REVIVING KALLIOPE: FOUR NORTH AMERICAN WOMEN AND THE EPIC TRADITION

by

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A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Department of English
and the Graduate School of the University of Oregon
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

September 2009

University of Oregon Graduate School

Confirmation of Approval and Acceptance of Dissertation prepared by:

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Title:

"Reviving Kalliope: Four North American Woman and the Epic Tradition"

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Original approval signatures are on file with the Graduate School and the University of Oregon Libraries.

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An Abstract of the Dissertation of

Britta Leigh Spann for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in the Department of English to be taken September 2009

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In English literary studies, classical epic poetry is typically regarded as a masculinist genre that imparts and reinforces the values of dominant culture. The *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, and *Aeneid*, after all, were written by men, feature male heroes, and recount the violent events that gave rise to the misogynistic societies of ancient Greece and Rome. Yet, in the twentieth century, women poets have found inspiration for their feminist projects in these ostensibly masculinist poems. The four poets in this study, for example, have drawn from the work of Homer and Virgil to criticize the ways that conventional conceptions of gender identity have impaired both men and women. One might expect, and indeed, most critics argue, that women like H.D., Gwendolyn Brooks, Louise Glück, and Anne Carson invoke their classical predecessors only to reject them and the repressive values that they represent. Close readings of these poets' work, however, demonstrate that, far from dismissing the ancient poems, *Helen in Egypt*, *Annie Allen*,

Meadowlands, and *Autobiography of Red* are deeply invested in them, finding in them models for their own social critiques.

The work of these four poets emphasizes that the classical epics are not one-dimensional celebrations of violence and traditional masculinity. Indeed, the work of Homer and Virgil expresses anxiety about the misogynistic values of the heroic code to which its warriors adhere, and it urges that war and violence are antithetical to civilized society. In examining the ways that modern women poets have drawn from these facets of the ancient works to condemn the sexism, racism, and heterocentrism of contemporary culture, my dissertation seeks to challenge the characterization of classical epic that prevails in English literary studies and to assert the necessity of understanding the complexity of the ancient texts that inspire modern poets. Taking an intertextual approach, I hope to show that close readings of the classical epics facilitate our understanding of how and why modern women have engaged the work of their ancient predecessors and that this knowledge, in turn, emphasizes that the epic genre is more complex than we have recognized and that its tradition still flourishes.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe a debt of gratitude to my dissertation director, Professor Karen Ford, whose guidance and mentorship have been indispensable, not only during this project but throughout my graduate school career. I thank her for the careful attention she has paid to my work and for her unflagging support. Working with her has truly been a pleasure. I also thank the other members of my defense committee, Professors P. Lowell Bowditch, Paul Peppis, and Steven Shankman, for their careful reading of this dissertation and for their insightful feedback. Their recommendations will be invaluable as I expand this project.

I cannot express my appreciation enough to my family, friends, and colleagues who have supported and encouraged me. I could not have completed this dissertation without them. I would especially like to thank Rachel Hanan, whose advice and friendship have been priceless throughout my time at the University of Oregon. I especially appreciate her feedback on my first chapter and assistance with my bibliography. Special thanks are also due to Corbett Upton for his support and friendship. Our many conversations have been a source of both pleasure and inspiration to me and were invaluable as I formulated and articulated my ideas.

Finally, I express my deepest and most sincere appreciation to my partner, Nova Rietmann, whose love, patience, support, and companionship sustain me.

Dedicated to the memory of Professor Ann Vardaman Miller

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter | Page

I. REVIVING KALLIOPE 1

Notes 22

II. H.D.'s *HELEN IN EGYPT*: EPIC AS PALIMPSEST 24

Notes 93

III. GWENDOLYN BROOKS' *ANNIE ALLEN*: EPIC AS PROTEST 97

Notes 162

IV. LOUISE GLÜCK'S *MEADOWLANDS*: EPIC AS TRAGIC OPERA 171

Notes 234

V. DOMESTICATING THE EPIC 237

BIBLIOGRAPHY 261

CHAPTER I

REVIVING KALLIOPE

The epic is the most lofty and lengthy of the conventional poetic forms; in Greek mythology, it is governed by Kalliope, the goddess of eloquence and the foremost of the nine Muses. At the same time, and not coincidentally, the epic is traditionally regarded as a masculinist form, written by male poets to elaborate the exploits of heroic men. These exploits are typically violent feats of military prowess that the hero performs to improve his reputation, and the fate of a nation or a people usually hangs in the balance: Aeneas must overcome terrible hardships on his journey to Italy and defeat Turnus in battle to found the city of Rome, the fate of the Greek and Trojan peoples hinges on the outcome of Achilles' great battle with Hektor, and Odysseus must endure the wrath of Poseidon in order to return home and slaughter the suitors driving his household into ruin, thus reclaiming his position as the rightful leader of the Ithakans. Yet the stories recounted in ancient Greek and Roman epics often look quite different from a female perspective: in the process of founding the future city of Rome, Aeneas loses his wife and inadvertently causes Dido's suicide; while Hector earns a glorious reputation by dying in battle with Achilles, his wife Andromache and the rest of the Trojan women are taken as slaves and concubines when Troy falls to the Greeks. Even the Greek women do not fare well in epic though their husbands win the Trojan War: Agamemnon sacrifices his daughter Iphigenia to gain favorable winds for his fleet, setting off a chain of events that

kills his entire family; Helen is offered to Paris by Aphrodite as a bribe then universally scorned as a perfidious wife and the cause of the Trojan war when he takes her; Penelope spends much of the *Odyssey* in a difficult and dangerous position, beset by suitors while unsure of her husband's fate.

The epic tradition in the English language reinforces the idea that it is an inherently masculinist genre. Given the violence against women that underpins the glory and heroism celebrated in epic poetry, it is perhaps predictable that few women poets have written conventional epic verse. And more to the point, traditionally defined gender roles would have precluded women from writing epics for much of literary history. The global scope, public aspirations, and frequently nationalistic implications of the conventional genre, to say nothing of its violent subject matter and celebration of masculine heroism, were considered inappropriate for women, who were expected to deal with stereotypically feminine subjects associated with the private, domestic sphere. Further, the long-enduring sexist notion that women are incapable of producing great literature tacitly forbade women from writing epic verse, long considered the greatest and most ambitious of poetic forms. It is hardly surprising that relatively few women have written epics or that those few works written by women prior to the twentieth century, with the exception of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (which can hardly be considered a traditional epic), have been relegated to obscurity. Few students of literature are likely to have heard of, much less to have read, Hannah Tapfield King's *The Rise of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints* or Lady Mary Wroth's *Urania.* Epics written by men, on the other hand, are required reading. Survey courses typically

cover Spencer's *The Faerie Queene*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and Romantic epics such as Keat's unfinished *Hyperion*, and it is not uncommon for entire courses to be devoted to Spencer's or Milton's epics.

In the twentieth century, however, it has become relatively common for women to write epic verse or to invoke the classical epic tradition. A casual survey of epic-related literature by women before 1900 reveals only a handful of names, while the list of women who have written epics or addressed the epic genre in their work after 1900 is far longer and includes many canonical and prize-winning writers: Virginia Woolf, Rebecca West, H.D., Gwendolyn Brooks, Muriel Rukeyser, and Sharon Doubiago are only a few examples. Perhaps recent women poets have found the epic to be a fruitful source because they are now able to engage the epic tradition on their own terms without the promise of critical dismissal. The various women's rights movements of the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries created an awareness of the problem of inequality between the sexes, helping women gain not only economic and educational opportunities but also more credibility as writers.[1] As a result, women were less likely to be attacked strictly because of their gender for attempting epic poetry, as was the case for Browning. At roughly the same time, modernism announced the demise of traditional verse and called for experimentation and new forms. Modernist poets were especially interested in writing a new epic poem for the modern age, hoping to utilize its collective and nationalistic character to lend authority to their arguments and experimentation.[2] This undermining of the traditional poetic forms, wide-spread interest in experimentation with the epic, and the increased visibility of women writers and of the problems associated

with inequality made it possible for women poets to critique the misogyny of the epic tradition while finding a wider and more sympathetic audience than in previous centuries.

Despite the proliferation of women working with epic poetry in the twentieth century, scholarship on modern poets' use of the epic genre continues to be dominated by studies of male poets. While there are several articles and a couple of books about H.D.'s use of epic poetry, for example, there are far more studies of the role epic plays in Ezra Pound's *Cantos* or William Carlos William's *Paterson* despite the fact that H.D. wrote an epic poem and confronted the epic tradition more directly and more frequently than either Pound or Williams.[3] One reason for this disparity is that scholarship on twentieth-century epics in general is sparse. Contemporary critics of twentieth-century literature are increasingly unfamiliar with, and uninterested in, the classical tradition. Because the number of educational institutions requiring students to study Latin and ancient Greek decreased rapidly over the 1900s, and the number requiring the classics even in translation decreased after mid-century, few scholars are able to read classical epics directly and thus to recognize the ways that twentieth-century poets have utilized the tradition in their own work.

Because of growing classical illiteracy, even scholars who do examine twentieth-century poets' use of the epic are working with misguided notions about the genre, and the classics in general, that facilitate examinations of men's work more readily than women's. The classicism that modernist writers such as T. E. Hulme and T. S. Eliot defined at the beginning of the twentieth century has endured to the present day. Modernists called for "a classical revival in literature at odds with the suppositions of a

century of romantic poetry, thought, and belief" (Gregory 13). Although they perceived their project as a return to classical values, these writers were actually constructing a particular type of classicism. As Gregory has observed, the modernist argument defined classical values against romantic values, "suggest[ing] a *nomos*, a widely accepted, largely unspoken code, an energized discursive field that modern writers could not ignore" (19). The positive qualities associated with "classic" writing are stereotypically masculine attributes: good writing is "hard," "disciplined," "austere," "impersonal," "scientific," "pessimistic," "ordered," follows "fixed standards" and exhibits "exact rendering." "Romantic" writing, on the other hand, is "soft," "hedonistic," "luxurious," "personal," "impressionistic," "optimistic," "chaotic," and values "infinitude" and "blurred rendering" (19-20). This dialectic established an orthodoxy that Pound, influenced by Hulme, set down in his "Imagist Manifesto": he declared that poetry should "employ the exact word," "render particulars exactly and not deal in vague generalities, however magnificent or sonorous," and "produce a poetry that is hard and clear, never blurred or indefinite." Poets who failed to follow these prescriptions were condemned for their lack of appropriate classical qualities; when H.D. deviated from the rules of Imagism, for example, she was criticized by Laura Riding and Robert Graves for "creat[ing] a false 'classical' atmosphere" (122).

Because this distinctly masculinist classicism was codified just as classical languages and literature stopped being required for students of English and American literature, the modernist interpretation of the classics is the one with which most readers are working. It is not difficult to see how ancient epics might embody the modernist

ideal. They are impersonal, their lofty style can be characterized as austere, and the battles scenes and conceits are vividly exact. Moreover, the heroic code to which Homer's and Virgil's warriors subscribe dictates that men be disciplined and hard (both physically and emotionally), establishes an orderly hierarchy among the warriors, and sets fixed standards for honorable conduct. Our received notion of classicism thus only amplifies the assumed misogyny of the epic tradition. Given the enduring perception of the epic as a masculinist genre and the fact that many contemporary critics are examining the epic tradition through a lens colored by the modernists' gendered definition of classicism while lacking the foundational knowledge to account for this bias (if they recognize it), it should come as no surprise that male writers are overrepresented in studies of twentieth-century epic writers. Just as women writers began to invoke the tradition or to write epics in significant numbers, scholars became less likely to recognize and understand the nature of their engagement.

The emergence of poststructural theories in twentieth-century literary criticism has also contributed to the lack of attention to women's use of the epic by focusing scholarship on the sociopolitical and cultural forces, rather than on the traditions and formal conventions, that shape literature. Eliot's argument in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" that critics must consider poets in the context of their literary tradition, setting them "for contrast and comparison, among the dead," fell by the wayside, along with the discipline's valuation of close reading, as the New Critics were dismissed and their canon criticized (41). Classicism, associated with the New Critics and with the canon, has thus come to seem an obscure practice at best. Indeed, some critics have

argued that the classical tradition, and the epic in particular, are irrelevant today. Most prominently, Mikhail Bakhtin claims that the epic genre "has not only long since completed its development, but [. . .] is already antiquated"; it is "ossified," "already completely finished, a congealed and half-moribund genre" that the novel has replaced (3, 8, 14). Bakhtin argues that novels and genres that have been "noveliz[ed]" are

> free and flexible [. . .] permeated with laughter, irony, humor, elements of self-parody and finally—this is the most important thing—the novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality (the openended present). (6, 7)

A further "remarkable feature of this ever-developing genre" is the "ability of the novel to criticize itself" (6). The implication, of course, is that epic poetry is incapable of self-critique and is devoid of laughter, irony, humor, self-parody, and indeterminacy. Indeed, Bakhtin claims that because "an absolute epic distance separates the epic world from [the] contemporary reality" of its audience, "there is no place in the epic world for any openendedness, indecision, indeterminacy. There are no loopholes in it through which we glimpse the future; it suffices unto itself, neither supposing any continuation nor requiring it" (13, 16). While it is true that the events depicted in epic are set in a remote, "absolute" past that is complete and unchangeable, it does not necessarily follow that epic poetry cannot contain irony, indeterminacy, or glimpses of the future. Bakhtin assumes that epic poetry endorses the culture and events that it recounts: "in the past, everything is good: all the really good things (i.e., the 'first' things) occur *only* in this past. The epic

absolute past is the single source and beginning of everything good for all later times as well" (15). But there is a distinction between the epic past *being* good and being the *source* of good. One can recognize that an event, such as a devastating war with heavy losses for both sides, makes "everything good" for the present age without considering the war itself a good thing. What happens first is not necessarily best. Indeed, there is ample textual evidence to suggest that the classical epics criticize as much as celebrate the values and events of the remote past they depict.

Because critics are now likely to be more familiar with Bakhtin than with Homer, his argument has helped hasten classicism towards obscurity; if something is "ossified," "congealed," and "half-moribund," why bother with it? Yet the theoretical movements influenced by Bakhtin's work have proven crucial to contemporary classicists in demonstrating the complexity of epic verse. Deconstructionists, for example, have uncovered and explored the indeterminacy of ancient texts, demonstrating that they do not necessarily treat their violent subjects as emblematic of "all the really good things." Linda Lee Clader, for example, argues that Helen, as the object the Greeks and Trojans fight to obtain, represents the immortality that warriors hope to earn through their exploits as well as epic poetry itself, the medium through which heroes are immortalized. The ambiguity with which Homer portrays Helen in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* thus extends to the heroic quest for glory and to his own work; epic glory, like Helen, is "shining but deadly" in Clader's account (40).

Similar indeterminacy is present in Virgil's *Aeneid*, as Marilynn Desmond demonstrates in *Reading Dido*. Like Helen, Dido is a complex character who

simultaneously exhibits positive and negative qualities. The lexicon of "pathological terms" with which Virgil characterizes her desire for Aeneas "reflects Roman attitudes toward *amor* as a dangerous emotion, one to be controlled and managed"; her passion "destroys her ability to govern her city" and drives her to suicide (30). In this respect, she serves as a foil for Aeneas, who embodies the Roman value of *pietas*, duty to the gods and one's family and fatherland. At the same time, though, Dido "exhibits the qualities that are valued in a heroic, male figure"; having single-handedly founded Carthage, she has already accomplished the goal that Aeneas pursues and her realm is thriving when he washes up on its shores (31). Moreover, the indeterminacy of the cave scene in Book 4 raises questions about how dutiful Aeneas actually is. While the text states Juno has deluded Dido into thinking that the couple's sexual consummation of their relationship constitutes a marriage, Virgil's allusion to Roman wedding rituals during the scene provides evidence that a wedding actually does take place in the cave. Thus, while "Aeneas's legal formulation regarding the limits of his responsibility to Dido provides an adequate justification for his abandonment of her, [. . .] it fails to fully exculpate him" (29).

Such readings of indeterminacies in Homer's and Virgil's texts challenge the notion that epic poetry unequivocally celebrates the violence and misogyny inherent in its subject matter. While the poets unquestionably celebrate their national past, their texts simultaneously express anxieties about the destructive means by which the contemporary greatness of Greek and Roman culture have been achieved. There is, for example, a marked note of self-critique in Homer's equation of epic poetry with the dangerously

seductive Helen. The fact that textual ambivalence frequently centers on the female characters of the ancient texts presents a striking challenge to the notion that epic poetry is a one-dimensionally masculinist genre. Indeed, critics like Desmond and Mihiko Suzuki have found epic indeterminacy to be conducive to feminist readings of the poems, demonstrating that while the poems bear the markings of the misogynistic cultures that produce them and have fostered a masculinist reading tradition, they also provide the requisite materials for challenging such sexism. As Gregory observes, there is an alternative classical tradition to the modernists' selective line that is "drawn to the discrete, the fragmentary, and the rationally obscure [. . .] emphasiz[ing] the erotic and the visionary," valuing the very qualities that modernist classicism rejects (40). The feminine desire of Sappho's lyrics, the lush erotic poetry of the lyricists who follow, and the heterodoxy of Euripides' plays find their basis in epic poetry along with the writers lauded by the (male) modernists.

Contemporary classical scholarship suggests that it is not epic poetry itself but particular traditions of interpretation and transmission that are inherently misogynistic. The women poets of the past century have found the indeterminacies of the epic as fruitful for feminist reinterpretation as classicists have, but the critics who examine these poets, having generally accepted the modernist and Bakhtinian notions of classical epic, have failed to recognize the complexity of women poets' engagement with the ancient texts. The critical conversations about individual poets' use of the epic treat the subject incidentally; assuming that the genre is thoroughly masculinist, they tend to argue that women poets invoke the tradition merely to reject it. Such simplistic arguments fail to

register the nuanced relationships that exist between modern and ancient texts. Bernard Schweizer's recent *Approaches to the Anglo and American Female Epic, 1621-1982* is one of the few books exclusively devoted to exploring women's use of the epic and is the only book that looks at this topic in the twentieth century; however, Schweizer does not seek to explore the complexities of women's use of the epic in English literature. Rather, this collection of essays examines women's epics across a long period of time, demonstrating not only that there is a tradition of women working with the epic but also a distinctly female epic. The book reveals some of the major shortcomings in this emerging area of critical study: roughly half of the essays are about work written before the twentieth century, and seven of the ten essays are on British writers. Moreover, the caricatured image of the epic as a conservative, uncritically nationalist genre that has emerged in the twentieth century occasionally colors the studies: speaking generally about American epics written by women, Schweizer states that, "[a]s can be expected, American woman's epics are almost invariably variants of the frontier experience," ignoring his own claim that women's epics tend to be revisionist and do not espouse nationalistic ideologies (14). Schweitzer readily acknowledges that his collection simply makes inroads into a new topic and leaves much critical work to be done, noting in particular the need for intertextual studies. His collection and his questionable generalization of American female epic suggest that there is, in particular, a need for studies of epics by American women in the twentieth century.

In this work, I begin the process of filling the critical gap that contemporary criticism on women's epic poetry has left. Each of the poets whom I discuss draws on

the indeterminacies of Homer's and Virgil's texts (or, in Carson's case, the revisionist lyric tradition that begins in the epics), turning the subversive possibilities afforded by these ambiguities towards a condemnation of the sexism, racism, and heterocentrism of twentieth-century society. Whereas most studies of female epic, like Schweitzer's, examine whether particular poets can be included in the epic tradition, I am less interested in arguing that these poets are epic poets than in examining how they use epic conventions and texts to revise the predominant conception of the epic tradition and its ideology. In some cases, as with H.D. and Gwendolyn Brooks, it is vital to read their work as epic; however, this is not always the case. It will be more productive for me to examine the way Louise Glück rereads the story of the *Odyssey* than to argue that *Meadowlands* is an epic. Whether or not these poets write epics, they all employ similar strategies to challenge epic ideology as it has traditionally been defined: the use of lyric forms to write epics or treat epic content, a focus on the domestic sphere and romantic relationships rather than on war and masculine, military camaraderie, and an interest in individual rather than collective experience that resists the nationalistic impulse of conventional epic.

Although these poets share similar techniques for dealing with the epic, they are not part of a divergent, distinctly female epic tradition. To argue that they are would ignore the anti-traditional thrust of their work and encourage overgeneralizations and unnecessary polarization between male and female traditions. H.D., Gwendolyn Brooks, Louise Glück, and Anne Carson are not trying to establish a new tradition so much as question and wrestle with the orthodox, masculinist one, thus participating in the

revisionist alternative tradition that I have discussed. The classical epics provide more than a point of departure or a bone of contention for these poets. They question and wrestle with the established epic tradition, but they do not repudiate or dismiss the ancient texts themselves. Indeed, the ways these poets rely on their predecessors as they undermine patriarchal ideology in their own texts revitalize the epic tradition, reviving Kalliope, so to speak, by demonstrating its complexity and continued utility for contemporary writers.

This study is, in part, intended as a defense of classicism and of ancient epic poetry in particular. In analyzing the extent to which classical authors have informed and contributed to these four women's poetry, I hope not only to challenge the characterization of ancient texts that prevails in English literature studies today but also to demonstrate that the study of the classics is useful, if not necessary, for understanding the work of poets whose work invokes the classical tradition. I have selected these particular poets not only because their work demonstrates the continuity of the alternative tradition, providing examples of the ways that ancient epics facilitate revisionist poetry, but also because the existing criticism on each poet contains gaps and misreadings that result from critics' lack of familiarity with the epic genre. Rather than examining the ancient poems, critics have operated from the assumption that the classical epics are inherently misogynistic and socially conservative, thus overlooking, for example, the fact that H.D. draws heavily from Homer's *Iliad* in transforming Helen into a feminist epic hero. Taking an intertextual approach and drawing from contemporary classical scholarship, my readings explore the complex relationships between ancient and modern

texts, demonstrating that close readings of classical literature are crucial to understanding poetry invested in that tradition.

My first chapter will examine H.D.'s palimpsestic feminist epic, *Helen in Egypt*. Her book focuses on Helen's experiences after the Trojan War, but its most immediate source material is not the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*; rather, H.D. draws the plot for her poem from the fragments of Stesichoros and one of Euripides' lesser-known plays, *Helen*. These materials are palinodes, retracting previous attacks that the authors had made against Helen for her adultery: Stesichoros allegedly wrote a poem condemning Helen for her adultery, for which he was stricken blind, and Euripides had previously lambasted Helen in *The Trojan Women*. In their palinodes, both authors present Helen as a faithful wife, relying on a myth that Helen was secreted away in Egypt while Paris abducted an imposter, and the Trojan War was fought over a fake Helen made by Zeus.

While these lesser-known classical sources are more forgiving to Helen than canonical classical literature, their representation of her is no less problematic; in *Helen*, for example, when Menelaus washes up on the shore of Egypt, Helen must enter into a suicide pact with him if they cannot outwit the Egyptian prince who wishes to marry her not because of their love but because the marriage would damage Menelaos' heroic reputation. Helen might not be reviled as an adulteress, but she has little control over her fate; she is just as much a pawn of the gods and the men around her as she is in the epic poems.

H.D. goes further than clearing Helen of the charge of adultery; she also gives Helen the agency and depth of emotion that she frequently lacks in classical literature.

Much of the book is given over to Helen's internal monologue as she analyzes her situation in Egypt, weighs whether or not her guilt over the Trojan War is justified, and ponders her relationship with Achilles, who has washed up on shore. As the poem progresses, Helen works to recover from the emotional damage that the war and its aftermath have inflicted on her; ultimately, she heals herself and assumes control over her destiny as she discovers and embraces her role in the Greater Mystery. The Mystery, an allusion to the ancient fertility rites of the Eleusinian mysteries, is the eternal cycle of life, death, and rebirth; in discovering herself as an agent of the Mystery, Helen recognizes that the destruction of the Trojan War was merely a part of this cycle and that she can bring about the rebirth and resurrection that will redeem it. Having been inducted into the Mystery, Helen acquires knowledge that, once revealed, offers the hope of ridding the world of war by providing an alternative means of achieving immortality to the epic pursuit of glory.

Helen in Egypt might initially seem to be a rejection of epic ideology: it values interiority over action, feminine fertility over masculine valor, and it depicts the wars that epics recount as senselessly destructive rather than glorious. Indeed, this is the argument of the critics who analyze the poem. Yet Homer's poem informs H.D.'s characterization of Helen and her criticism of war more than any other of the texts, myths, and theories that H.D. assumes into her poem. In the *Iliad*, Helen wrestles with feelings of guilt as the war plays out, providing a classical precedent for H.D.'s depiction of Helen's internal conflict. Further, the agency of H.D.'s Helen and her poem's criticism of the male pursuit of immortal glory in violent combat draw from the indeterminacies of Homer's

text. As the embodiment of the heroic quest, Helen is paradoxically a helpless victim over whom men fight and a powerful figure who drives them into battle. Further, as a symbol for epic poetry itself, Helen represents both the immortality that men desire and the dangerous propaganda that drives them into danger. H.D. retains the paradoxical representations of Helen as guilty-yet-innocent and passive-yet-powerful from Homer's text, using such contradictions as the basis for the psychological drama of her poem. Similarly, she borrows from the *Iliad* Helen's ability to remedy the trauma of war and confer immortality through epic poetry. Whereas the indeterminacy of Homer's poem expresses anxiety about the consequences of this power, *Helen in Egypt* resolves that anxiety by making the life-giving power of feminine fertility, rather than the destructive force of the masculine heroic quest, the source of immortality.

My second chapter explores Gwendolyn Brooks' *Annie Allen*, which exploits epic conventions to criticize the racism and sexism of mid-century American society. The book, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1950, tells the story of its title character's childhood, marriage, and her struggle to cope with her disillusionment and raise her children after the death of her unfaithful husband. The second section of the book, which focuses in particular on Annie's marriage and its disintegration, features the long and complex poem "The Anniad."

The poem's allusive title, elevated language, and length suggest the epic form, but in all other ways it inverts epic conventions. "The Anniad" lacks an epic invocation, criticizes rather than celebrates war, and no gods or goddesses intervene in Annie's life. These revisions emphasize the fact that conventional poetry does not accept black poets

and black subjects readily; as a poor black woman, Annie is considered unworthy of notice by the (white, male) gods. Most critics of "The Anniad" have unintentionally reinforced this racist and sexist perspective by reading the poem as a mock epic, citing as evidence the disparity between its black, female, lower-class "hero" and the white, upper-class male heroes of conventional epic. These critics miss fact that Brooks argues against the very system of values on which such readings depend; one can only read "The Anniad" as a mock epic if one agrees that a poor black woman and her domestic life are too low to be the subject of an epic poem. Moreover, they overlook the extent to which the classical epics inform Brooks' project.

Although Brooks rejects many of the conventions of the epic genre, she does not reject the ancient poems themselves. Indeed, Virgil's *Aeneid* provides Brooks with a precedent for African female heroism in the character of Dido. Moreover, like H.D., Brooks draws upon the ambivalent depiction of war and traditional masculine heroism in epic poetry. The death of Annie's lover and her ensuing breakdown demonstrate the devastating domestic consequences of war, a prevalent motif in the classical epics. Although she condemns the traditional masculine violence of war, militancy is nevertheless important for Brooks. Virgil's depiction of war as a necessary evil for founding great civilizations informs her exhortation to black writers to make war with their words in order to create a space for free artistic expression. The public, collective, nationalist nature of epic poetry is thus crucial for Brooks in sounding this call to arms with her own epic work. Though she resists the nationalistic quality of epic in her criticism of dominant society, Brooks invokes it to a certain extent by elevating Annie

Allen to heroic status. The poetry of *Annie Allen* explores the personal life and private experiences of its protagonist in lyric poems, but the overarching epic form of the work elevates Annie to the status of a national hero for black women, valorizing their struggle to achieve autonomy in a sexist and racist society.

Like H.D. and Brooks, Louise Glück, the subject of my third chapter, alludes to a classical epic poem in order to turn its criticism of masculine heroism toward a feminist critique of repressive conceptions of gender. Yet, whereas the political statements of *Helen in Egypt* and *Annie Allen* are widely recognized, *Meadowlands*' social commentary has been overlooked. Glück's critics insist on reading her later work by the standards of her spare, intensely private early lyrics; discussions of *Meadowlands* thus tend to focus almost exclusively on its aesthetic merits or attempt to read the collection as an expression of personal experience. Disregarding the book's complex engagement with Homer's *Odyssey*, they miss its sharp criticism of contemporary society's sexism.

Like Brooks, Glück shifts the focus of her poetry from the battlefield to the domestic sphere. *Meadowlands* is a series of poems about the breakdown of a modern marriage interspersed with poems about Odysseus, Penelope, and Telemachus. Through the juxtaposition of these two families, Glück explores the ways that traditionally conceived gender roles repress individuals and thus damage their relationships. Subverting a long-standing poetic tradition that regards Odysseus and Penelope as paragons of masculine and feminine virtue, Glück draws upon the *Odyssey* to emphasize that their conformity to conventional gender stereotypes is not worthy of emulation. She follows Homer in criticizing Odysseus' adherence to the heroic code by illustrating its

destructive consequences for his family and comrades. Similarly, drawing on the ancient poet's ambivalent depiction of Penelope as a faithful but possibly duplicitous woman, she emphasizes that the Greek woman's celebrated endurance of her husband's long absence and famous deception of the suitors are not signs of her virtuous nature but rather survival strategies necessitated by a misogynistic culture.

Glück recasts the characters from Homer's epic poem as players in a tragic opera, a form that underscores the fictional, performative nature of the gender ideals that Odysseus and Penelope ostensibly embody. The hero's masculine pursuit of adventure and glory and his wife's long-suffering patience are tragic flaws rather than virtues, and in playing out these roles they inflict emotional harm on each other and on their son. The modern couple in *Meadowlands* replicates the ancient couples' behavior: the husband, like Odysseus, is frequently absent from his marriage, both emotionally and physically, and his wife, like Penelope, passively endures his neglect and the possibility that he is having an affair. The equation of these two relationships not only helps to pull the ancient couple off their traditional pedestals by showing that their relationship is no different from the average, dysfunctional contemporary marriage but also underscores Glück's social critique. Where Odysseus' and Penelope's troubled relationship plays out as a tragic opera, the modern couple's failing marriage constitutes a burlesque; the banality of their arguments as they attempt to play the supposedly heroic roles to which they aspire is darkly humorous. The farce that plays out between them emphasizes that conventional notions of proper masculine and feminine behavior are not only based on fictitious ideals; they are also absurd.

In my conclusion, I describe the collective aim of this line of feminist interventions in the epic tradition, characterizing it as a domestication of the epic genre. Domestication suggests not only the traditionally feminine realm of the home and family but also the action of taming. H.D., Brooks, and Glück domesticate the epic in both senses of the word: they train its focus on women's lives and relationships, and they yoke its collective aspirations and social critique for their feminist projects. To end this study, I will briefly examine the work of Anne Carson, the contemporary heir to the revisionist epic tradition. Her "novel in verse," *Autobiography of Red*, like the work of the other poets I study, criticizes narrowly circumscribed identity categories and illustrates the consequences of traditional masculine heroism. But her solution to these problems is more extreme than H.D.'s or Brooks': while they envision a world in which women can live free from narrowly circumscribed notions of femininity, Carson seeks to discard identity categories altogether.

Autobiography of Red draws on the myth of Herakles tenth labor: stealing a herd of red cattle from Geryon, a terrifying red monster with wings, three heads, and six arms. The epic recounting Herakles' exploits has not survived to the present day, so the immediate source for Carson's work is Stesichoros' *Geryoneis*, a lyric poem that exists today in a handful of small fragments. Stesichoros, one of the earliest poets in the revisionist epic tradition, tells his story from Geryon's perspective rather than from the emblematic hero's. Carson takes up this domesticating impulse and extends it, transforming the giant monster into a shy, red, winged boy who struggles to find

acceptance in a world that rejects him because of his strange appearance, and refiguring Herakles as Geryon's homosexual lover rather than his mortal enemy.

Invoking the familiar metaphor of monstrosity as a figure for homosexuality, Carson rewrites Geryon's myth as an epic coming out narrative: the hostility and rejection that he experiences leads him to hide his wings and avoid social interactions. His ambiguous gender identity amplifies his queerness and thus his sense of alienation; throughout Carson's text, he identifies with women and sees himself in conventionally feminine terms. His lack of conformity to stereotypical notions of masculinity, meanwhile, makes him a target of scorn and abuse for his older brother, who bullies and molests him, and Herakles, who uses him for sex and then breaks his heart. Geryon finally experiences an epiphany while visiting Lima to see a volcano: he hears a Quechua legend about the *Yazcol Yazcamac*, men who were thrown into volcanoes and, with all their weaknesses burned away, emerged as immortal wise men with wings and red skin. Realizing that there are others like him, Geryon accepts his queer, genderless body and thus fulfills his epic quest, coming out, paradoxically, by flying into the depths of the sacred volcano. As in the texts of H.D., Brooks, and Glück, the motif of the heroic quest in *Autobiography of Red* valorizes Geryon's struggle to overcome emotional impairment and criticizes the restrictive identity categories that cause his alienation.

Throughout my dissertation, I compare the modern texts that I examine to their ancient predecessors through close readings to demonstrate how and why they invoke and depart from the epic tradition. These comparisons will encompass not only the thematic elements that are so vital in creating or questioning epic ideology but also the formal

elements of the modern works. There are varying degrees of tension between lyric and epic form in each woman's work, and this tension often registers the poets' conflicts with the traditional gendering of literature and society. Brooks' work, for example, reveals that traditional poetic forms are exclusive of both women and African Americans. Annie Allen and her family try to live in the fairytale romance world of lyric and the glorious military world of epic, but both worlds are forbidden to them by dominant white society; the form of "The Anniad," a hybrid of lyric and epic elements, reflects this tension. To emphasize and account for such gendered and raced elements better, I will also contextualize each work I study by examining it in its historical context. Through these historical analyses and close readings, I revive Kalliope in literary studies by demonstrating that the epic, far from being obsolete, is a living and changing form, and I begin to answer the question of why, in the past century, women have been the poets who are keeping the epic alive.

Notes

[1] The first few chapters of *No Man's Land: the Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century* by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar offer a detailed account of the various women's rights movements of the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and an analysis of how these movements impacted literature.

[2] Jeffrey Walker's first chapter, "Prospects," and his chapter on Pound in *Bardic Ethos and the American Epic Poem* analyze how the *Cantos*, Pound's "tale of the tribe," fulfills both his definition of epic as "a poem containing history" and the modernist ideals expressed in several of his prose pieces.

[3] A search for "Pound, Ezra" and "epic" on MLA's online bibliography database returns 36 hits, and a search for "Williams" and "epic" returns 12. Searching for "Doolittle, Hilda" and "epic" returns 12 hits. However, even though one finds similar numbers of hits for Williams and H.D., a considerably higher percentage of the hits for

the H.D. search are unpublished dissertations, meaning that there are currently more published works on Williams than on H.D. It is perhaps also noteworthy that almost half of the works about H.D. also look at Pound or Williams.

CHAPTER II

H.D.'S *HELEN IN EGYPT*: EPIC AS PALIMPSEST

In the first section of H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt*, Achilles asks "how are Helen in Egypt / and Helen upon the ramparts, / together yet separate?" (63).[1] Having washed up on the Egyptian shore after his death, he has encountered the woman over whom the Trojan War was fought, and he has learned that she was never at Troy; rather, the woman he saw on the ramparts, and for whom he fought, killed, and died, was a phantom placed there by Zeus, who had transported the real Helen to Egypt some time before the war. Achilles' question most immediately reflects his attempt to understand his experiences: has he suffered and died for a real person or an illusion? Or, somehow, for both? Why has he encountered Helen in Egypt—is this meeting the purpose of the war? Helen herself takes up these questions later in the poem, and her struggle to find answers is the central conflict of the poem's plot.

But more, Achilles' question points toward the major themes of the poem. Through the speakers' frequent introspective questioning, *Helen in Egypt* explores the psychological and emotional trauma caused by war. Most of the poem's speakers suffer from shellshock: Achilles and Paris struggle with anger and feelings of betrayal while Helen suffers from guilt and a sense of psychological fragmentation that is underscored by persisting questions about whether she and her phantom are separate or the same,

whether she is living or dead, and whether she is lucid or in a hallucinatory trance. At the same time, however, Achilles' query emphasizes the quest for integration that the poem poses as a cure for the ruin of war. Paradoxes are frequent in H.D.'s poem: Helen and her phantom are "together yet separate," Achilles is immortal yet mortal and dead yet living, the various speakers of the poem are themselves yet also the gods and goddesses with whom they are aligned over the course of the book. Paradox, the figure that reconciles the irreconcilable, provides the characters of the poem with a means of unifying the disparate, and often conflicting, accounts of their lives and thus of healing their sense of psychological fragmentation. As paradoxes accumulate over the course of the poem, the devastation of the Trojan War, and even death itself, become forces of creativity and reproduction as they are reconciled into what the poem will term the "Greater Mystery," the ultimate paradox of "life-in-death."

Helen in Egypt underscores its concern with paradox by taking a paradoxical, fragmented-yet-whole form. The book-length poem is divided into three sections, each of which explores a stage of Helen's quest to comprehend the Greater Mystery. "Pallinode," the first section, recounts Helen's meeting with Achilles in Egypt and explores their psychological and emotional trauma: Achilles' rage and confusion, and Helen's guilt and shame about the Trojan War, the events of which she has largely suppressed, and her anxiety and doubt as she struggles to relate the "lesser personal mystery" of her experience with "the Greater Mystery."[2] The second section, "Leuké," deals with Helen's recovery of the memories she has repressed. Thetis orders her to go to Leuké, the island where she and Achilles, according to tradition, get married and have a

son. When she arrives, however, she meets Paris instead of Achilles, and he reminds her of her last moments in Troy, which raises new questions for Helen: how can she reconcile her young self with her present, older self? Greece with Egypt? Greece with Troy? To understand and be initiated into the Greater Mystery fully, Helen must unite these disparate, fragmentary aspects of her life and identity. She therefore consults Theseus, with whom she undergoes a sort of psychoanalysis that enables her to bring together her fragmented selves; having done so, she is able to articulate the paradoxes of the Greater Mystery.[3] This articulation forms the action of the third section of the poem, "Eidolon," in which Helen synthesizes the conflicting stories of her identity and reconciles her past lovers. Having now been successfully initiated into the Greater Mystery, she comprehends the cyclical process of Eros/Eris, death, and resurrection, and she reinterprets her destructive past within this framework. This process resists the finality and chaos of war and death by imposing a larger narrative that offers the hope of rebirth. Helen's story is thus one layer in an eternally written and rewritten palimpsest, which would also include the wars of H.D.'s age, World War I and World War II.

Helen in Egypt thus has a linear plot that heavily emphasizes synthesis and reconciliation, but it communicates this through a fragmented form. The poem's three sections are divided into separate books, and each is further divided into individual lyric poems. And these poems are divided even further: each begins with a prose epigraph, set in italics, that comments on its poem. The short stanzas of the lyric poems and the visual contrast between the prose and verse give the pages of *Helen in Egypt* a fragmented appearance. This visual effect underscores not only the shellshock of the speakers of the

poems but also the poem's perplexing style and narrative structure. Though the three major sections progress through the plot in a logical, linear order, the individual poems themselves frequently do not. The action of the poem, which takes place largely in the characters' minds, happens in fits and starts. Questions accumulate, especially in the first section of the poem:

> What does [Achilles] mean by that?
> must I summon Hellenic thought
> to counter an argument?
>
> must we argue over again,
> the reason that brought us here?
> was the Fall of Troy the reason?
>
> can one weigh the thousand ships
> against one kiss in the night?
> Helena? who is she? (37)

Such litanies of questions impede understanding. Their answers are central to an understanding of the poem but are not revealed until the final section. The poem thus replicates Helen's confusion as she obsessively ponders and restates these questions, and many more besides, sometimes appearing to answer them only to retreat into self-doubt and bewilderment. Her internal struggle, paradoxically, simultaneously stalls the plot of the poem and *is* the plot. When the answers to her questions finally arrive, they take the

form of free associations that defy conventional logic. The poem thus offers materials that encourage an intuitive understanding that mirrors Helen's own instinctual "*emotional knowledge*" of the Greater Mystery (13).

In addition to reproducing the paradoxes it explores, the form of *Helen in Egypt* also replicates the palimpsestic view of history that it poses. The poem rewrites the story of Helen, adding a layer to the literary tradition of texts about her. H.D. provides an overview of this history at the beginning of the book:

> *We all know the story of Helen of Troy but few of us have followed her to Egypt. How did she get there? Stesichorus of Sicily in his* Pallinode *was first to tell us. Some centuries later, Euripides repeats the story. Stesichorus was said to have been struck blind because of his invective against Helen, but later was restored to sight, when he reinstated her in his* Pallinode. *Euripides, notably in* The Trojan Women, *reviles her, but he also is "restored to sight." The later, little understood* Helen in Egypt, *is again a* Pallinode, *a defense, explanation, or apology.* (1)

H.D.'s explanation of Helen's textual history, like the palimpsestic poem that follows, writes over the classical predecessors she names. She claims that Stesichorus "tell[s] us" how Helen got to Egypt, but in fact only the first lines of the poem survived antiquity, and all they tell is that Helen "did not come to the city of Troy" (44). Moreover, she cites questionable titles for the Greek works. The title of Stesichorus' poem is ultimately unknown, though Suidas and others refer to it as the *Palinode*. Similarly, Euripides' drama is simply called *Helen*. These are not careless errors. H.D. read Euripides and

many Greek lyric poets in the original language and even translated some of their works into English. However, the titles H.D. references point toward her own work and the approach she takes to literary tradition in *Helen in Egypt*: she does not retell the stories of her classical predecessors but, instead, creates a new story that overwrites what has come before.[4] As with palimpsestic documents, however, traces of the original texts are apparent under the new: H.D. takes the palinode concept and the idea that Helen was never at Troy from Stesichorus, and from Euripides she borrows the basic story of Zeus placing Helen in Egypt and a phantom at Troy in her stead. Moreover, the hybrid form of H.D.'s poem reflects the influence of Homer (whom she alludes to indirectly when referring to "the story of Helen of Troy"), Stesichorus, and Euripides.

Helen in Egypt most immediately suggests the epic form. Like the works of Homer and Virgil, it is an extremely long poem subdivided into separate "books."[5] As with classical epics, these individual books are generally episodic. The individual poems in H.D.'s books, however, are more suggestive of the work of Euripides and Stesichorus than of Homer and Virgil. As Eileen Gregory has argued, the lyric poems bear a striking resemblance to Euripidean choruses both in their formal features and in their function, "giv[ing] an associational dreamlike reflection on a large, composite drama, [. . .] specifically, the drama of war" (222). In addition, the prose commentaries that appear before each poem suggest dramatic form. Although classical dramatists did not provide stage directions or details about setting, it is a familiar convention from contemporary drama and one that H.D. used extensively in her translation of Euripides' *Ion* and in "Hippolytus Temporizes." Stesichorus is also an influence in the lyric poems. In calling

the first section of her work "Pallinode," H.D. emphasizes that her work is in the same vein as his lost palinode. Although little of his work has survived to the present day, accounts of Stesichorus' poetry exist, and several of these point toward similarities in the two poets' work. Longinus casts Stesichorus in epic terms, describing him as worthy of being called "most Homeric" (13.3), as does Quintilian, who describes him as "singing of great wars and the most outstanding leaders and sustaining the weight of epic poetry with a lyre" (10.1.62). The Greek lyricist, then, was renowned for using lyric forms to explore epic stories and themes. A similar practice is apparent in *Helen in Egypt*, which uses lyric forms to treat epic subjects and characters as well as epic themes.

Though *Helen in Egypt* remains one of H.D.'s lesser known works, it has begun to receive critical attention in recent decades, especially from feminist critics. Many of these have read the poem in terms of the epic. Susan Friedman, who is largely responsible for resurrecting the poem from obscurity, reads it as a "psychoanalytic epic" in which Helen undertakes the heroic task of "clarify[ing] her relation to the hated phantom of Helen, and [recovering] the significance of fragmented memory" (66, 60); Helen becomes a sort of feminist hero, fighting a battle to achieve psychological wholeness and self-definition. In a similar vein, Rachel Blau DuPlessis argues that H.D. "undertakes a major task of cultural recuperation in her deconstructed 'epic' to reconstruct not so much a new Helen, but the oldest and 'therefore' truest Helen, a measured displacement of the narrative of war" (108). Helen's epic quest unseats the predominating misogynist traditions (the "narrative[s] of war") that have objectified her and recovers "an ultimate maternal space" as she reconstructs her "oldest" and "truest"

self (111). Recent criticism has expanded such arguments; Kathleen Crown, for example, reads *Helen in Egypt* as an epic poem in which Helen's heroic quest is to recover the "lost or forgotten mother" whose rejection by masculinist culture is the cause of "a psychic wounding that manifests itself as human violence and war"; her recovery of this mother provides a means of "healing a traumatized psyche" and preventing further destruction (76). Eileen Gregory, whose *H.D. and Hellenism* provides the most extensive treatment of H.D.'s classical influences to date, takes a slightly different approach. She acknowledges the epic subtext of the work and agrees that it "certainly appears as a kind of antiepic" but urges that "claims for the poem as epic [. . .] must be qualified in light of its more proximate but little considered classical contexts" (218). Taking an intertextual approach, she argues that Euripides is the most important formal and thematic influence on *Helen in Egypt*.

There is general consensus, then, that *Helen in Egypt* engages the epic genre; epic gives shape to the poem through its structure and conventional quest theme, or, at the least, it serves as a subtext. Critics also generally agree that H.D.'s poem ultimately rejects Homeric epic as it is traditionally understood: her work is antiwar, emphasizes interiority rather than action, and is feminist rather than masculinist. Several critics have pointed toward the lack of obvious allusions to Homeric texts as a sign of H.D.'s rejection of the classical poet. DuPlessis finds that she treats Homer "rather offhandedly," pointing toward a single, brief allusion that is "virtually lost in this lengthy text" (112). Homer's brief appearance serves merely to provide the material that the poem will deconstruct. Similarly, Friedman argues that that "H.D.'s 'pallinode' is a

'song against' [the] misogynist [literary] tradition" and "the male-dominated system of values that victimized Helen as *both* wife and lover" (254, 255). She does not explicitly state that Homer, in particular, is the origin of this tradition and set of values, but he is certainly implicated by Friedman's emphasis on war, patriarchy, and conventional masculine heroism as the defining characteristics of the "misogynist tradition." Gregory's argument, on the other hand, only implies a rejection of Homer. In a chapter on H.D.'s earlier lyrics, she states that the poet had a "[complex]" and "lifelong" engagement with Homer characterized by ambivalence (176). She summarizes H.D. as "a poet in resistance to epic vision and the destruction of war, who nevertheless imagines [poetic] vocation in heroic terms and whose vocation necessitates a working of chthonic ground, a sailing of wine-dark seas" (178). However, she diminishes the importance of the Greek epics in discussing H.D.'s most epic work. She uncovers a number of direct allusions to Homer in *Helen in Egypt* but does not explore them in any depth, merely listing them in an endnote. Instead, Gregory finds that the author of Greek epic influences *Helen in Egypt* in only the most general way: as in her early poems, Homer provides H.D. with a means for conceiving of her poetic role as heroic, and he is the subtext for her treatment of war inasmuch as "[he] is the subtext of classical writing itself, he is *the* Western poet of war" (219). Gregory makes sense in arguing that Euripides is the most accessible and pervasive influence on H.D.'s poem, and her point that there is no evidence that H.D. reread Homer after 1920 is well taken (218-19). However, Gregory is too emphatic in her dismissal of the ancient poet, leaving little room

for the complex engagement with Homer that she finds in H. D.'s earlier work and that also exists in H.D.'s long poem.

Helen in Egypt is, in fact, deeply engaged with Homeric epic. While H.D. does not mention Homer by name in her overview of the classical literary history of stories about Helen and alludes to the *Iliad* less often than to Euripides' plays in the poem, the epic poet is nevertheless a major presence in her work. After all, Euripides and Stesichorus, who provided H.D. with classical "precedents for revisionist mythmaking," were heavily influenced by Homer's works (Friedman 255). Given H.D.'s familiarity with Greek literature and her interest in literary tradition and transmission, it is unlikely that she would have disregarded this fundamental influence. Indeed, Homer's work is visible underneath the palimpsestic layers of H.D.'s poem and serves as a vital source for its revisionary efforts. Achilles and Paris, characters from the *Iliad*, and Theseus, who is not a Homeric figure but, as a semi-divine warrior, is a similar type of character, are all major forces in the poem; it is only with their help that Helen is able to complete her quest. Moreover, the masculinity that they represent is crucial to H.D.'s syncretic ideal: gender is one of the dualities that Helen resolves as a paradox, and her emphasis on maternity and feminine creativity and procreation depends upon men—death, destruction, and male potency are part of the "life-in-death" cycle of the Greater Mystery. Friedman has extensively analyzed the role of traditional masculine and feminine gender constructs as they relate to this paradox and has noted the bisexual ideal that it underscores; she argues that Euphorion, the offspring of Helen's marriage to Achilles in the traditional Greek myth, "is the androgynous One that incorporates both the archetypal polarity of

mother and father and the dualities within each of them" (294). Her reading, however, does not allow for the androgynous character of Helen and Achilles themselves; since the birth of Euphorion does not occur in *Helen in Egypt* but, instead, is merely understood as what happens afterward, Friedman's reading ultimately does not allow for the fact that *Helen in Egypt* actually resolves the masculine/feminine duality rather than merely pointing toward its resolution. Crown, on the other hand, does find androgynous qualities in Achilles and Helen; she observes that H.D.'s poem "set[s] forth an ideal male-female relationship modeled on the brother-sister equality of the lovers Isis and Osiris [that] relies on an androgynous ideal of psychic bisexuality" (82-83). Nevertheless, she ultimately renders this relationship as problematic because it "remain[s] caught up in a family paradigm in which heterosexual romance predominates," a conclusion that ignores the homosexual implications of a relationship between androgynous characters who possess an ideal of psychic bisexuality (89).

A common factor that plays into both Friedman's and Crown's inability to account fully for the androgynous and homosexual possibilities in *Helen in Egypt* is a misconception of Homer's work. Both critics assume that he is aligned with the bellicose misogynistic tradition that H.D.'s poem supplants, when the degree to which his work actually affirms the values of the culture it recounts is debatable. Fundamental misreadings and overgeneralizations are present in much of the feminist criticism that takes up the question of Homer's role in H.D.'s poem. Crown, for example, claims that

> [r]ather than justifying the nation, H.D.'s markedly interrogative poem questions national subjectivity, it invites challenge and interpretation by including the voice

> of a critical reader, and it circles through time rather than marching forward to a manifest national destiny. [. . .] In Homeric epic, of course, women's bodies are the stage for national dramas—the rape or seduction of Helen, the sacrifice of Iphigenia, and the revenge of Clytemnestra all have ramifications for the status of the nation. (80, 81)

These remarks about the way that H.D.'s poem challenges dominant masculinist culture are apt, but the events that Crown cites as examples of "women's bodies [being] the stage for national dramas" in Homeric epic are not actually Homeric. The *Iliad* only alludes to the judgment of Paris, not to the subsequent "rape or seduction of Helen." The sacrifice of Iphigenia and the revenge of Clytemnestra do not appear in the *Iliad* at all; the Athenian dramas of Euripides and Aeschylus are the primary sources for these stories.[6] Since Homer's poetry does not actually treat these events, it cannot serve as evidence for his nationalist agenda. Moreover, the very idea of Homer's texts as nation-building is anachronistic. Ancient Greece, during Homer's time, was not a nation but rather a collection of independent societies that occasionally formed temporary alliances such as the one that attacks Troy in the *Iliad.* Though Homer's poetry helped foster a collective Hellenic identity, the ancient Greeks did not consider themselves a "nation" in the modern sense of the word. Friedman makes a similar oversight, referring to the sacrifice of Iphigenia as "the familiar Homeric tale" (262). She regards this sacrifice, and other instances of female sacrifice during or after the Trojan War (Cassandra, Polyxena, Briseis, Chryseis, and Clytemnestra), as a consequence of the "hierarchical, terror-based, death-centered social systems" of "the masculine 'warrior cult'" (260). Though

Friedman does not explicitly discuss Homer in relation to this social system, her passing remarks about "Helen's Homeric images of war" in *Helen in Egypt* and her characterization of the Iphigenia story as a Homeric tale certainly implicate the ancient author (259). Her argument leaves the general impression that Homer is the literary origin for the misogynist story of "Helena, Helen hated of all Greece" that H.D. sings against in her "Pallinode" (2).

But this crucial line from *Helen in Egypt* does not accurately reflect Homer's treatment of Helen or his attitude toward the female victims of war.[7] While it is true that women are victimized in the epic poems and that both Greek and Trojan heroes are capable of slandering Helen, his poem does not necessarily endorse such behavior. Homer's depiction of Helen is, at the least, ambiguous. She is presented as the cause of the Trojan War: the Greek soldiers claim to be fighting "for the sake of Helen and all her possessions," and the Trojans also speak of "suffer[ing] hardship for a woman" (3.91, 157).[8] Some of the Trojans clearly blame Helen for the destruction of their city; when she leads a song of lament over Hektor's body at the end of the poem, she says that she "never heard a harsh saying from [him], nor an insult" (24.767), implying that she did hear such things from the other Trojans. But the fact that Helen joins Hektor's family in leading songs of lament over his body is also telling. Though the Greeks and Trojans are fighting over her, she is not necessarily responsible for the war. Indeed, Homer's text represents Helen as an unwilling victim of the whims of the gods and men who control her. There is only one reference to the events leading up to the Trojan War in the *Iliad*, and it lays the blame for the Trojan War on Aphrodite and Paris:

> So Achilles in his standing fury outraged great Hektor.
> The blessed gods as they looked upon him were filled with compassion
> and kept urging clear-sighted Argeïphontes to steal the body.
> There this was pleasing to all the others, but never to Hera
> nor Poseidon, nor the girl of the grey eyes, who kept still
> their hatred for sacred Ilion as in the beginning,
> and for Priam and his people, because of the delusion of Paris
> who insulted the goddesses when they came to him in his courtyard
> and favored her who supplied the lust that led to disaster. (24.22-30)

When Homer describes the aftermath of Achilles' slaying of Hektor, the symbolic defeat of the Trojans, he reveals that the cause of this devastation is not Helen, over whom the armies have been fighting, but Aphrodite's delusion of Paris. *Atê*, the Greek word translated here as "delusion," literally means "stupor" or a "blindness of the mind sent by the gods, a divine perversion or deception of the mind leading to evil-doing or mischance" (*Lexicon*). Aphrodite bewitches Paris, "supplying the lust" for Helen that leads him to take her from Sparta. The goddess, then, is primarily responsible for the Trojan War. This opinion is echoed by Priam, the leader of the Trojans. When Helen emerges from her chamber to watch the events unfolding on the battlefield, the Trojan elders see her and begin to discuss her, saying that she is worth fighting over because of her beauty but that it would be better if she were sent away to the Greeks:

> So they spoke: but Priam aloud called to Helen:
> "Come over here where I am, dear child, and sit down beside me,

to look over your husband of time past, your friends and your people.

I am not blaming you: to me the gods are blameworthy

who drove upon me this sorrowful war against the Achaians." (3.161-65)

Priam's invitation to Helen does not merely interrupt the conversation of the elders; it overrules it. The Greek verb *agoreuon*, meaning "they were speaking in counsel," is used to characterize the elders' conversation; the men are not simply gossiping, but having a weighty conversation with official overtones. Priam's speech is introduced with the Greek adversative particle *de*, translated here as "but," which indicates that his words mark a sharp contrast with those of the elders. The men have not disparaged Helen or even stated aloud that the war is her fault; they have merely posed the idea that Troy can avoid destruction if she leaves. Priam, who is characterized sympathetically in the *Iliad*, shouts down this mere suggestion that Helen has anything to do with the fate of Troy and places the responsibility entirely on the gods.

Yet Paris, though he is deluded by Aphrodite, is also held accountable for the war in the *Iliad*. At the beginning of Book 3, as the armies prepare to do battle, Paris rushes in front of the Trojans and threatens the Greeks, only to beat a hasty retreat when Menelaos charges forward to meet him. Hektor sharply criticizes Paris' cowardice in a speech that blames him for the war:

"Evil Paris, beautiful, woman-crazy, cajoling,

Better had you never been born, or killed unwedded.

[. . . . .]

Were you like this that time when in sea-wandering vessels,

assembling oarsmen to help you, you sailed over the water,

and mixed with the outlanders, and carried away a fair woman

from a remote land, whose lord's kin were spearmen and fighters,

to your father a big sorrow, and your city, and all your people,

to yourself a thing shameful but bringing joy to the enemy?

And now you would not stand up against warlike Menelaos?

Thus you would learn of the man whose blossoming wife you have taken.

[. . . . .]

No, but the Trojans are cowards in truth, else long before this

you had worn a mantle of flying stones for the wrong you did us."

(3.38-39, 46-53, 56-57)

Paris responds by challenging Menelaos to single combat, and Menelaos' speech to the assembled warriors echoes Hektor's blame: "You have suffered much evil / for the sake of this my quarrel since Alexandros [Paris] began it" (3.99-100). As in the previous passages, Helen is nowhere mentioned as one responsible for the war; in fact, Hektor's speech reveals her to be an innocent victim who came to Troy unwillingly: Paris "take[s]" and "carrie[s] away" the "fair woman." Elsewhere, Homer describes Menelaos as "eager / to avenge Helen's longing to escape [the Trojans] and her lamentations" (2.589-90). Her longing to escape Troy is on full display when, after saving Paris from Menelaos, Aphrodite bids her to meet him in their bedroom, describing how handsome he looks as he awaits her in their bed. Helen retorts: "Go yourself and sit beside him [. . .]. I am not going to him" (3.406, 410). (Aphrodite, it seems, did not

"supply lust" to Helen as she did to Paris.) The goddess must force Helen to visit her lover, and when she does, she mocks him for his cowardice and tells him that Menelaos was a far better husband than he. Needless to say, these are not the words and actions of a willing adulteress. The Helen of the *Iliad* is not "Helena, hated of all Greece," the lustful woman who caused the Trojan War and earned the hatred of Greeks and Trojans alike by leaving her husband for Paris. Far from what H.D.'s critics have implied, Homer treats the Spartan woman sympathetically, depicting her as an unwilling victim of the machinations of the gods, a woman who is powerless to stop the war being fought ostensibly on her behalf.

Moreover, Homer does not endorse the misogynistic culture that regards women as objects to be fought over and bartered by heroic men. The emphasis that the *Iliad* places on the devastating consequences of the objectification of women by warrior culture complicates any attempt to view the poem as celebrating or even condoning those values. As Richard Lattimore has noted, the focus of the *Iliad* is not the Trojan War itself but Achilles' destructive wrath; the war merely provides the context in which the hero's tragedy plays out (17).

True, Homer does not explicitly condemn warrior culture's treatment of women as spoils of war; indeed, his contemporary audience would have been more likely to find fault with Agamemnon's insecurity and Achilles' stubborn anger than with their predation. An episode in Book 6 of the *Iliad*, however, suggests that Homer was sympathetic to the fate of women. The battle scenes of the poem begin not with full-scale war between the Greeks and Trojans but with their attempt to avoid it: the armies

agree that Paris and Menelaos will fight one-on-one to determine who takes Helen home. But the gods thwart these plans, ensuring that the armies will fight until one side is devastated. The armies begin to fight, yet before the siege begins in earnest, Homer provides a brief domestic interlude in which Hektor returns to the city to visit his wife and son:

> Hektor smiled in silence as he looked on his son, but she,
> Ancromache, stood close beside him, letting her tears fall,
> and clung to his hand and called him by name and spoke to him: "Dearest,
> your own great strength will be your death, and you have no pity
> on your little son, nor on me, ill-starred, who soon must be your widow;
> for presently the Achaians, gathering together,
> will set upon you and kill you; and for me it would be far better
> to sink into the earth when I have lost you, for there is no other
> consolation for me after you have gone to your destiny—
> only grief; since I have no father, no honoured mother." (6.404-413)

Andromache continues her entreaty with a long description of how Achilles killed her father and seven brothers in a previous battle and how her mother died shortly after being taken as spoils then ransomed back to her family. This passage and the digression into Andromache's past losses that follows it emphasize the human cost of war, especially for women. Andromache knows that she and her son will meet the same fate as her mother and brothers, so her description of their deaths serves as more than mere foreshadowing. Her tale also imbues the scene with pathos, as do the subtle details that Homer renders:

Hektor's silent smile at his infant son, Andromache's tears, Hektor taking Astyanax from the nursemaid to hold him for the last time and removing his helmet when it frightens the child. This scene is long and detailed by Homeric standards and poses a significant interruption to the action of warfare. For the space of approximately 100 lines, a significant portion of Book 6's 529 lines, Homer renders a moving and sympathetic portrayal of doomed domesticity, drawing attention to what the destructive consequences of the Trojan war will be before moving on to describe the full-scale battle that takes up much of the rest of the *Iliad.*

Because Helen and the other female victims of war are often incidental to the main plot of the *Iliad*, it is easy to overlook Homer's complex and sympathetic treatment of them. As Gregory notes, Homer is *the* Western poet of war. But such brief, yet significant, details in his text run counter to the dominant and misogynistic tradition that H.D. challenges in *Helen in Egypt*, a fact that she, having read Homer in the original language, would certainly have appreciated. Her text does not reject the Greek epics themselves but, rather, a particular interpretive tradition. As Gregory has described, there are two distinct and opposing traditions of hellenism with which H.D. would have been familiar.[9] The Athenian tradition was espoused by most of the modernist writers and has thus become predominant. It emphasizes traditionally masculine values: orthodoxy, order, reason, austerity, objectivity, impersonality, exact rendering, integrity, and fixed standards. The Alexandrian tradition, with which H.D. aligned herself, was quite the opposite; it valued heterodoxy and heresy, chaos, passion, effusiveness, subjectivity, personality, blurred rendering, fragmentation, and an aesthetic of infinitude. In short, the

Alexandrian tradition values texts that the Athenian would dismiss as effeminate. The two writers who are typically regarded as exemplars of these traditions are Aeschylus, for the Athenian, and Euripides, for the Alexandrian. Homer, who is usually described in Athenian terms, is at the root of both traditions, paradoxically providing both the foundation for the misogynistic tradition that H.D. critiques *and* the basis for such critique. As Mihoko Suzuki argues, Homer's epics "cannot escape the conditions of their production in patriarchal culture; thus they inevitably participate in the encoding of woman as Other," yet they also "expose that very process of symbolic representation, and hence repression, of woman" (4-5). Indeed, Homer's influence on Stesichorus and Euripides, H.D.'s "precedents for revisionist mythmaking," is well documented in classical scholarship.[10] But H.D. does not enter this line of transmission in *Helen in Egypt* merely by picking up where Euripides leaves off, as Gregory's argument implies; on the contrary, Homer is also a direct and crucial influence on H.D.'s subversive rendering of Helen's story.

Achilles' question—"how are Helen in Egypt / and Helen upon the ramparts, / together yet separate?"—emphasizes the importance of the ancient epics in H.D.'s text. As Gregory has observed, "Helen upon the ramparts" is one of the few direct allusions to Homeric texts in the poem; it refers to the scene in Book 3 of the *Iliad* when Helen, at Iris' behest, appears on the walls of Troy and discusses the Greek army with Priam. The rarity and specificity of this reference urge the question, "how are *Helen in Egypt* and Helen upon the ramparts together yet separate?" The scene that H.D. alludes to is frequently referred to as the *Teichoscopia* (literally, "a viewing from the walls"). H.D.'s

own treatment of Helen owes a great deal to the *Teichoscopia*, which provides a precedent for rendering her in a paradoxical fashion. Although the *Iliad* blames Aphrodite and Paris, rather than Helen, for causing the war, the Spartan woman is not entirely free from blame. When Iris summons Helen to the ramparts, the goddess finds her

> weaving a great web,
>
> a red folding robe, and working into it the numerous struggles
> of Trojans, breakers of horses, and bronze-armoured Achaians,
> struggles that they endured for her sake at the hands of the war god.
> Iris of the swift feet stood beside her and spoke to her:
> "Come with me, dear girl, to behold the marvelous things done
> by Trojans, breakers of horses, and bronze-armoured Achaians,
> who just now carried sorrowful war against each other,
> in the plain, and all their desire was for deadly fighting;
> now they are all seated in silence, the fighting has ended;
> they lean on their shields, the tall spears stuck in the ground beside them.
> But Menelaos the warlike and Alexandros will fight
> with long spears against each other for your possession." (3.125-37)

Although the *Iliad* emphasizes that Aphrodite and Paris caused the war, Helen does not emerge blameless: the war is being fought "for her sake." She did not cause it, but she is its cause. On the surface, this distinction paints Helen as a passive object rather than an agent. She can only wait and watch while her former and current husbands fight to

possess her "and all her belongings"; she is merely the most valuable of the precious objects that the men desire (3.70, 91, 255, 283, 285, 458). However, the subject matter of Helen's weaving implies something quite different. Many critics have discussed the fact that weaving is a frequent metaphor for poetic composition and, more specifically, for "a form of feminine writing substituting for the voice that has been silenced" in ancient literature (Gumpert 5). Several argue that Helen appears here as the author of the *Iliad* and is thus engaged in self-representation; Matthew Gumpert finds evidence for Helen's authorship in the structural similarities between her woven text and the opening of the *Iliad*: "both passages introduce the broad 'matter' of the work as a whole, both stress the sufferings of the Achaeans and the role of the gods in those sufferings, and both, finally, point to an essential division, either between Achaeans and Trojans or between Achilles and Agamemnon."[11] Iris emphasizes Helen's authorship by, in effect, citing her woven text when she summons her to the rampart to witness the feats of the "Trojans, breakers of horses, and bronze-armoured Achaians."[12] When Helen arrives on the rampart, she briefly takes over as the poet of the *Iliad*, narrating "what is essentially a second catalogue" as she identifies and briefly describes the various Greek leaders to Priam (Clader 9). As Linda Lee Clader notes, it is remarkable that Helen should be the author of such a list: "traditionally, such a scene should be dominated by a member of the opposing side, who could provide information about his former comrades on the basis of his own martial experience." In acting as the poet of the *Teichoscopia* and playing a narrative part that would normally fall to one of the Trojan commanders, Helen acquires an agency that belies her apparently passive role in the war. Paradoxically, she

authorizes the war that objectifies her; she is a mere prize over which the men fight, but as a worker of texts and textiles, she exercises creative authority over the heroes and their exploits.

Helen's dual role complicates the question of whether or not she is responsible for the Trojan War, creating further paradoxes that render the issue irresolvable. As the victim of Aphrodite's machinations, Helen is innocent, but as the author of "the numerous struggles of Trojans, breakers of horses, and bronze-armoured Achaians," she must also be guilty. The *Teichoscopia* renders Helen both ways. When the Trojan elders see Helen approaching on the ramparts, they describe her in conflicting terms:

> "Surely there is no blame on Trojans and strong-greaved Achaians
> if for a long time they suffer hardship for a woman like this one.
> Terrible is the likeness of her face to immortal goddesses.
> Still, though she is such, let her go away in the ships, lest
> She be left behind, a grief to us and our children." (3.156-59)

Helen is a valuable prize worth fighting for because of her beauty, but this beauty is "a grief" that is too costly; she is, at once, desirable and repellant, a valuable object to be owned and a powerful figure, "terrible" in her resemblance to goddesses, who can cause devastation. Her presence raises the question of blame, but the elders nevertheless conspicuously avoid passing judgment on Helen. Their desire to send her to the Greeks implies that they hold her responsible for the war to some extent, but the issue remains pointedly undecided. Priam overrules the elders with his assurance that he holds the gods alone to blame for the danger to his city, but Helen insists on her guilt:

> "Always to me, beloved father, you are feared and respected;
> and so bitter death should have been desirable to me, when I came here
> following your son, forsaking my chamber, my kinsmen,
> my grown child, and the loveliness of girls my own age.
> It did not happen that way: and now I am worn with weeping.
> This now I will tell you in answer to the question you asked me.
> That man is Atreus' son Agamemnon, widely powerful,
> at the same time a good king and a strong spearfighter,
> once my brother-in-law, slut that I am. Did this ever happen?" (3.172-80)

In wishing she had died rather than come to Troy and in calling herself a slut, Helen would seem to refute Priam's assurances that she is not to blame; rhetorically, however, she undermines her own admission of guilt. She says that it would have been better to die than to come to Troy, but she abdicates responsibility by shifting the onus to death, which "should have been [more] desirable" to her than it was. Similarly, though she calls herself a slut, her self-condemnation expresses the shame of an honorable woman; as Gumpert has observed, she "[renders herself] endearing, and even innocent" by taking the blame (9). At the same time, however, Helen's self-censure is a dark reminder of the consequences of the war. As Clader observes, the word Helen uses to call herself a slut, *kunopes* (which literally means "dog-eyed"), "may be connected with the terrible threat that dogs represent to heroes" (18). The opening of the *Iliad* records the fact that most of the warriors who die on the battlefield "[give] their bodies to be the delicate feasting / of dogs" (1.4-5). Such a dishonor effectively damns them: without a proper funeral, they

cannot earn immortality through the commemoration of their deeds.[13] Paradoxically, then, as Helen subtly distances herself from the blame she heaps on herself, she even more subtly affirms her guilt. When Helen appears for the second time in the *Iliad*, she repeats this rhetorical pattern. Hektor, who squarely blames Paris for the war, has come to fetch his brother and upbraid him for being in bed with Helen rather than on the battlefield. Helen bursts into their conversation:

> "Brother by marriage to me, a horrible evil-devising bitch,
> how I wish that on that day when my mother first bore me
> the foul whirlwind of the storm had caught me away and swept me
> to the mountain, or into the wash of the sea deep-thundering
> where the waves would have swept me away before all these things had happened.
> Yet since the gods had brought it about that these vile things must be,
> I wish I had been the wife of a better man than this is." (6.344-50)

Helen follows the same pattern as in the *Teichoscopia*: she encounters someone who does not blame her and seems to insist on her guilt by wishing she were dead and calling herself names. Here, though, her rhetoric is intensified. Even more fervently than before, she wishes she had died, but she also abdicates responsibility more clearly: here, it is unquestionably "the gods [who] brought it about that these vile things must be." Moreover, the vivid description of how she wishes she had died is hyperbolic, and when she finally turns it toward abusing her husband, the effect is humorous, nullifying her words as an admission of guilt. At the same time, though, her verbal abuse is more

vicious than in her previous speech, and it more strongly links her to the devastation of war. In literally calling herself a bitch (the Greek work *kunos* means "dog"), Helen becomes one of the dogs that destroys heroic bodies and reputations. Moreover, the words translated here as "evil-devising" and "horrible," *kakomechanou* and *okruoesses*, are always associated with physical violence and with war, respectively, in Homer's epics, as Clader has noted (17-18). By repeating and intensifying the language and rhetoric that both implicate and exonerate Helen in this scene, the poem thus emphasizes the questions about her nature and her role in the war that are raised when she appears on the ramparts of Troy.

The *Teichoscopia* further confounds these issues by raising additional paradoxes. The language Helen uses to express her feelings of guilt depicts her as a powerful threat: her "terrible" beauty leads to the destruction of Troy and impedes the warriors' quest for immortality. Yet, at the same time, Helen offers the Greek and Trojan heroes their greatest hope of achieving immortal glory. As several critics have observed, Helen's abduction and rescue are primarily important to the warriors because they provide a means of acquiring or maintaining *kléos*, an honorable heroic reputation.[14] Clader notes that Helen is "a dangerous woman" primarily because she possesses "the same sinister beauty which *kléos*, won through suffering and death, portends for the hero" (12). Helen thus symbolizes the heroic quest for an honorable reputation that will confer immortality; paradoxically, though, the price of immortality is death. The heroes' desire to maintain or obtain *kléos* motivates the action of the *Iliad.* Menelaos must win Helen back from Paris, or else his reputation is tarnished. The Greek warriors, who are bound by a pact,

must join him in the fight in order to preserve their honor.[15] The Trojans are similarly bound; since Paris refuses to give Helen back, they are obligated to fight on his behalf. More importantly, however, the warriors can earn *kléos* through their exploits on the battlefield. Martial prowess and an honorable death in battle inspire poetry; the warriors frequently entertain themselves by singing *kléa andron* (literally, "reputations of men") that recount the feats and fates of their ancestors and comrades. The survival and transmission of these songs ensure the immortality of their subjects. This poetry, which includes Homer's epics, has potent healing powers that compensate for the terrible price of *kléos*. Gregory Nagy has demonstrated that *kléos* is the opposite of *pénthos*, grief caused by defeat and loss (*Achaeans*). Further, as Clader notes, *kléa andron* are a remedy for *pénthos*: after Agamemnon insults Achilles by taking Briseis from him, Achilles comforts himself by singing heroic poetry (32). The quest for *kléos* may result in devastation and loss, but it is also able to alleviate that *pénthos*.

Helen's ambiguous nature in Homer stems from her embodiment of this paradoxical ideal. Overtly, she is the object that the Greeks and Trojans fight to own, but implicitly, she represents the deadly *kléos* that every warrior desires. Yet Helen's relationship to *kléos* goes beyond the fact that she serves as a pretext for its acquisition; she is also, as a weaver of textiles and texts, able to confer it. The tapestry that Helen weaves immortalizes its subject: the *kléa* of "Trojans, breakers of horses, and bronze-armoured Achaians" (3.131). Similarly, the points at which Helen acts as the poet of the *Iliad* invest her with this life-giving power. The catalogue of heroes that she authors in the *Teichoscopia* records for posterity the names and heroic qualities of the Greek

warriors she describes to Priam: Agamemnon the "good king" and "strong spearfighter," "resourceful" Odysseus who "know[s] every manner of shiftiness and crafty counsels," "gigantic Aias, wall of the Achians," and Idomeneus "like a god standing / among the Kretans" (3.179, 200, 202, 229, 230-31). Likewise, the funeral song that Helen sings over Hektor's body at the end of the *Iliad*, the final and most powerful of the three songs in his honor, "represent[s] the beginnings of the memorial of oral poetry that the heroes have won. Coming at the very end of an epic, [it is] also a reference to the composition which has just been performed" (Clader 11). As a poet of *kléa andron*, Helen also has the ability to soothe the grief that is a consequence of the war being fought for her sake. This power is most apparent in her brief appearance in the *Odyssey*. When Telemachos comes to Sparta in search of information about the fate of his father, his personal loss awakens Menelaos' own feelings of *pénthos*. Helen soothes the men before they are overwhelmed by their grief, slipping a drug into their drink that calms them and then telling a long story about the Trojan War. Homer refers to the drug she uses as *nepénthes*, anti-*pénthos*. It thus has the same effect as the *kléa andron* that she next recounts; therefore, as Clader argues, Helen's potion "may be seen as a brief symbol for Homer's extended self-conscious expression of the effect of epic poetry" (33). Helen's healing powers, however, are offset by the way the exercises them. While her recounting an event from the war is a traditional, positive means of purging grief, her stealthy anesthetizing of Menelaos and Telemachos is devious.

An ambivalent picture of Helen emerges in this scene of the *Odyssey*. She depicts herself as an unwavering supporter of the Greek warriors, telling Telemachos a story

about how, when Odysseus entered Troy disguised as a beggar, she recognized him and took care of him rather than giving him away to the enemies. Menelaos then follows up with a rather different story: while the Greeks hid inside the Trojan horse, Helen stood outside of it imitating their wives' voices, trying to compel them to call out so that the stratagem would be ruined. Clader notes that Helen has witchlike powers: knowledge of potions, a prescient awareness of which Greeks are hidden inside the horse, and an uncanny skill for imitating the wives. These powers have the potential both to help (as when she soothes the *pénthos* of Telemachos and Menelaos) and hinder. Helen's appearance in the *Odyssey* thus extends the paradoxes set forth in the *Iliad*: she is simultaneously an innocent victim and good wife who is loyal to Menelaos and the Greeks, and she is a dangerously powerful figure capable of destroying men who is allied with Paris and the Trojans; she is a source of *pénthos* because she is the cause of war, and she is a dispenser of *nepenthés* who can confer immortality because she is the poet of *kléa andron*.

Homer's "Helen upon the ramparts" is not a distinct figure and tradition against which H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt* stands in opposition, then, but a paradoxical *eidolon* on which H.D.'s fractured heroine is based. The word *eidolon*, which means "image" or "phantom," is most familiar from Euripides' *Helen*, where it refers to the image of Helen that Zeus placed in Troy while Helen herself remained in Egypt; however, it is equally apt for describing the Homeric Helen. Gumpert notes that "the text of the *teichoskopia* is haunted by the specter of competing and contradictory Helens" and asks "which Helen is the right one? Which Helen is the first one? Which Helen is the real one?" (9). The

Helen whom Iris summons to the ramparts is a divided figure in the *Iliad*: as Menelaos and Paris prepare to duel, she simultaneously belongs to both and neither of the men. Iris compels Helen to the Skaian gates by filling her with erotic desire for Menelaos, her former and future husband, and with nostalgia for Sparta and her parents, thus conflating her past, present, and future identities. When Homer's Helen arrives at the Skaian gate and speaks with Priam, she poses a question that throws her entire history, and even the *Iliad* itself, into doubt: "did this ever happen?" Gumpert argues that this question invokes a series of abduction myths that parallel Helen's abduction by Paris. Homer's poem specifies that one of Helen's handmaidens is "Aithre, Pittheus' daughter" (3.144). Aithre is the mother of Theseus, Helen's first abductor, and she is also in Troy because she has been abducted. Helen's abduction by Theseus, according to Martin Nilsson, is a secularized variant on the story of Persephone's abduction by Hades. Helen's abduction by Paris is thus the most recent layer in a palimpsest of abduction stories that render questions about the "right," "first," or "real" Helen unanswerable: she "has always *already* been abducted; she is always to be abducted again. It is also possible that she was never abducted at all. There is no 'original' or 'real' Helen: only a perspective of innumerable Helens receding backward into the past and forward into the future" (Gumpert 10). Thus, "the figure of the *eidolon* [in Euripides' *Helen*] is [. . .] only the most explicit image of an ontological and epistemological instability already constitutive of the 'standard,' Iliadic Helen" (12). The same could be said of *Helen in Egypt*. H.D.'s use of the Euripidean *eidolon* myth as the premise of her poem literalizes the multiple, often conflicting, identities contained in the Homeric Helen.

Homer's *eidolon* not only provides H.D. with a precedent for rendering Helen in paradoxical and palimpsestic terms but also plays a central role in shaping the narrative of *Helen in Egypt*. A long, arcane, convoluted, and thus forbidding poem, *Helen in Egypt* is understandably not well known. Because few readers are familiar with the text and H.D.'s hermeneutic style and because her characters' frequent, abrupt changes in mood and train of thought make for a bewildering narrative even to those who have read the poem, I will devote significant attention to the plot, especially in the "Pallinode" section. I hope that this extra attention will be justified by its usefulness to readers and its contribution to critical discussions of H.D.'s work.

Both Helen and Achilles suffer from emotional impairment that stems from their realization that "*the Greeks and Trojans alike fought for an illusion*" (1). While this statement is true in a literal sense, it is not the battle for a phantom image of Helen herself but, rather, the fight to earn the *kléos* she represents that is most damaging to Helen and the warriors. The fact that she was never at Troy proves to be a moot point: "*it was not her fault*," yet "*through eternity, she will be blamed*" as the cause of the war (15). This blame impedes Helen's reconciliation with Achilles and thus her quest to be initiated into the Greater Mystery. He, like the rest of Greece, hates her because "they did not understand what she herself can only dimly apprehend," the fact that "*it all happened, the ruin—it would seem not only of Troy, but of the 'holocaust of the Greeks'* [. . .] *in order that two souls or two soul-mates should meet*" (5). As in the *Iliad*, Helen appears in H.D.'s poem as both an innocent victim of the machinations of men and the gods and a powerful figure who leads warriors to their deaths. She also, in both poems, is

paradoxically able to confer immortality and *nepenthes* upon the men whom she has destroyed. The means by which she does so, however, is where *Helen in Egypt* and the "Helen upon the ramparts" of the *Teichoscopia* differ. Rather than weaving *kléa andron* or dispensing drugs that anesthetize warriors to the painful emotional consequences of war, thus inspiring the future pursuit of *kléos*, H.D.'s Helen turns her poetic gift toward ending this self-perpetuating cycle of violence. By translating herself and her experiences into the script of the Greater Mystery, "a magic more powerful than the trial of arms," Helen will create a life-affirming text capable of healing the damage wrought by, and even of supplanting, the illusory *kléa andron* of warrior culture.

However, before Helen can explain the Greater Mystery, she must fully understand it. Her meeting and reconciliation with Achilles is the key to gaining this understanding, but she is hindered by the shellshock that she and Achilles experience. In Egypt, "alone" in the "long corridors of lotus-bud / [. . .] and the lotus-flower unfurled" she has repressed her knowledge of the war and of the quest that she must complete (2). Achilles' arrival sparks her memory and the beginning of her recovery; she chooses "not Lethe and forgetfulness / but everlasting memory" of how "[the warriors] fought, forgetting women, / hero to hero, sworn brother and lover, / and cursing Helen through eternity" (3, 4). The warriors' perception of Helen impedes her reconciliation with Achilles; he, too, curses Helen because he regards her as the seductive and destructive embodiment of *kléos*, responsible for his and his comrades' deaths. He arrives on the Egyptian shore with "the fury of the tempest in his eyes, / the bane of battle / and the legions lost" (7). Shellshock complicates Helen's recovery. She must learn about the

war from him so that she can continue to unravel the Mystery, but she must first contend with his anger and confusion. He recognizes that something is amiss in the afterlife:

> This was the token, his mortality;
> Immortality and victory
> were dissolved;
>
> *I am no more immortal,*
> *I am man among the millions,*
> *no hero-god among the Myrmidons.* (9)

His glorious death on the battlefield has not earned him *kléos*, "immortality and victory," status as a "hero-god," as the heroic code promises. Helen, who has perceived that their fates are governed by "magic greater than the trial of arms," recognizes that she must reveal to him the devastating knowledge that he fought and died for an *eidolon*, that *kléos* is merely a destructive illusion:

> some said a bowman from the Walls
> let fly the dart, some said it was Apollo,
> but I, Helena, know it was Love's arrow;
> [. . . . .]
> it was God's plan
> to melt the icy fortress of the soul,
> and free the man. (9, 10)

Freeing Achilles from the "icy fortress" of the heroic code is no easy task. Helen does not yet understand how or why "Love's arrow" has brought them together, so she is consumed by doubt and by fear of his anger. She attempts to hide her identity from Achilles and prays that "*Amen, All-father*" will "*let him forget*" his battlefield experiences (12).

As Helen stalls, a bird flies overhead and forces a confrontation between Achilles' *kléos*-driven ethos and that of the Greater Mystery. Achilles, "*lately arrived from Troy and the carnage of battle*," interprets the bird with a warrior's eyes: to him, it is a "carrion creature" (13). His remark recalls the dangerous scavengers of the *Iliad*, the dogs and birds that make "delicate feasting" of fallen men's bodies, with whom "dog-eyed" Helen is aligned (1.3, 3.180). For Helen, however, the bird is a revelation:

> when the bird swooped past,
>
> that first evening,
>
> I seemed to know the writing,
>
> as if God made the picture
>
> and matched it
>
> with a living hieroglyph. (23)

In the temple where Helen has stayed in Egypt, she has seen but not understood hieroglyphic writing, the "indecipherable Amen-script" of the Mystery (21). At the sight of the bird, however, she gains "intuitive or emotional knowledge" that allows her to "*translat[e] a symbol in time, into timeless-time or hieroglyph or ancient Egyptian time*"

(13). Having connected the living bird with the hieroglyphic "*symbol* [. . .] *that represents or recalls the protective mother goddess*," Helen realizes that it "is no death-symbol but a life-symbol, it is Isis or her Greek counterpart, Thetis, the mother of Achilles." Upon this realization, she interrupts Achilles, replacing his interpretation of the bird with her own:

> he started, "a curious flight,
> a carrion creature—what—"
> (dear God, let him forget);
>
> I said, "there is mystery in this place,
> I am instructed, I know the script,
> the shape of the bird is a letter,
>
> they call it the hieroglyph;
> strive not, it is dedicate
> to the goddess here, she is Isis";
>
> "Isis," he said, "or Thetis," I said,
> recalling, remembering, invoking
> his sea-mother (13-14)

Helen's authoritative declarations ("there is mystery," "I am instructed," "I know the script") strike a sharp contrast with Achilles' halting speech. Yet her silent prayer, "dear

God, let him forget," reveals desperation in her attempt to turn Achilles from his heroic frame of mind. As she instructs Achilles, she realizes that he has not yet recognized her and thinks again of the hatred and blame that the Greeks have cast upon her. Once again, she is overcome by terror, doubt, and confusion, the greatest obstacles to her quest.

Helen's identity as the *eidolon* of *kléos* results in her emotional impairment as well as Achilles'. As she is overcome by fear of his anger, she experiences an acute sense of psychological fragmentation:

> *She knows what the Greeks think of her, and here is Greece-incarnate, the hero-god; true, he is shipwrecked; nevertheless, though wounded, he carries with him the threat of*
>
> *autocracy. She has lost caste. He is still Achilles. Or who is she? She says that Helen upon the ramparts was a phantom. Then, what is this Helen? Are they both ghosts? And if she is convinced of this, why does she entreat the flame that Achilles kindled, "let me love him, as Thetis, his mother"? Is she afraid of losing even her phantom integrity? And what of it?* (15)

Achilles' arrival "shipwrecked" and "wounded" recalls a similar episode from the *Odyssey* that emphasizes the concept of *nostos*, "home-coming." After Odysseus has lost his crew, he washes up on an unknown shore, destitute and unable to continue his quest to reach Ithaka. He is saved by a beautiful, godlike woman, Nausikäa, who takes pity on him and leads him safely into the Phaiakian city. There he is healed and given provisions to continue his quest. As Clader has argued, the central tension in the *Iliad* is that Achilles must choose between *kléos*, certain death on the battlefield and eternal glory,

and *nostos*, a full life with those he loves and the ignominy of choosing domestic life over the heroic code (6). Helen's task in H.D.'s poem is to correct his choice of *kléos*. Like Nausikäa, she must heal the warrior and facilitate *nostos*, his reunion with Thetis, his "protective mother goddess." But the strength of the heroic code and its threat of misogynist "autocracy" cause Helen to doubt herself: she has "lost caste," so how can she possibly sway the "hero-god," "Greece-incarnate"? The power of the Homeric *eidolon*, "Helen upon the ramparts," fragments her sense of self: "who is she?," "what is this Helen?," is she a "ghost" like the specter on the ramparts? Moreover, she does not yet fully understand her quest. She has intuitively grasped that she must "recall, remember, invoke" Achilles' mother, that she herself loves him as a soulmate, and that her love must be maternal as well as erotic, but she does not yet know how these elements of the Mystery fit together. In order to understand these tangled relationships, Helen must first contend with her own emotional impairment.

Helen's fear moves her to attempt to disguise her features so that Achilles will not recognize her as the baneful "*femme noire of antiquity*" (15). She grasps a charred stick to smudge her face with ashes, but, ironically, this traditional gesture of shame or grief causes Achilles to recognize her and attack her, both verbally and physically. As he grabs her throat and chokes her, he exclaims:

> "Helena, cursed of Greece,
>
> I have seen you upon the ramparts,
>
> no art is beneath your power,

you stole the chosen, the flower

of all-time, of all-history,

my children, my legions;

for you were the ships burnt,

O cursed, O envious Isis,

you—you—a vulture, a hieroglyph";

"Zeus be my witness," I said,

"it was he, Amen, dreamed of all this

phantasmagoria of Troy

it was a dream and a phantasy." (16-17)

Achilles' wrath and the charges he levies against Helen are a consequence of his adherence to the heroic code, yet they ironically provide Helen with insight that will aid her in turning him from his destructive mindset. Achilles' accusation that no "art is beneath [Helen's] power" recalls her role as the seductive weaver of treacherous *kléa andron* in Homer's texts, but it also suggests the powerful art that she will practice in translating the Greater Mystery. Similarly, in calling her both a "vulture" and "a hieroglyph," he reaffirms his interpretation of the bird as a "death-symbol" but also acknowledges Helen's reading of it as a hieroglyphic "life-symbol." By combining the two interpretations, Achilles suggests both the Homeric paradox of Helen as a lethal

figure capable of granting immortality and the central life-in-death paradox of the Greater Mystery. He thus emphasizes Helen's poetic authority even as he attempts to overpower her verbally. Moreover, Achilles' recriminations yield clues that help Helen to unravel the nature and purpose of their meeting so that she eventually can use her poetic power to articulate the Mystery. He identifies the Greek host killed in the war as his "children" and Helen as "Isis," conflating her with his mother and her Egyptian counterpart. In doing so, he reveals paradoxes that are central to the Mystery: Helen is his mother, her love for him is maternal and erotic, and the reconciliation of the two soulmates will be Achilles' *nostos*.[16] In her response to Achilles, Helen extends his blending of Greek and Egyptian identities, naming Zeus as Amen, as she finally reveals her devastating knowledge: that his pursuit of *kléos* was a "dream and a phantasy." H.D. uses the archaic Hellenistic spelling of the word "fantasy," emphasizing the word's etymological connections with "phantom," the most common translation of the word *eidolon*, and with "phantasmagoria," another archaism. Helen thus underscores the illusory nature of *kléos* while implying that it is also an outmoded concept. This revelation incenses and frightens Achilles, prompting him to attack Helen. He does not succeed in throttling her, but his violence overwhelms her emotionally, aggravating her shellshock and hindering her quest.

Helen is plagued by fear, doubt, and emotional exhaustion as she begins to piece together the text of the Mystery. Moreover, Achilles' attack presents her with new puzzles: why did he choke her? why was he unable to kill her? how can the attack be both a sign of his "*latent hostility*" and of the erotic passion that "brought [her] / to sleep

in his arms" afterward? (18, 19). Overwhelmed, Helen is torn between desire to give up her quest and new feelings of "strength [. . .] and defiance not only of Achilles, but of the whole powerful war-faction" inspired by his passion and failure to kill her (I.2.1). The prayer she offers to Thetis as Achilles strangles her captures Helen's emotional turmoil:

> *let me go out, let me forget,*
>
> *let me be lost . . . .*
>
> *Oh Thetis, O sea-mother,* I prayed under his cloak,
>
> *let me remember, let me remember*
>
> *forever, this Star in the night.* (17)

This pattern of giving up her quest only to resume it immediately is repeated throughout the "Pallinode" section of *Helen in Egypt* as Helen makes slow, painstaking progress in unraveling the Mystery. After the attack, she again resists the process of remembering that is central to her quest, insisting that she "do[es] not want to hear of Agamemnon," the "Trojan Walls," or "shield, helmet, greaves, / though he wore them" (18). Yet, as soon as she mentions Achilles and realizes that these implements of war are "part of his first / unforgettable anger," she changes her mind: "I do not want to forget his anger" (18, 19). Helen then understands that his wrath and the Trojan War are an integral part of the Mystery; they have "brought Helen / to sleep in his arms" and, moreover, have given her the power to defeat the destructive heroic code: "[Achilles] had lost / and they had lost— / the war-Lords of Greece." Although she is once again briefly tempted to give up her

quest ("go, go, / Achilles from me," "I am happier here alone / in this great temple"), she sets to work "study[ing] and decipher[ing] / the indecipherable Amen-script" (21).

Having translated the vulture that flew over her and Achilles as Isis' "life-symbol," Helen knows that "*the secret of the stone-writing is repeated in natural or human symbols*" (22). Achilles' attack makes her realize that the hieroglyphics tell her personal story as well: "she herself is the writing." Helen draws on what she has learned from Achilles' verbal assault to decipher the "Amen-script" of the Mystery, creating a palimpsestic text that reinterprets their meeting through the lens of Egyptian mythology:

> with his anger,
>
> that ember, I became
>
> what his accusation made me,
>
> Isis, forever with that Child,
>
> the Hawk Horus. (23)

Having recognized herself as Isis, Helen pieces together the rest of her text: Achilles is Isis' husband, Osiris, and his "children," the Greek soldiers who died at Troy, are Horus. In Plutarch's version of the Egyptian myth of Isis, Horus, and Osiris—which H.D. read—Osiris is murdered by his brother, Set, who tricks him into lying in a chest that seals itself shut. Isis recovers the chest and briefly resurrects Osiris so that he can impregnate her. She then hides his body and gives birth to Horus. Meanwhile, Set finds

Osiris and dismembers him, scattering the pieces of his body throughout Egypt. Isis finds all the pieces except the penis; she then reconstructs the body, fashioning a penis out of gold. Her devotion impresses the gods, who resurrect Osiris and make him the god of the underworld. Horus, in a series of battles, later defeats Set. As Helen applies this myth to the Trojan War, though, the identities overlap and fail to create a single cohesive narrative:

so with the whirlwind

of the chariot-wheels,

the clang of metal

and the glint of steel,

Achilles lorded Simois plain,

as Typhon, the Destroyer

[.....................]

the scattered host

(limbs torn asunder)

was the Osiris

[...................]

he lived, the immortal son

of the sea-goddess,

but anger made him sterner,

anger enclosed Osiris

within the iron-casement

of the Whirlwind, War;

they were not two but one,

Typhon-Osiris

to the initiate. (26, 27)

Helen has resurrected not only Achilles but also the "host" of Greeks destroyed as a result of Achilles' wrath; therefore, potential translations accumulate, overlap, and conflict: Helen/Isis resurrects the host/Osiris after they are destroyed by Achilles/Typhon (Helen uses the Greek Typhon as a counterpart for Set); she resurrects Achilles/Osiris and, in a sense, gives birth to the host/Horus by resurrecting them; "the Whirlwind Typhon"/ "the Whirlwind War" destroys Achilles/Osiris; Achilles, "destroyer and destroyed," plays the parts of both Set and Osiris by destroying himself. Yet again,

Achilles' obsession with *kléos* presents an impediment to Helen's quest; it is as the epitome of the traditional epic warrior, "lord[ing]" over the battlefield "with the whirlwind / of the chariot wheels, / the clang of metal / and the glint of steel," that he embodies Typhon, "the Whirlwind, War." In order to create a cohesive narrative, Helen must dissolve the connection between Achilles and Typhon by breaking the heroic code's hold on him.

Turning Achilles from his desire for *kléos* not only allows Helen to translate her and Achilles' experiences into the language of the Greater Mystery successfully, it is also a crucial part of the narrative itself. In the original Egyptian myth, Isis resurrects her husband twice: the first, brief, resurrection brings about the birth of Horus while the second establishes Osiris as god of the underworld and leads to Horus' defeat of Set. Helen has already resurrected Achilles once and, in doing so, acquired the Greek host as her children. She must now resurrect him a second time by converting him from his lethal morés: "*as Isis seeks to reclaim Osiris with the help of their Child, the sun-god Horus, so Helen, with the aid of 'the unnumbered host' would gain spiritual recognition and ascendency over 'Typhon, the Destroyer'*" (28). Her child has already bested Set in their first confrontation: the resurrected Greeks protected Helen from Achilles' physical attack, transforming the stranglehold of the "hero-god" into a lover's embrace: "it was they, the Holocaust, / a host [. . .] / who encircled, who sheltered me" (40). Set's ultimate defeat will occur when Helen utilizes the host/Horus to articulate the Mystery, successfully reinterpreting the purpose of the war to be not the pursuit of *kléos* but an element of the cycle of life, death, and resurrection. Once again, however, her shellshock

presents an obstacle. Helen repeatedly balks at the enormity of the destruction: "must death rule life?," "does Zeus decree that, forever, / Love should be born of War?" (28). Moreover, the strength of the "*charm of enchantment*" of the illusory *kléa andron* continues to intimidate her, and she begins to resent Achilles for "dar[ing to] remember / the unreality of war" (37, 30). She attempts to dismiss Achilles in her thoughts, but he interrupts with an enigmatic question: "'Helena, which was the dream, / which was the veil of Cytheraea?" (36). Helen does not understand the question, but she recognizes its importance: the answer is the key to explaining the Mystery, and Achilles is ready to listen if she will explain it. She works out what it is that Achilles is asking but cannot yet offer a response: "*is the 'veil of Cytheraea,' or of Love, Death? Is the disguise of Death, or the 'veil' of Death, Love? This is too difficult a question to answer*" (45). The appearance of a crack in the "iron casement" from which she must free Achilles prompts her to continue her quest; she knows that she must "*fight for her identity, for* Helena," a battle that requires her to confront "*that other, 'walking upon the ramparts,'*" the Homeric *eidolon* (37, 47). Though she is still wracked by doubt, Helen eventually manages to ask about the figure from whom she must reclaim her identity.

As Gregory has observed, Achilles' depiction of "Helen upon the ramparts" is one of the few direct allusions to the *Iliad* in *Helen in Egypt*; it refers to her appearance on the walls of Troy in the *Teichoscopia*. Homer's paradoxical Helen resonates through the hero's recounting of his experiences to H.D.'s heroine:

> there was bitter discussion and hate,
>
> she could leave by a secret gate,

and the armies be saved;

why does she hold us here?

[. . . .]

year after year, we fought

to enter a prison, a fortress;

was she a prisoner?

did she wanton, awake?

or asleep, did she dream of home?

[. . . .]

and we asked, would an arrow pierce

a Daemon's heart? a devil?

had she enchanted us

with a dream of daring, of peril,

as yet un-writ in the scrolls of history,

un-sung as yet by the poets? (49, 50)

The warriors' "bitter discussion" of how Helen could "leave by a secret gate / and the armies be saved" recalls the counsel of the Trojan elders, who propose such a plan, in the *Teichoscopia.* Their inability to decide on a course of action is a result of the impossibility of reading her; as in Homer's text, she is both the faithful Greek wife who

"dream[s] of home" and the "wanton" betrayer loyal to the Trojans, the helpless "prisoner" they must free and the terrible goddess who "holds" them on the battlefield with the promise of immortality: their "daring" and "peril" can provide the subject for *kléa andron* "as yet un-writ in the scrolls of history, / un-sung as yet by the poets." The men despise and are repelled by the "Daemon" who has "enchanted" them even while they desire her above all things; Achilles describes her as "a mist / or a fountain of water / in that desert" where the men "died of thirst" (48). Suzuki argues that the indeterminacy of Homer's Helen "reflects [the warriors'] ambivalence toward the inextricable duality of glory and death that marks the heroic code" (19). H.D.'s allusion to the Helen of the *Teichoscopia* invokes the character's duality to extend the Homeric critique: Achilles does not express ambivalence so much as disillusionment with the heroic code. He uses a lexicon of illusory imagery to characterize the deception of *kléos*: it is a "dream," an "enchantment," and a mirage that lures men to their deaths with the false promise of salvation. His illustration recalls Helen's previous use of similar imagery ("it was a dream and a phantasy," "phantasmagoria of Troy"), signaling that he has, on some level, accepted her revelation.

Describing his experiences at Troy to Helen serves as a sort of talking cure for Achilles, allowing him to recover the memory of his previous disillusionment with the heroic code.[17] He explains that the code, "*the Command or the adamant rule of the inner circle of the warrior caste*," establishes an "iron-ring" of camaraderie that demands absolute loyalty and obedience (61, 51). As the leader of the Myrmidons, Achilles is an "*indisputable dictator*"; the soldiers he commands are "[his] slaves, [his] servants,"

whom he has "broken" and "re-moulded [. . .] to [his] whim" so that they can "[share] immortality with [him]" (51). Although he fondly and rather proudly recalls his former power, Achilles' language betrays his awareness that the heroic code is a devastatingly tyrannical force. His depiction of his past self as a "dictator" who "broke" and enslaved men so that they would obey him without question aligns the heroic code with the brutal and doomed fascism of Hitler's reign, which had ended just a few years before H.D. began work on *Helen in Egypt*. Though the code ostensibly prescribes the rules for honorable conduct among warriors, in reality it frequently serves as a pretext for the selfish "whims" of those in power. As Achilles continues his story, he recalls the incident that made him aware of such ulterior motives. At Troy, Achilles shares the Command with the other Greek leaders, forcing him to compromise "*though this is not his usual way of fighting*." When Odysseus introduces the Trojan horse plan, Achilles alone dissents. To get him to agree to the plan, Odysseus offers a bribe "*contrary to the first agreement of the allies*":

> the Towers will fall;
> Helen will be your share
> of the spoils of war;
>
> what is a promise given?
> this is the iron-ring,
> no Grecian or other king

may contest or disobey;

within the iron-circle of your fame,

no more invisible,

you shall control the world. . . . (51, 52)

Odysseus offers Achilles all the rewards the heroic code promises to its adherents: victory ("the Towers will fall"), a beautiful woman of noble birth (the best prize one can gain from "the spoils of war"), and *kléos* ("fame, / no more invisible"), which will endow him with power ("you shall control the world"). Yet, the means by which Achilles would earn these rewards is blatantly dishonest; reneging on the first agreement of the Command ("what is a promise given?") and accepting a bribe are a far cry from the bravery in combat and fidelity to comrades that the code dictates. Odysseus manipulates "the iron-ring / no Grecian or other king / may contest or disobey," to place Achilles in an untenable situation. He can hardly turn down the opportunity to win victory, booty, and immortal fame; moreover, if he did, he would be going against the Command because the other leaders agree with Odysseus' plan. Yet, if Achilles accepts the bribe, he and his Myrmidons would be forced to "*take second place*" in the fighting and to rely on stealth and deception rather than strength and open combat; this, too, would be dishonorable (53). Trapped by Odysseus' machinations and "*at odds with the Command*," Achilles grows disillusioned with the heroic code's failure to provide "*direct guidance*" to an honorable course of action; he therefore decides to "*consult a new oracle*."

H.D.'s Achilles replaces "*the original oracle of the purely masculine 'iron-ring whom Death made stronger*" with one that is feminine and symbolic of life and resurrection: Helen (55). Having rejected the hypocritical authority of the Command, Achilles no longer sees the woman on the ramparts merely as a prize and as a means by which he can achieve *kléos*; rather, he looks to her as an authority in her own right. He creates "a game of prophecy" in which he watches the figure on the ramparts each day, counting her steps and observing where she pauses or turns, and interpreting each pause or turn as an answer to his question: should he defy the Command and strike with his legions or go along with Odysseus' plan? Though he presumably receives an answer each day, Achilles fails to act, choosing instead to wait and consult the oracle again. This behavior emphasizes his departure from the heroic code, which values action over reflection, and it signals the infatuation that leads to his death. One day he makes eye contact with Helen while he puts on his armor. Rather than seeing her as a mere object to be won in the pursuit of *kléos*, as a warrior ought, he "exchange[s]" a glance of mutual desire that causes him to "[stand] / indifferent to the rasp of metal" (54). Momentarily transfixed, Achilles fails to fasten the greave that protects his vulnerable heel, and he is struck there by an arrow and killed.

Although Achilles is disillusioned with the heroic code and even rejects its authority at the end of his life, he is unable to escape it entirely. When he first arrives in Egypt, Achilles is overcome by fear and disorientation and so falls back on the familiarity of the Command; as a tradition "[bequeathed] from the past, from father to son" that "[binds] past to present / and the present to aeons to come," it provides a sense of order

and stability to palliate his fear and sense of disorientation (61). Moreover, it provides Achilles with the only explanation for his death and afterlife that he can fathom; the Command has served as "[his] father, [his] brother, / [his] lover, [his] God," leaving nothing that could challenge its orthodoxy. Achilles therefore makes sense of what has happened to him by interpreting his death through the lens of the heroic code's values. He regards his defection from the Command and his erotic desire for Helen at Troy as "weakness" and "wavering" for which he was justly "shot like an underling," and he assumes that the absence of "*the circle of immortals to hail and acclaim him*" is further punishment for his betrayal (60, 57). Although meeting and talking with Helen has revived his doubt in the Command, he is nevertheless forced to cling to it until Helen can provide him with a new perspective. He therefore asks her to interpret the "*lesser personal mystery*" of his death, resurrection, and meeting with her in the afterlife:

> how are Helen in Egypt
> and Helen on the ramparts,
> together yet separate?
>
> how have the paths met?
> how have the circles crossed?
> how phrase or frame the problem? (64, 63)

These questions signal that Achilles has finally come to "*perceive the truth*" that Helen has revealed but cannot fully understand it; his "how phrase or frame the problem" recalls Helen's frustration: "*how explain it?*" (5). Aware that she possesses power that he does

not, he urges her to continue her quest by "ask[ing] the oracle to declare" the answers to his questions while he works "to reclaim the coast / with the Pharos, the light-house" (63).

While Achilles' talking cure leads him to accept Helen's authority and to take up work that is constructive, it hinders Helen by exacerbating her shellshock. She flatly refuses to inquire into "the ancient Mystery, the Oracle" and instead "*recall[s] her immediate 'family' as protection or balance against the overwhelming fact of her Fate or Destiny*" (64, 68). Achilles' tale causes Helen to remember that much of her family has been destroyed because of the war: her niece Iphigenia was sacrificed so that the Greeks could reach Troy; her sister Clytemnestra killed Agamemnon in revenge and was in turn killed by her nephew Orestes; and Helen's own daughter, Hermione, married the outcast matricide. Further, Helen recalls that Iphigenia was brought to Aulis on the pretext of marriage to Achilles and that he "sanctioned the sacrifice"; in light of her own romantic relationship with Achilles, she begins to identify with her niece and "*feel that she, like Iphigenia, was 'a pledge to Death'*" (81, 72). The connection intensifies her resentment of Achilles and thus her desire to "forget the past" and thus her quest (77). She seeks forgetfulness and *nepenthes* by "*re-living her own story and visualizing her own fate in terms of her twin-sister*" (74). Helen attempts to incorporate Clytemnestra into her translation of her personal story, casting her as Nephthys (Isis' sister and Set's wife), Nemesis (the Greek goddess of retribution), Astarte (a Semitic goddess associated with fertility and war), and Nepenthe (a goddess of H.D.'s own invention whose name is derived from *nepenthes*, the anesthetizing drug Helen uses in the *Odyssey*). The last of

these associations hints at the escapist nature of Helen's thinking. In identifying with her niece and sister, and by extension with the multiple goddesses with whom she associates Clytemnestra, Helen derails the narrative she has been trying to construct. Although she eventually recognizes that Achilles would have been killed by his men had he opposed the Command's sacrifice of Iphigenia, Helen remains unable to continue her quest until Thetis intervenes.[18]

Although Achilles' tale and Helen's subsequent diversion present obstacles to her quest, they also offer crucial insight. Achilles confirms something that Helen has already stated—that he was shot and killed by "Love's arrow"—which points toward the answer to one of the Mystery's central questions: "*is the 'veil of Cytheraea" or of Love, Death? Is the disguise of Death or the 'veil' of Death, Love?*" (45). Achilles' revelation that he was killed while locked in an erotic gaze with Helen reveals that Love is, in fact, Death, a paradox central to the Greater Mystery—the *petit mort* of orgasm is the generative force that drives the cycle of life, death, and rebirth. Moreover, his story suggests the bisexual romantic ideal that Helen must uncover: she penetrates him, first with her gaze and then with Love's arrow, which consummates their destined relationship in the afterlife. Achilles also reveals the possibility that the *eidolon* at Troy and "Helen in Egypt" are not distinct entities. During his temporary defection from the Command, he perceives Helen with a lover's eyes rather than a warrior's eyes, seeing not the Homeric symbol of *kléos* but an *eidolon* of Love possessing power and knowledge that he cannot access or even comprehend himself. In essence, he sees the actual Helen, "Helen in Egypt," in "Helen on the ramparts." This paradox suggests the course that Helen must take: to explicate the

Mystery, she must recognize and reveal herself to be the *eidolon* of Love, an identity that both subsumes and is distinct from the Homeric *eidolon* through the Love-as-Death paradox. But before Helen can recognize and draw upon the knowledge Achilles has revealed, she must overcome her emotional impairment. To overcome the guilt, doubt, and resentment that she suffers as a consequence of the devastation of war and her subsequent vilification by the Greek warriors, she must, as she has stated previously, "*fight for her identity, for* Helena" (37).

To help her begin this fight, the *eidolon* of Thetis appears to Helen and allays her worries. She proclaims that "Phoenix / has vanquished / that ancient enemy, Sphinx," the embodiment of "*indecision and doubt, the eternal* why," and that Helen shall be worshipped as a goddess of love: "in Melos, in Thessaly, / they shall honour the name of Love, / begot of the Ships and of War" (94, 93, 95). In other words, Helen shall succeed in her quest: the redemptive and resurrecting feminine power of the Mystery will triumph over logic (masculine, teleological, and sterile), and she will no longer be denigrated for her role in the Trojan War. In order to fulfill this prophecy, however, Helen must "[*accept*], *without reservation and without question, the decree of the Absolute*" (105). Thetis advises Helen not to wish "*to change* [*her*] *place with* [*her sister's*]" because their fates must diverge (101). Clytemnestra, having adopted the heroic code's destructive values in taking revenge against her husband, represents the "*death cult*" that Helen must work against; the goddess warns that "no sword, no dagger, no spear / in a woman's hands / can make wrong, right" (99, 97). Helen's fight will not be physical and vengeful; rather, it will be psychological and redemptive. With the cryptic advice that "a simple

spiral-shell may tell / a tale more ancient / than these mysteries [the "lesser personal mystery" of Helen, Achilles, and the Greek army]," Thetis summons Helen "home" to Leuké, where her battle plays out (107, 108).

When Helen arrives at Leuké, the scent of the island causes her to recover a lost memory: her previous sojourn there on the way to Troy with Paris during her "first rebellion" (109). As she reflects on Paris, the events leading up to the war, and the image of the spiral shell that Thetis has suggested, Paris himself appears to recount his final moments at Troy. He tells Helen that, as the Greeks sacked Troy, he was distracted by her flight from their room: he watched her trip and grasp at "the woven veil by the portal" to steady herself, then turn and look at something over his shoulder (125). As he watched her, a poisoned arrow hit him in the shoulder. He dragged himself home to his wife Oenone and pleaded with her to heal him, and she agreed on the condition that he "forget Helen"; he refused and died (124). Paris' death shares several similarities with Achilles': the moment of distraction by Helen from battle, the deadly arrow, and the choice of Helen and Love/Death over life lived in accordance to the values of warrior society. These similarities and the image of the veil that Helen grasps, a counterpart for the "veil of Cytheraea," signal the workings of the Greater Mystery, thus marking Paris as having a role in Helen's quest. Indeed, Paris claims responsibility for killing Achilles, revealing himself to be "*the agent, medium, or intermediary of Love and of Troy's great patron, Apollo, the god of Song*" (112). Serving in his role as the intermediary of Apollo, Paris introduces a new layer for the palimpsestic text that Helen must compose: the Greek

myth of Hades and Persephone. He describes the voices of the Greek soldiers as they pursued Helen down the staircase:

> "—it's only a winding stair,
>
> a spiral, like a snail-shell;"
>
> "a trap—let the others go—"
>
> "into the heart of earth,
>
> into the bowels of death—stand back—" (127-28)

The "trap" of a "portal" leading to a staircase descending "into the heart of the earth" and "the bowels of death" evokes Persephone's capture and descent into the underworld, and the image of the spiral snail's shell, H.D.'s metaphor for the palimpsest, identifies Helen as Persephone's counterpart.[19] Paris underscores this connection when he proclaims that he is "the first in all history / to say [Helen] died, died, died" and evokes the image of "the pomegranate, blighted by winter" that later "flower[s] on the summer branch" (131). The repetition of "died" and the image of the pomegranate flowering after its winter dormancy recall Persephone's figurative, cyclical death and rebirth. According to the Greek myth, Persephone would be allowed to rejoin her mother, Demeter, on earth provided she did not eat anything in the underworld; however, she ate three pomegranate seeds and therefore had to spend three months each year with Hades. The Greeks regarded this myth as an aetiology of the occurrence of the season: when Persephone was in the underworld, Demeter, the goddess of vegetation and fertility, expressed her sorrow through the blight of winter; when Persephone rejoined her, she would allow the land to

bloom again, causing spring. From the palimpest that Paris suggests, Achilles, who has previously been aligned with death through his involvement in the "death cult" of the Command and through his conflation with Osiris, emerges as a counterpart for Hades. Indeed, Paris criticizes the Greek warrior as a dangerous, deceptive lover who lured Helen into the underworld. He tries to persuade Helen to leave Achilles and live with him instead, but she knows that her fate lies with the Greek. Frustrated by Paris' bitterness, she leaves and encounters Theseus.

Much critical attention has been paid to Helen's encounter with Theseus. Duplessis, Crown, Friedman, and others have noted that the episode reflects events in H.D.'s own life: just as her psychoanalysis with Freud enabled her to start writing poetry again, so Helen's talking cure with Theseus leads her to find her poetic voice. Friedman and Duplessis, in particular, have examined the feminist implications of Helen recovering the memory of her "first rebellion," the unification of her fragmented psyche into an identity that challenges a misogynistic literary tradition, and her composition of a poetry that gives primacy to the maternal power of procreation. While Freud's influence undoubtedly shapes Helen's feminist rebellion, critics have overlooked the fact that the *Iliad* plays an equally important role. The ambiguity surrounding Helen and the *kléos* that she represents in Homer's work create the central conflict in the "Pallinode" section of *Helen in Egypt*; H.D. does not discard her ancient influence when she turns to its resolution. On the contrary, the *Iliad* provides a precedent for the poetic voice that Helen acquires and the palimpsestic path she follows to do so.

When Theseus first encounters Helen, he reminds her of their former relationship and asks about his mother's fate:

I am Theseus, do you remember?

I left you with Aithra, my mother;
what became of her?
the Dioscuri made her your servant

when they took you back—
aië—fool that I was. (147-48)

Theseus' use of a Greek interjection, *aië*, signals that his questions constitute more than small talk between former lovers. The word, H.D.'s idiosyncratic rendering of *ai*, is an interjection expressing sorrow (akin to the English "alas") and is distinctly Homeric in nature; it thus marks the presence of an allusion to the *Teichoscopia*.[20] Again, Aithra appears with Helen on the ramparts of Troy in the *Iliad* and is the only one of Helen's handmaidens mentioned by name; this reference in Homer evokes the palimpsestic history of Helen's abductions, which provides the basic structure of "Leuké": Helen first encounters Paris, her most recent abductor, then Theseus, her first, then ultimately identifies with Persephone, the original abducted woman whose myth gave rise to the legends of Helen's abductions.

Thus, H.D. strategically conflates two myths surrounding Theseus and Persephone. Again, the myth of Theseus' abduction of Helen is a secularization of the

story of Hades' abduction of Persephone. In a second myth, Theseus visits the underworld with his friend Pirithoös to steal Persephone from Hades so that his friend can marry the goddess. In the original story, the men are thwarted, and Theseus escapes Dis only with the aid of Herakles. In *Helen in Egypt*, however, H.D. presents Theseus as having succeeded on his quest to the underworld to rescue Persephone; echoing the words of the Sybll, who famously guided Aeneas through his chthonic quest, he authoritatively tells Helen that "it is another thing to come back" from Dis (157).[21] As the events of "Leuké" unfold, it becomes clear that H.D. has combined the two Theseus-Persephone myths, depicting him as the one who restored Persephone to Demeter whereas in the original story, a decree from Zeus accomplishes this task.[22] Just as Theseus brings Persephone back to her mother from the underworld in H.D.'s version of the ancient myth, he returns Helen from the figurative death of shellshock and reunites her with Leda in *Helen in Egypt*. He makes the crucial connection between Helen and Persephone explicit when she presents him with the problem of how to interpret Paris' role in her story and thus "*reconcile Trojan and Greek*" (157). He responds:

> It is one thing, Helen, to slay Death,
>
> it is another thing to come back
>
> through the intricate windings of the Labyrinth;
>
> [. . . . .]
>
> you are Persephone's sister;
>
> wait—wait—you must wait in the winter-dark.

He explains that Paris hates Achilles because the heroic code dictates that he must "[hate] his rival in War"; before she will have the power to break this ingrained enmity, Helen must "return to the Shell, [her] mother, / Leda, Thetis or Cytheraea" (159, 165). He advises her to rest before undertaking her journey out of the "winter-dark" of her "*too intense primary experience*" and, as she does, describes his journey out of his own labyrinth after slaying the Minotaur (158, 162). His salvation was, figuratively, an umbilical cord: a knotted thread that he named "Aethra, [his] mother" (167). He spooled out the thread on his way to the beast and then followed it back out of the maze. He tells Helen she, too, "*must be reborn*" symbolically, and he wraps her in a womb-like cocoon of fleeces (162). It is in this nest that Helen discovers "a voice within [her]" that, like an "ember glow[ing] / in the heart of snow," presages the end of the "winter-dark" of her emotional impairment (175, 174).

Oddly, when Helen first speaks with her newly found voice, it is as an epic bard; her "*heroic voice*" celebrates

> the thunder of battle,
>
> shouting and the Walls
>
> and the arrows; O, the beauty of arrows
>
> each bringing surcease, release. (176, 177)

Puzzled herself, Helen asks "do I love War? / is this Helena?" Helen's celebration of war seems incongruous in light of her quest to unseat the heroic code. She speaks again, in "*a lyric voice this time*," but the new song is not "*a challenge*" to her previous utterance

(178). On the contrary, Helen's lyrical voice answers her question in the affirmative and reveals that the death and masculinity inherent in Helen's celebration of war are crucial components of the Greater Mystery. As she sings her lyric, characters and identities merge: "*Isis is Cypris*," "*Isis is Thetis*," "*Amen-Zeus is the father of Isis-Thetis-Aphrodite (Cypris)*" (178). "Cypris, Cypria, Amor," then, are all manifestations of Helen, who is "*loved of War*: / War, Ares, Achilles, Amor" (178, 179). As Aphrodite, Helen is love, and Achilles, as Ares, is war; their identities merge in the figure of Amor "begotten of Love and of War." Helen identifies Paris as Eros/Amor and hence reconciles Greek and Trojan as the "*slayer becomes the son of the slain*" (184). Amor, the child of Ares and Aphrodite in Greek mythology, is the god of *eros*, the sexual drive that makes new life possible. Through the accumulation of paradoxes in Helen's song, the workings of the Greater Mystery are revealed: war brings about death, which is also love, and the mingling of death and love produces *eros*, which, in turn, brings about new life. This infinite cycle is at the heart of the palimpsest that Helen explores: it plays out in the changing of the seasons, the Persephone myth that renders them artistically, and Helen's own "lesser personal mystery."

Helen's "heroic voice" serves a further purpose, gesturing towards the bisexual ideal implicit in the Greater Mystery. It emphasizes that there is a distinctly masculine heroic aspect to Helen's identity. Indeed, Helen emerges in "Leuké" as a counterpart for Theseus. She has given a talking cure to Achilles just as Theseus has given one to her. Further, like her first lover, she has navigated "the intricate windings of the Labyrinth" to be reborn, and she has descended into, and returned from, the underworld. This

connection draws attention to the second manifestation of the Persephone myth in H.D.'s text: just as Theseus rescues Persephone from the underworld and returns her to Demeter, Helen will rescue Achilles from the death-cult of the Command and reconcile him to his mother. Helen (as Persephone-Theseus) and Achilles (as Persephone-Hades) thus simultaneously play masculine and feminine roles; so, their relationship is not one of heterosexuality, as critics have supposed, but bisexuality. Indeed, it is Helen's embrace of both her feminine and masculine rôles that reconciles her to Achilles. Having found her voice and woven the palimpsestic, paradoxical text that restores her identity, Helen proclaims "I am Koré, Persephone" (195). This realization fills her with desire "to remember / Dis, Hades, Achilles" (199). While Helen has been on Leuké, Achilles has been engaged with an emblematic heroic task: the twelve labors of Hercules. She expresses a desire to "endure with him, / the twelve labors, / conquer Boar, Stag, Lion," underscoring the masculine aspect of her psyche (206). In doing so, Helen accomplishes her first major Thesean task; her desire rescues Achilles from his labor and from the power of the Command.

Helen is transported back to Egypt, where she once again meets Achilles. He reveals that her psychic reintegration on Leuké has converted him to "*a new Command*"; he has been

> commanded by Formalhaut,
> the Initiator, royal, sacred
> High Priest of love-rites,

more ancient than Troy citadel;

[. . . . .]

commanded to say, in Egypt,

we are in Eleusis,

Helen is Persephone,

Achilles is Dis,

(the Greek Isis-Osiris). (210, 208-09)

Achilles' description of "love-rites more ancient than Troy" recalls Helen's description of the Greater Mystery as "magic greater than the trial of arms," marking his acceptance of this power as his supreme authority. Further, his declaration to Helen that "[they] are in Eleusis" affirms the palimpsestic text she has woven. His remark is an allusion to the Eleusinian Mysteries, the yearly initiation ceremony for the cult of Demeter and Persephone in ancient Greece. Little is known about the ceremony itself, but scholars speculate that the initiation included both Lesser and Greater Mysteries and that the latter involved love rites that united participants with the fertility goddesses themselves, granting rewards in the afterlife or even immortality. The Greater Mystery that Helen has been initiated into, "*the innermost mystery of 'life-in-death,'*" is "*symbolized by* [. . .] *Eleusis*" (213, 212). Achilles also adds to Helen's text, synthesizing the Persephone myth with the Egyptian myth that she explored in "Pallinode." Again, in the Isis-Osiris myth, Isis must reassemble the scattered body parts of her husband to bring about his second resurrection. In his new life, Osiris becomes the god of the underworld, a position

that gives him power over the fertility of the earth. In restoring Achilles to his mother, Helen will accomplish Isis' task of reintegration. His reunion with Thetis (who is Isis, who is Helen, who is Persephone) will effect his initiation into the Eleusinian mystery and, by extension, into the Greater Mystery of H.D.'s text, and he and Helen will take their places as god and goddess of love and fertility.

But before Helen can accomplish this final part of her quest, she must contend with "*outer circumstance*"; Paris reappears to dissuade her from joining Achilles (213). He mocks Achilles, reminding Helen that, at Thetis' behest, the Greek warrior disguised himself in "woman's robe and ornament, / and hid" to avoid going to Troy (214). Paris concedes that he is part of the Greater Mystery, "completing the circle, / the triangle, the broken arc, / Dionysius-Paris" and states that he will accept Achilles as his "father / in this new spirit-order" if Helen agrees to be his mother, Hecuba (215, 217). His remarks underscore the bisexual ideal that is implicit in the Greater Mystery. In revealing himself to be Dionysus, who is the son of Persephone in one mythological tradition, he demonstrates that the child produced by the two bisexual parents is similarly bisexual: Dionysus is frequently described in Greek literature as having both masculine and feminine traits.[23] Paris' aim, however, is to dissuade Helen from her quest. He urges her to leave Achilles and join him to recreate Troy, "*a new war*" rather than joining Achilles-Hades, whom he regards as the leader of a "*'death-cult'*" far worse than the Command (216). He reminds Helen of Iphigenia, Polyxenia, Briseis, and Chryseis, insisting that she too will be sacrificed to Achilles. Paris's bitter complaint introduces a new layer to Helen's palimpsest: the Oedipus myth. Paris was "left by Hecuba, / like Oedipus to die,"

so in accepting her role as Hecuba, Helen must also become Jocasta and Achilles Laios, the father whom Oedipus murders. The Freudian theory of the Oedipus complex is thus subsumed into the Greater Mystery; erotic desire for the mother becomes the driving force that keeps the life-death-rebirth cycle in motion.

Helen has uncovered the workings of the Greater Mystery, but she has yet to articulate how it has governed the "lesser personal mystery" of her experiences. In order to complete her quest, Helen must use her newly discovered voice to reinterpret her past, weaving the text that will replace the misogynistic story of Troy's destruction. In doing so, Helen will allay the worries that Paris' warning inspires in her and discover Achilles' desire for his mother, which in turn will allow her to effect Achilles' reconciliation with Thetis and with herself, thus establishing the primacy of the Greater Mystery and a new identity for Helen. Before she begins her retelling, she asks a series of strange questions: "was I ever [at Troy]," "did I ever stand on the ramparts," "was it Apollo's snare / so that poets forever, / should be caught in the maze of the Walls / of a Troy that never fell?" (221, 224, 232). These are, the text makes clear, "*rhetorical questions that have already been answered*"; there is no doubt that the war happened and that Troy fell, and Helen has already discovered that she was, paradoxically, both at Troy and not at Troy (236). In making these queries, though, Helen challenges the accuracy of the conventional story of Troy to create a space for her "*rhythm as yet unheard*" (229). Helen's questions recall the moment of the *Teichoscopia* when she asks "did this ever happen" before narrating the catalogue of warriors whom she sees from the ramparts. In alluding to the moment when Helen becomes the poet of the *Iliad* and calls the poem itself into question, H.D.'s

Helen asserts her poetic authority and emphasizes that the original tale of Troy is not necessarily definitive; thus, the poets who "forever" repeat the tale are, in a sense, "lost in [a] maze."

Appropriately, then, Helen recalls Theseus, the archetypal solver of mazes, as she considers how to escape this textual maze:

> I am called back to the Walls
>
> to find the answer,
>
> to wander as in a maze
>
> (Theseus' Labryinth)
>
> to explore each turn of the street,
>
> for a way to the ships and the wharves. (232)

Just as her mentor and counterpart brings together "*the opposites* [. . .] *the lyre* [and] *the sword*," Helen's text will reconcile the epic and lyric (227). She draws the traditional story of "the Walls" and her memory of being "an enemy in a beleaguered city" into a larger, lyrical narrative of maternal love (234). As she considers "the ships and the wharves," she remembers that the image of Thetis adorned the prow of Achilles' boat; she then realizes that it was not she or Paris who caused the war but Achilles' separation from his beloved mother. The war was fought and Troy destroyed so that they could be reunited and War-Typhon defeated. She proclaims her discovery:

> I say there is only one image,

one picture, though the swords flash;

I say there is one treasure,

one desire, as the wheels turn

and the hooves of the stallions

thunder across the plain,

and the plain is dust,

and the battle-field is a heap

of rusty staves and broken chariot-frames

and the rims of the dented shields

and desolation, destruction—for what?

a dream? a towered town?

proud youths for slave,

a princess or two for lust?

I say there is one image,

and slaves and princesses

and the town itself are nothing

beside a picture, an image, an idol

or eidolon. (243-44)

Helen's confident declarative statements mark a sharp contrast with the halting questions she has asked throughout most of the text. She asserts that the force driving the war is not the pursuit of *kléos* and its trappings: "slaves," "princesses" and conquered "towered town[s]." These things are merely "a dream"; they "are nothing" in comparison with the "treasure" that the warriors truly "desire": union with their mothers, represented by the "picture [. . .] or eidolon" of Thetis on Achilles' ship. If they were to possess their mothers, there would not be war; in Helen's vision, battlefields are "dust" and the trappings of war are "rusty," "broken," and "dented" once the warriors are aware of their desire. She recalls that "Achilles avoid[ed] the battle" while he was mindful of his mother, "[going] to the prow / of his love, his beloved" (247, 248). It was the heroic code's demand for vengeance when Patroclos was killed, the Command's "*lure of war*," the caused him to forget Thetis and her "*simple wish that he learn to rule a kingdom*" and instead pursue a destructive course (286). Ultimately, however, the force of maternal love prevails. It attracts Achilles to Helen at Troy to cause his death, and Achilles is restored to his mother in the afterlife. Helen comes to realize that she is Thetis; therefore, the moment in Egypt when she said Thetis' name and he attacked her marked not only the consummation of their relationship as lovers but also as mother and son. In discovering that Achilles has been reconciled with both Thetis and herself and in proclaiming this knowledge, "the threat of the Labyrinth" is thwarted and "the Beast is

slain" (303). Helen takes on a new identity, emerging as an *eidolon* not of *kléos* but of maternal love, and her quest comes to an end.

The epic-lyric hybrid text that Helen creates in *Helen in Egypt*, like the *kléa andron* that the Homeric Helen weaves, offers *nepenthes* and a form of immortality. Rather than anesthetizing warriors so that they do not feel the pain that war causes and luring them into further conflict with the promise of immortal glory, though, H.D.'s heroine confronts the reality of shellshock and explores the process of remembering and reinterpretation that can cure it. In regarding war as a manifestation of the eternal cycle of life-death-rebirth, Helen offers hope against the apparent finality of war's consequences: in death, soldiers are united with the earth, the archetypal mother, and are figuratively reborn through the new life that death makes possible. Yet, H.D.'s poem does not regard war as a necessary evil. Death, after all, is a natural phenomenon that will occur regardless of whether there is war or peace. *Helen in Egypt* proposes the Greater Mystery and its syncretic bisexual ideal as a means of establishing peace. War is a consequence of the strict separation of men from women by social strictures such as the heroic code. The Mystery fulfills the Oedipal fantasy, allowing men to possess their mothers sexually. Because this incestuous desire is not repressed, the process of gender identification that Freud theorized need not occur, so men and women can be inherently bisexual.[24] Moreover, the paradoxes of the Greater Mystery act as a conciliatory force, synthesizing opposites and eliminating differences and thus the grounds for conflict. If all people were initiated into the Mystery and put into the service of its "love-rites," the separation of the genders, and thus war, would be eliminated. By grounding her feminist,

pacifist vision in the *Iliad*, the more violent of the two epics written by "*the* Western poet of war," H.D. demonstrates the complexity and continued vitality of Homer's poetry.

Notes

[1] Due to the complexity of the organizational scheme of *Helen in Egypt*, I will be citing poems by their page number rather than by section, book, poem, and line numbers in order to prevent unnecessarily cumbersome citations.

[2] H.D.'s readers will be familiar with her idiosyncratic spelling of the word "palinode."

[3] I am much indebted to Susan Stanford Friedman's thorough analysis of "Leuké" in *Psyche Reborn* for helping me to summarize the events of this puzzling and complex section of H.D.'s poem.

[4] Granted, H.D. regularly referred to Euripides' *Helen* as *Helen in Egypt*. In *H.D. by Delia Alton*, for example, she writes "I had been working [around 1923] on a translation of Euripides' *Helen in Egypt*, which I never finally assembled" (218-19). Her unpublished "Notes on Euripides, Pausanias, and Greek Lyric Poets," which she wrote while working on her translations, exhibits the same idiosyncracy. That H.D.'s habitual misnaming of Euripides' play is contemporaneous with her work on a translation of it suggests that H.D. may have conceived of her work as a palimpsestic overwriting of her Greek predecessor early in her career.

[5] The sections into which Latin and Greek epics are divided are always called "books," so H.D.'s use of the word is one more way she marks her poem as an epic.

[6] The *Odyssey* contrasts Clytemnestra with Penelope at several points and briefly recounts the story of her revenge, but it does not explore her story in enough depth to sustain the argument that her "body" is "the stage for national [drama]" in the poem (81).

[7] The idea of Helen being "hated of all Greece" actually owes more to Euripides than to Homer. Moreover, many of Euripides' plays express the Greeks' loathing of Helen, and she is the villain of *Hecuba*.

[8] For this chapter, I will be using Richard Lattimore's translation of the *Iliad*. For philological analysis of individual Greek words, I have consulted M. M. Wilcock's edition.

[9] My discussion of Athenian and Alexandrian hellenism summarizes Gregory's thorough analysis of these traditions in the first two chapters of her book, to which I am much indebted.

[10] Suzuki briefly discusses Homer's influence on Stesichorus and Euripides in her introduction, and Matthew Gumpert treats the topic in passing throughout his book. See also Norman Austin's *Helen of Troy and her Shameless Phantom*, considered by classicists to be an authoritative text on the subject of Homer's influence on Steisichorus and Euripides.

[11] Clader, Suzuki, and Austin make similar arguments.

[12] Milman Parry famously argues that Homeric epithets such as "Trojans, breakers of horses" and "bronze-armored Achaeans" are stock phrases that oral poets relied upon to fill out lines of hexameter; they are essentially superfluous, serving only a metrical function. As Lattimore explains this phenomenon, "[Zeus] is not *nephelegerata* ["cloud-gathering"] *Zeus* when he is gathering clouds, but when he is filling [a particular] metrical unit" (40). These critics therefore advise against finding meaning in the repetition of Homeric epithets. While their arguments are apt, it is not necessarily the case that *all* repetitions serve pragmatic metrical functions only. The body of criticism surrounding the *Teichoscopia* evidences the fact that certain repetitions, such as Iris echoing the description of Helen's weaving, can indeed do something more than fill out a particular metrical pattern.

[13] Heroic funeral customs required that the warrior's body be buried and covered with a mound of earth, rock, weapons, and armor to serve as an eternal memorial. The feasts, games, and contests of martial skill that accompanied these rites could also earn the fallen man immortality; the funeral of Patroklos, for example, is recorded in the *Iliad.* Not only could the lack of an honorable funeral hasten a warrior into obscurity, though, but it also prevented him from entering the Elysian Fields. When Odysseus journeys to the underworld, for example, he encounters a comrade at the threshold who cannot enter Dis because he was lost at sea and therefore not honored with a funeral. He begs Odysseus to set up an empty tomb for him so that he will be allowed to enter.

[14] The word *kléos* means "fame" or "reputation," but it refers specifically to the stories of heroic deeds that would be recounted after a warrior's death, thus earning him immortality. I will be retaining the Greek word in order to preserve these culturally specific connotations. See Clader's first chapter for a discussion of the importance of *kléos* in the *Iliad.*

[15] Dozens of powerful Greek heroes wooed Helen. Her father, Tyndareus, was worried that the men would fight once he chose a suitor to marry her, so he had the men swear an oath of allegiance before he made his decision: the men vowed that they would

come to the aid of Helen's future husband if he were ever to call upon them. They were therefore obligated to assist Menelaos in recovering Helen from Troy.

[16] The erotic maternal love of Helen for Achilles is clearly based on Freud's psychoanalytical theory. See Friedman's chapter "Hieroglyphic Voices" for a thorough discussion of Freud's influence on *Helen in Egypt*.

[17] H.D. underwent psychoanalysis with Freud in 1933-34 because the trauma of WWI had left her unable to write. The letters she wrote to Bryher throughout this period express that H.D. herself wanted to become a psychoanalyist and practice the sort of talking cure that Helen provides Achilles within *Helen in Egypt*. Again, see Friedman for a detailed discussion of the influence of Freudian psychoanalysis on H.D.'s work.

[18] Helen's escapist retreat into stories about her family marks H.D.'s most complex and extensive engagement with Euripides' plays in *Helen in Egypt*. See Gregory for an analysis of this intertextual engagement. While Gregory's argument offers a significant contribution to studies of H.D.'s poem, her emphasis on Euripides as the most important source for H.D.'s poem strikes me as analogous to Helen's own distraction.

[19] H.D. finds the image of a snail's spiral shell evocative of the palimpsest. For example, the second section of her novel *Palimpsest*, which tells palimpsestic iterations of a love story in three different historical periods, is titled "Murex: War and Post-War London." (A murex is a type of snail with a spiral-shaped shell.)

[20] I call the word *ai* Homeric because it appears well over 100 times in his texts but only occasionally in the work of other Greek writers. It appears only four times in the work of Herodotus, who uses it most frequently after Homer.

[21] In addition to referring to Theseus' return from the labyrinth, this line alludes to the Sybll's warning to Aeneas as he prepares to enter the underworld in Book 6 of the Aeneid: "easy, the descent into Avernus [. . .] but to retrace one's steps and escape to see the skies above, this is a great task, hard labor" (126, 128-29). The allusion underscores both Theseus' role as a guide for Helen and her role as an epic hero in H.D.'s poem. The translation here is my own.

[22] H.D.'s conflation of these two myths grows out of a second overlapping: she also aligns Theseus with Zeus. After she has overcome her shell-shock, Helen refers to the hero as her "*god-father*" and addresses him as "Amen-All-father," the Egyptian god who is a counterpart of Zeus (207).

[23] See Walter Otto's book *Dionysus Myth and Cult*, which provides a thorough accounting for the god's feminine aspects and his role as a fertility deity.

[24] In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud argues that, upon resolution of the Oedipal complex, children would identify with their same-sex parents and reject their opposite-sex parents, thus growing into their heterosexual gender roles and identities.

CHAPTER III

GWENDOLYN BROOKS' *ANNIE ALLEN*: EPIC AS PROTEST

In a 1990 interview, D. H. Mehlem asks Gwendolyn Brooks a series of questions about the "new developments" in her latest work, *Gottschalk and the Grande Tarantelle*, and closes with a question that looks forward to possible future developments: "[a]re there any literary genres you would like to try you have not as yet attempted?" (*Conversations* 151, 154) Brooks' answer is short and decisive: "Yes. An epic. An honest-to-goodness epic." She was acquainted with epic poetry from her study and translations of Virgil's *Aeneid* in high school and, by 1990, Brooks had already written two poems that are widely regarded by critics as epic or mock-epic (*In the Mecca* and "The Anniad," respectively).[1] Yet, her "honest-to-goodness" implies that these two poems did not measure up as epics and suggests that what qualifies to her as epic poetry changed over the course of her career—and certainly, her attitude towards traditional poetry changed dramatically as she as she became radicalized by the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s.[2]

The epic would initially appear to be an odd choice for Brooks because it is diametrically opposed to many of the themes and values in her previous poetry. Her work tends to be lyrical both in form and in content: it is brief, musical, and usually concerned with the thoughts, feelings, and lives of ordinary people. The epic, on the

other hand, is collective in scope, concerned with the fate of nations rather than individual experiences and focused on godlike heroes rather than ordinary people. While epic poems exist from many indigenous cultures, in the West the epic is typically associated with Europe since the Greek epics, the Latin *Aeneid*, and the Old English *Beowulf* are so widely known. The genre is also regarded as inherently masculinist; its focus on war and male heroism often disregards women and their experiences or depicts them as impediments to the hero's quest for glory. While these are features of the conventional epic, they are probably not what Brooks had in mind for her epic; it is hardly likely that she wanted to write a poem celebrating the violence of Anglo-European warriors. Rather, the features of the form that likely appealed to Brooks are its collective focus, celebratory tone, concern with heroism and heroic struggles, and its nationalistic aspirations. Indeed, the epic would be an ideal form to commemorate and celebrate the Black Power movement and its heroes—a frequent concern in Brooks's later poetry.[3] The epic could also have been a useful form for "calling" to black audiences, a primary goal for Brooks in her later work:

> My aim, in my next future, is to write poems that will somehow successfully "call" (see Imamu Baraka's "SOS") all black people: black people in taverns, black people in alleys, black people in gutters, schools, offices, factories, prisons, the consulate; I wish to reach black people in pulpits, black people in mines, on farms, on thrones; *not* always to "teach"—I shall wish often to entertain, to illumine. (*RPO* 183)

The way that Brooks states this aim recalls epic poetry in both its scope and its form: a worldwide, collective view of black people rendered through an epic catalogue. The epic's concern with the collective fate of a people could be a useful tool for "calling" black audiences because of its inclusiveness—it encompasses and affects both people "in gutters" and people "on thrones."

While people in gutters might not have the means or ability to read an epic, the genre was originally intended for oral performance and could, in that way, reach audiences unable or not inclined to read a long poem.[4] In fact, Brooks describes such public performances in a 1969 interview with George Stavros:

> Well, right around the corner is a tavern, and one Sunday afternoon, some of the poets decided to go in there and read poetry. I went with them. One of them went to the front of the tavern and said, "Say, folks, we're going to lay some poetry on you." [. . .] The poets started reading, and before we knew it, people had turned around on their bar stools, with their drinks behind them, and were listening. Then they applauded. And I thought that was a wonderful thing, something new. I want to write poetry [. . .] that will be exciting to such people. (*Conversations* 41)

Though Brooks ultimately did not use the epic to engage this particular audience, doing so could have been a useful strategy. As a narrative form, it is well suited for serving the dual function of entertaining and illuminating; its stories of warfare and heroism are more likely to catch the interest of a popular audience than tightly crafted lyric verse, and as a

form with its origins in oral performance, it is designed to capture and hold a listening audience's attention.

Epic poetry has been used to call and unite people around a cultural identity for thousands of years, often with the simultaneous goal of establishing legitimacy for that group. Virgil's *Aeneid* accomplished these tasks so well that it could be interpreted as a piece of Augustan propaganda.[5] The *Aeneid* was written between 29 and 19 BC, at the beginning of Augustus' principate. The past several decades had been marked by civil war and a succession of leaders. In order for Augustus to rule successfully, he needed to win the faith of a wary public by differentiating himself from recent leaders, by proving his legitimacy, and by restoring peace. As part of this project, he encouraged Virgil to write the *Aeneid.* The poem, which recounts the myth of Aeneas fleeing Troy's destruction to found Rome, supplied the new empire, and Augustus, who claimed Aeneas as an ancestor, with a heroic pedigree. This heroic past provided a basis for a sense of national pride that, combined with Augustus' public policies aimed at maintaining and restoring traditional Roman values, helped unite a war-ravaged populace under a shared Roman identity and firmly established Augustus as their leader—the protector of Roman tradition.

Just as Virgil's epic had been useful in uniting the Roman people under a common identity to work for the improvement of the empire, so could a Black Arts movement epic have been valuable for uniting black Americans. Like the ancient Romans, black Americans had experienced generations of violence and social upheaval, and just as Augustus sought to establish a new form of society founded on traditional

Roman values and customs, so the Black Power movement hoped to create a new black society rooted in a distinctly black culture and heritage. Had such a poem been written, the epic's focus on an ancient heroic age could have served, as it did for the Romans, to bolster pride in black culture by providing it with a heroic pedigree and, in turn, legitimacy in the eyes of society.

The frequent concern with heroism in Brooks' poetry points toward her awareness of the need for cultural heroes.[6] Having read and translated sections of the *Aeneid*, she was likely familiar with its nationalistic aspiration and its success in rallying the Roman people around Augustus, so she would have been aware that epic could not only provide cultural heroes but also use these heroes to establish a sense of cultural pride and identity. The epic's ability to authorize a person or a culture may have appealed to Brooks; her comment that she wanted to write an "honest-to-goodness" epic reveals a specific concern with pedigree and legitimacy.[7]

In what ways are Brooks's previous poems, which many have connected to the epic tradition, not "honest-to-goodness"? Most critics have been inclined to regard "The Anniad" as a mock epic because of the disparity between its lofty, highly wrought language and form and its poor, black, passive female subject. At the same time, they view "In the Mecca," which also features a poor black woman as its hero, as an epic poem because it is more action oriented than "The Anniad" and exhibits a quest theme.[8] But their female subjects and narratives of loss may have disqualified these poems as "honest-to-goodness" epics in 1967 when Brooks was committing her work to black

liberation. Indeed, any epic she wrote after her radicalization would certainly have a male hero and tell the story of his and his culture's victory.

In 1963, even before Brooks became heavily involved in the Black Arts movement, the new poems in her *Selected Poems* hint at the coming change in her work. "Riders to the Blood-Red Wrath" reveals a shift from lyrical themes and language to those of epic poetry and from the domestic heroism of women to the military heroism of men.[9] The opening of the poem casts the male speaker, one of the Freedom Riders, as an epic hero. He describes how he "astonished [the] ancestral seemliness" of his elders with his "proper prudence" (2) toward the "proper robe" (1) of the court, an act they viewed as "a wrought risk [. . .] / An indelicate risk" (3-4). The speaker is preparing to wage a war, protesting racism and testing whether the laws against segregation will be upheld, but he does so with concern for strategy and propriety, "[handling his] discordances / And prides and apoplectic ice" (5-6) and "rein[ing] his charger" (7). Both his militarism and his concern for waging war properly are reminiscent of epic heroes, whose fights are governed by strict codes of propriety and who generally take the council of their elders into careful consideration.[10] While mindful of the older generation's astonishment, the speaker of the poem nevertheless "waives all witness" (10) except for that which is concerned with violent struggle: "rotted flowers / Framed in maimed velvet" (10-11) and "dimnesses / From which extrude beloved and pennant arms" (13-14). Flowers and velvet, emblems of a lyric mode, are rotted and maimed whereas the "pennant arms" of warfare, symbols of the epic, are "beloved." The speaker is a soldier, "a uniform" (22), and "Army unhonored, meriting the gold, [he] / [Has] sewn [his] guns inside [his]

burning lips" (31-32). Unlike Achilles, whose rage at going unhonored and not receiving spoils harms his army, the speaker exhibits "good rage" (42) and, like Odysseus, has strategically waited for the opportune moment to make his attack: "Ride into wrath, wraith and menagerie / To fail, to flourish, to wither or to win. / We lurch, distribute, we extend, begin" (88-90). As Melhem has noted, these closing lines of the poem, describing the beginning of the speaker's assault, recall Tennyson's *Ulysses* (140). At the end of the poem, Ulysses exhorts his men to return to their previous life of heroism: "One equal temper of heroic hearts, / Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will / To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield" (68-70). Brooks' allusion connects her speaker explicitly with the epic tradition and, specifically, with the figure of Odysseus. It confirms the speaker's epic identity and expresses his commitment to his fight, just as Tennyson's Ulysses expresses his dedication to his own epic life. Moreover, the allusion raises Brooks' speaker's vow to the level of an exhortation; just as Ulysses urges his men to join him, the "spread hands" (87) of the Rider, "[his] fellows, and those canny consorts" invite others to join their ranks (86).

Fueling the "good rage" of Brooks' speaker is the memory of an ancient, heroic past in Africa and the loss of this heritage:

> I remember kings.
>
> A blossoming palace. Silver. Ivory.
>
> The conventional wealth of stalking Africa.
>
> All bright, all Bestial. Snarling marvelously.
>
> I remember my right to roughly run and roar.

> My right to raid the sun, consult the moon,
>
> Nod to my princesses or split them open,
>
> To flay my lions, eat blood with a spoon. (45-52)

Like the heroic pasts of the Homeric and Virgilian epics, this remembered past is one of masculine violence and glory ("stalking," "snarling," "running," "roaring," "raiding," "flaying") and of great wealth and spoils ("kings," "palace," "silver," "ivory"). The slave trade brought an end to this idealized past; the speaker "recollect[s] the latter lease and lash / And labor that defiled the bone, that thinned / [His] blood and blood-line" (65-67). Like an epic hero, the speaker focuses on the damage done to his family and reputation, his "thinned" blood and blood-line, and this offense fuels his "good rage" as he waits for the moment to avenge himself and his ancestors. His epic desire for recompensatory vengeance, a common theme in the literature of the Black Arts movement, is shared by several characters in Brooks' next book.

The poems of *In the Mecca* place a similar emphasis on masculine heroism and reveal the continuing progression from a lyrical to an epic mode in Brooks' work. The long poem "In the Mecca" contains a catalogue of the black people who live in Chicago's Mecca, a large tenement. One of the Mecca's denizens, Way-out Morgan, exhibits the epic qualities of the speaker of "Riders to the Blood-Red Wrath." He, too, waits strategically to avenge himself and his people:

> Way-out Morgan is collecting guns
>
> in a tiny fourth-floor room.
>
> He is not hungry, ever, though sinfully lean.

He flourishes, ever, on porridge or pat of bean

pudding or wiener soup—fills fearsomely

on visions of Death-to-the-Hordes-of-the-White-Men!

Death!

[. . . . .]

Remembering three local-and-legal beatings, he

rubs his hands in glee,

does Way-out Morgan. Remembering his Sister

mob-raped in Mississippi, Way-out Morgan

smacks sweet his lips and adds another gun

And listens to Blackness stern and blunt and beautiful,

Organ-rich Blackness telling a terrible story.

Way-out Morgan

predicts the Day of Debt-pay shall begin,

the Day of Demon-diamond,

of blood in mouths and body-mouths,

of flesh-rip in the Forum of Justice at last! (711-17, 720-31)

The heavy alliteration of these lines evokes the Old English epic tradition, as do many of the hyphenated words; "debt-pay" and "demon-diamond" are kennings, while other words ("mob-raped" and "organ-rich") are hyphenated coinages that resemble kennings. "Way-out" also evokes the kenning and acts as an epic epithet for Morgan. Like the epic speaker of "Riders," Way-out Morgan is preparing for a violent conflict and nurturing his

"good rage" with the memories of wrongs done and the promise of future acts of heroic revenge. "Blackness" nurtures his righteous anger with its "terrible story," an allusion to the heroic African past destroyed by slavery that fuels the speaker of "Riders." "Blackness" also connects Way-out Morgan's preparations for battle with the nationalistic impulse of the epic. Fighters like Way-out Morgan and Amos, who prays for violence and "good rage" (527) "for America" (523) will lead the revolution that will establish the "new nation [. . .] new art and anthem" that Don L. Lee calls for, both in Brooks's poem and in his own work (491, 502).

The poems of "After Mecca" prophesy the coming of this new nation, looking "toward contemporary heroes and the future" (Melhem 189). Brooks continues the epic themes and values from "In the Mecca" as she celebrates the men who have died heroic deaths while fighting to establish the new nation. In "Malcolm X," epic language and themes undercut the lyric form of the work. Brooks's description of Malcolm X alludes to his epic character: original. / Ragged-round. / Rich -robust. / He had the hawk-man's eyes (1-4). The hyphenated adjectives are again reminiscent of the Anglo-Saxon kenning and the Homeric epithet, and the alliteration of the second and third lines further recall Old English epic verse. The description also paints Malcolm X as a larger-than-life figure: "rich" and "robust" (3), with the eyes of a "hawk-man" (4), he is possessed of "a sorcery devout and vertical" (9) with which he "beguiled the world" (10). When Brooks describes Malcolm X's heroic contributions to the Black Power movement, she focuses in particular on his masculinity:

We gasped. We saw the maleness.

> The maleness raking out and making guttural the air
>
> and pushing us to walls.
>
> [. . . . .]
>
> He opened us—
>
> who was a key,
>
> who was a man. (5-7, 11-13)

The participles describing Malcolm X's accomplishment form a lexicon of action-oriented words that are consonant with the epic: "raking," "making guttural," and "pushing [. . .] to walls." The participle form also draws attention to the on-going process of these feats, intensifying the sense of activity in the poem and thus strengthening its epic overtone. Moreover, the sense of continuity that the participle imparts emphasizes that there is a continuing need for such epic actions, and it grants Malcolm X the sort of immortality that epic heroes seek—he lives on through his continuing deeds. It is not the man who performs these actions, though—it is his "maleness." Brooks' repeated emphasis on Malcolm X's masculinity implies that it is a determining factor in his heroism; the poem effectively equates his gender with his greatness.

Male figures like Malcolm X, Way-out Morgan, and the speaker of "Riders to the Blood-red Wrath" emerge as the heroes of Brooks' later poetry, and their epic nature suggests that they are the type of character that Brooks had in mind for her prospective poem. The qualities that contribute to their heroism make them consonant not only with the epic tradition but also with the Black Power movement: masculinity, nationalistic

pride, the desire for revenge, and the willingness to embrace violence as a means of resistance. The Black Power movement is typically considered radical both in its philosophy and its practices, but the characteristics that marked its break with the integrationist Civil Rights movement and made it radical in its time—its emphasis on cultural consciousness and the collective interests of black citizens, its valuation of masculine heroism, and its advocacy, even glorification, of violence as a legitimate means to accomplish its goals—also place it within the ancient tradition of the epic. Given the Black Arts movement's celebration of the specifically masculine, often violent, heroism associated with the heroic code in epic poetry, it is unsurprising that its values replicate the code's repression of women.

Both epic poetry and the Black Power movement narrowly circumscribed the parts that women could play and vilified women who failed to fit into these limited roles. In the warrior cultures of Homer and Virgil, for instance, women are confined to the domestic sphere. A woman's primary duty was to bolster the heroic reputation of her husband: she must be faithful, maintain the household in his absence, and not interfere with his heroic duties. Andromache represents the epic ideal for women—she waits at home while Hector fights, caring for his son and his household, though she knows that he will die and that she will suffer as a result.[11] Her "reward" for being a model wife is to be treated as spoils by the conquering Greeks, given away as a slave to one of the soldiers as booty. Women who challenge these constricted roles, whether intentionally or not, do not fare much better. Helen, Andromache's opposite, is reviled by both the Greeks and the Trojans for being unfaithful to her husband and for distracting her lover, Paris, from

battle. The fact that she does not willingly choose to do either of these things does not lessen the hatred that is heaped upon her. Similarly, women in the Black Power movement were relegated to mere supporting roles for the heroic men who led the movement. The movement's insistence on conventional gender roles forced women who wanted to write valid poetry either to "ventriloquize the hypermasculine expostulations of their male comrades" or to adopt a "hyperfeminine mode" (Ford 194, 196). Women poets who refused to conform to these standards were criticized or dismissed by the movement's male leaders: Sonia Sanchez, for example, was faulted by Haki Madhubuti (Don L. Lee) for "overuse of the page" (426) when she wrote poetry that challenged misogynistic Black Arts rhetoric and, later, censured for her refusal to conform to the Nation of Islam's dictum that women not speak in public; similarly, Carolyn Rogers was criticized as unfeminine when she employed the Black Arts aesthetic without ventriloquizing the masculine revolutionary voice.[12] The anthology *Black Fire*, a collection of writings by authors of the Black Power movement, reflects its narrowly circumscribed roles: the overwhelming majority of the pieces are by men, and their work tends to glorify violence and male virility. When they mention women at all, they generally depict them either as victims of violence or as mothers, implying that a woman's value for the movement lies in her ability to give birth to and nurture black men.[13]

The transition into an "honest-to-goodness" epic mode carries heavy consequences for black women in Brooks' poetry as well. Epic poems traditionally portray women as victims or as obstacles to the male hero's quest, and Brooks' turn to

the genre follows suit. In "Riders to the Blood-Red Wrath," the heroic speaker describes women as a potential danger to the impending fight: "My Revolution pushed his twin the mare, / The she-thing with the soft eyes that conspire / To lull off men, before him everywhere" (34-36). Not only are women passive, needing to be pushed "everywhere" by the Revolution, they are themselves a potential enemy, "[conspiring]" to "lull off" the heroes. Just as Kalypso seduces Odysseus and hinders him on his quest in the *Odyssey*, women threaten Brooks' Odyssean riders with sexual distraction that would keep them from their fight. Moreover, the past idealized by the speaker is hardly a paradise for the women, whom he can "split [. . .] open" as easily as "nod to" (51). A similar threat hangs over Way-out Morgan, who "postpones a yellow woman in his bed, postpones / wetnesses and little cries and stomachings-- / to consider Ruin" (734-36). The pleasures of sex threaten to distract him from his consideration of "Ruin," the "blood in mouths and body-mouths, / of flesh-rip in the Forum of Justice" (230-31) that will accompany the "Day of Debt-pay" when he seeks revenge against the white race (228).

Brooks depicts the violent revenge that her heroes envision in images of male violence against women. Way-out Morgan fuels his anger with the memory of "his Sister / mob-raped in Mississippi" (723-24) and plans to repay this slight in kind. The bloody "body-mouths" that he envisions suggest vaginas and, along with "flesh-rip," the act of rape. Amos, who also lives in the Mecca building and looks forward to a day of violent uprising and revenge, similarly thinks about the "Day of Debt-pay" in terms of rape and violence against women in his prayer for America:

Bathe her in her beautiful blood.

A long blood bath will wash her pure.

[. . . . .]

Slap the false sweetness from that face.

Great-nailed boots

must kick her prostrate, heel-grind that soft breast,

outrage her saucy pride,

remove her fair fine mask.

Let her lie there, panting and wild, her pain

red, running roughly through the illustrious ruin—

with nothing to do but think, think

of how she was so long grand,

flogging her dark one with her own hand,

watching in meek amusement while he bled.

Then she shall rise, recover.

Never to forget. (523-24, 528-41)

Amos personifies America as a woman and then attacks her specifically female aspects: the "sweetness" must be slapped from her face, her "soft breast" must be ground by boots, and her "saucy pride" must be "outraged" (a euphemism for rape). Amos's prayer echoes the disturbing rationale of many rapists: America is a woman who "doesn't know her place" and must be humiliated and punished, taught a lesson that she is "never to forget." Such vengeful rapes were actually celebrated and even advocated by some Black Power writers. Eldridge Cleaver views rape as "an insurrectionary act" that "defi[es] and

trampl[es] upon the white man's law" and serves as a just "revenge" for racist treatment of black people (14).[14] Another image of rape occurs in "Malcolm X." The description of his "maleness [. . .] pushing us to walls" (6-7) recalls not only the protest slogan "up against the wall, motherfuckers" but also the image of a rapist pushing his victim up against a wall to corner her.[15]

While Brooks acknowledges the violence against women that results from epic values in "Riders to the Blood-red Wrath" and "In the Mecca," she does not criticize it. In fact, she glorifies the masculine heroism that causes it and at times, as with Amos's prayer for America and Malcolm X's push, seems to glorify the acts of violence themselves. This attitude contrasts sharply with that of her early work, which often criticized the limited and limiting worldview associated with the epic genre. But, Brooks openly distanced herself from her early work after she became involved with the Black Power movement. In an interview with Gloria T. Hull and Posey Gallagher she referred to "The Anniad," the central poem in *Annie Allen*, which won the 1950 Pulitzer, as "an exercise, just an exercise" (*Conversations* 96). The remarks she makes about the poem in her 1969 interview with George Stavros are equally diminishing: the poem was "enjoyable" and "a pleasure" to write, and her aim was to make "every phrase [. . .] beautiful" (*RPO* 159). Regarding the sonnet-ballad in the "Appendix to the Anniad," she merely says "[i]ts one claim to fame is that I invented it" (*RPO* 186). These remarks, tellingly, echo the criticism of Don L. Lee, a figure who not coincidentally appears as one of the Black Power heroes in "In the Mecca":

> *Annie Allen* (1949), important? Yes. Read by blacks? No. *Annie Allen* more so than *A Street in Bronzeville* seems to have been written for whites. For instance, "The Anniad" requires unusual concentrated study. She invents the sonnet-ballad in part 3 of the poem "Appendix to the Anniad, leaves from a loose-leaf war diary." This poem is probably earth shaking to some, but leaves me completely dry. [. . .] *Annie Allen* is an important book. Gwendolyn Brooks' ability to use their language while using their ground rules explicitly shows that she far surpasses the best European-Americans had to offer. There is no doubt here. But in doing so, she suffers by not communicating with the masses of black people. (*RPO* 17, 19)

Both Lee and Brooks regard *Annie Allen* as valuable only for its technical achievement—it is "beautiful," and it proved that a black woman could beat white poets at their own game. Lee's criticism of the poetry, that it did not "[communicate] with the masses of black people," and Brooks' dismissal of her early work as she sought to write poetry that would call to the masses suggest that they regarded the early poetry as insufficient (and perhaps too "weak") to fulfill the goals of the Black Arts movement. Among the poems that Lee singles out for praise are "Malcolm X" and the portrait of "Way-out Morgan" from "In the Mecca," works that he refers to as "glimpses of greatness" (22), and that reflect the traditional epic values of the Black Power movement.

Lee's critique of Brooks' early poetry reveals that it was not epic enough, in a conventional sense, for the Black Arts movement. The leaders of this movement, men like Lee, Baraka, and Ron Karenga, required a poetry that would reflect their values,

which were remarkably conventional, in epic terms. In becoming a part of this movement, Brooks adopted not only their political aims but also their ways of reading and thinking about literature—hence her desire for an "honest-to-goodness" epic. This limited understanding of the genre, however, values convention and excludes experimentation. In turning to the Black Power movement and traditional epic, Brooks forces herself and her poetry into a rigid role—she must work to support the male heroes of the movement. As a result of this shift, both Brooks and her critics underestimate poetry like "The Anniad," overlooking the revolutionary potential of its experiments with epic convention.[16]

"The Anniad" and, on a wider scale, *Annie Allen* not only are epics but also fulfill Brooks's goal of calling to black audiences. Further, they do so in a more inclusive and constructive way than a conventional epic could. Whereas the genre traditionally encourages men to act and women to support passively, Brooks' epic exhorts both men and women to act and, further, to act in concert. While most critics have acknowledged the poem's engagement with the epic tradition, they have tended to do so by reading the poem as a mock epic.[17] To do so, one must acknowledge an element of burlesque in it where the poem's elevated language and tone, essential traits of epic poetry, describe the life of Annie Allen, a "common" black woman who is more given to dreaming than heroic action. Brooks herself would seem to agree with this assessment; when asked whether she intended the poem's title as a classical reference, she responded, "[w]ell, the girl's name was Annie, and it was my little pompous pleasure to raise her to a height that she probably did not have. I thought of the *Iliad* and said, I'll call this 'The Anniad'"

(*RPO* 158).[18] It is true that Annie's race, gender, class, and personality are diametrically opposed to those of Homer's protagonists, but this difference only precludes Annie from being an epic hero if one takes a narrow view of the genre and of what constitutes heroism.

The ancient epics actually provide a more inclusive notion of heroism than critics have recognized. While it is true that the protagonists of the classical epics are all male, the poems do not necessarily limit great deeds to men. Penelope's strategy of telling her suitors that she will marry one of them after finishing Laertes' funeral shroud, then unweaving the work she has completed during the day at night, rivals Odysseus' own plans in its cunning. Her cunning, heroic in itself, does not merely support Odysseus by keeping his household in working order while he pursues glory—it is indispensable to his success. Penelope takes an active role in creating a good reputation for her household by forestalling the marriage until Odysseus can return and kill her suitors. She does not win glory on the battlefield like her husband, but Penelope nevertheless transcends the narrow strictures of her society and, in doing so, earns a heroic reputation in her own right.[19]

Women in the *Aeneid*, the poem to which Brooks' title alludes, break even further out of their stereotypical roles by acting as leaders and warriors. When Aeneas is shipwrecked in Carthage, he goes to Dido's palace and sees a mural depicting the fall of Troy. Among the various heroes, he sees

> Furious Penthesilea of the Amazonians with crescent shields
> leading a battle line, and she blazes in the middle of thousands,
> fastening golden belts underneath her exposed breast,

a female warrior, the maiden dares to run together with the men.[20]

(1.490-93)

Virgil depicts Penthesilea not only as equal to the men in daring and skill but as preeminent, standing out among thousands of other warriors and leading a line of soldiers. And his portrayal of the female warrior as heroic is by no means anomalous in classical literature. Penthesilea is an important character in the *Aethiopis*, a lost epic attributed to Arctinos of Miletus.[21] Propertius, a contemporary of Virgil's, describes Penthesilea as "conquering the conquerer" (3.11.16) when Achilles falls in love with her as she dies from a wound he has dealt her, and Seneca conflates her fate with Troy's in the *Troiades*, a play notable for its numerous depictions of female characters as heroic.[22]

Dido, the owner of the mural on which Aeneas gazes, herself represents female heroism. Moreover, she is a figure of African heroism—her great kingdom was built on the northern shore of modern-day Tunisia. By the time the Trojans land on the Carthaginian shore, Dido has already undertaken and successfully completed a heroic quest like Aeneas'. After her brother had killed her husband and stolen his wealth and kingdom, Dido fled with a group of her followers to found a new city, just as Aeneas and his men flee the ruins of Troy to found Rome. When he arrives at the city, he marvels at the throng of activity and the greatness of the city that is under construction:

Aeneas wonders at the mass, formerly just huts,

he marvels at the city gates, the noise, and the stretch of roads.

Eager, the Tyrians take their positions: part raise walls,

they toil at the citadel and roll up rocks with their hands,

> part select a place for a building and mark it off with a furrow;
> the magistrates dictate laws and lead the sacred senate.
> Here some dig out a port; here others place the high
> foundation for the theater, they carve columns from
> immense rocks, lofty decorations for future plays. (1.421-29)

The immensity of the growing city, formerly "just huts," attests to Dido's success and skill as a leader. When Aeneas meets Dido, he greets her with the same reverence he would show to any male ruler, and his words both pay respect to her office and underscore the magnitude of her achievement: "Oh queen, to whom Jupiter has granted it to found a new city / and to guide a proud people with justice / [. . .] we beseech you" (1.522-25).[23] Dido is such an effective ruler, and her kingdom so successful, that Aeneas seems tempted to stay; he lingers so long that Mercury is sent from the heavens to rebuke him and remind him that he has his own kingdom to build. Dido commits suicide over Aeneas' departure, but this act does not diminish her heroism or her achievement. Dido is a victim of fate and the gods' deception—Venus devises both her madness and her love for Aeneas. Moreover, the Romans viewed suicide as a noble act when one is faced with a desperate situation or has committed a grave sin.[24] If anything, Dido's suicide redeems her questionable relationship with Aeneas. Virgil points toward the success of Dido's leadership by connecting her suicide with the Punic wars, which he alludes to as the revenge that Dido's people will seek against Aeneas and his people in the future. At the time of the Punic wars, the Carthaginian empire was a major world power, second only to Rome itself. Rome emerged victorious from the wars, but the victory was by no means

easy; the memory of these wars and the threat the Carthaginians posed to Roman world dominance in the Republican days would be ample evidence of Dido's greatness for any of Virgil's Roman readers.

Dido's mural, in addition to challenging conventional notions about the necessary masculinity of epic heroes, also places into question the idea that epic heroes are entirely "men of action," glorying in violence and lacking interiority. The classical epics recount the feats of their heroes, which tend to be violent, but they also call attention to the devastating consequences of this violence; the glory that the heroes earn is tempered by criticisms and deep anxieties about the way they achieve glory. As Aeneas stares at the mural, which depicts him and his people in the heat of battle—the most glorious undertaking for epic men, regardless of whether they win or lose—he turns to Achates, weeping,

> [and] he says, "what place, Achates,
> what region on earth is not filled with our labors?
> Behold Priam! Even here fame has its rewards;
> there are tears of things and mortal affairs touch the mind.
> Let your fear dissolve; this fame will bear us some sort of greeting."[25]
>
> (1.459-63)

Aeneas reacts to the depiction of his glorious, fame-earning defeat not with boasts about his valor or vows of vengeance against the Greeks, as one might expect, but with tears, philosophical musing on the "tears of things," and bitter irony. The "rewards" of his fame are the recognition of the pain of human existence and the hope of perhaps

receiving a positive reception from the Carthaginians. Such rewards are a far cry from the glory and booty that are more typically associated with epic heroes.

Aeneas is not the only epic hero who expresses disillusionment with the violent ideals of his warrior culture. Even Achilles, the epitome of classical epic heroism, shows ambivalence about his quest for immortal glory through military combat. Far from being a one-dimensional "man of action," Achilles is often given to pensiveness and introspection. Though he generally does long for combat, he does not do so wholeheartedly. Achilles is aware of the wasteful destruction of warfare and, at times, expresses his disillusionment with his own violent quest for glory. As Achilles mourns with Priam, who has come to him to recover the body of Hektor, he describes the bad fortune of his own father:

> But even upon him the gods placed evil, that for him
> no generation of lordly sons was born in his great house,
> but a single child, doomed to an untimely end, was born, and even now
> I provide him nothing as he grows old, since far from my fatherland
> I sit here in Troy, and distress you and your children. (24.538-42)

Rather than boasting to his enemy or considering the glory that his reputation will bring his father, Achilles laments that he cannot care for the aging man because he must fight and die at Troy. Moreover, he is not only sorry for the damage that the war is causing his own family but also those of his enemies; his acknowledgement of his role in Priam's losses is almost apologetic and thus out of character for the stereotypical epic hero. Like Aeneas, Achilles is mindful of "the tears of things" and doubtful about the "rewards" of

glory and fame. Achilles himself often weeps these tears when confronted with the aftermath of his violence. He weeps for his comrade Patroclos, who dies trying to take Achilles' place in battle while Achilles is refusing to fight because of an insult to his heroic reputation. After Achilles kills Hector and drags his body around the walls of Troy, he weeps with Priam, who sneaks into the Greek camp to beg Achilles to return Hektor's body. Achilles also weeps for Penthesilea, the Amazon warrior, falling in love with her as she dies from a wound that he dealt her.[26] His violent fate, though it will earn him immortal glory, does not appear entirely attractive to him next to the prospect of aging peacefully, especially when he is faced with the ruin that his quest for glory brings.

Indeed, Achilles' desire for a peaceful life is reflected throughout Homer's text. Even as the poem celebrates the heroic exploits of the Greeks and Trojans, it tempers that enthusiasm with an emphasis on the wastefulness of war and foreshadows the peaceful, democratic society that is to follow the heroic age. According to the text's invocation, its subject is not Achilles, the hero, but his wrath and the consequences of his heroic deeds:

> Sing, goddess, the wrath of the son of Peleus, Achilles,
> and its ruin, which put unfathomable suffering upon the Achaians,
> cast many strong souls of heroes down to Hades,
> but gave their bodies as spoils to the dogs and all the birds. (1.1-4)

In addition to laying out the subject of the poem, Achilles' heroic feats in battle and the Greek victory, the invocation interprets these events. By emphasizing the wrath of the hero rather than the man himself, and by pointing out that Achilles caused "unfathomable suffering" to his own people before reporting how many heroes he killed, the poem casts

a negative light on Achilles' heroic glory. These lines also emphasize one of the potential "rewards" of such glory; the heroes who fall in battle might achieve an immortal reputation, their deeds recorded for all time in epic poetry, but their bodies become dog food.[27]

The grim realities of war, such as the fate of some warriors' bodies, are apparent throughout the text. Homer's descriptions of battle scenes are filled with graphic descriptions of the gory injuries that the warriors sustain:

> This man [Phereklos] Meriones pursued and, overtaking him,
> Struck him in the right buttock, and the spearhead drove straight
> and, passing beneath the bone, drove into the bladder.
> He dropped, screaming, to his knees, and death was a mist about him.
> [. . . . .]
> Now the the spear-famed son of Phyleus, closing upon [Pedaios],
> struck him behind the head with the sharp spear at the tendon,
> and the bronze blade cut straight on through the teeth and under the tongue,
> and he dropped in the dust gripping the cold bronze in his teeth. (5.65-68, 72-75)

Scenes such as this one fill the *Iliad* and emphasize the actual nature of warfare. Each hero, whether he kills or is killed, receives individual mention—the glorious immortality that he seeks. But that glory is tempered by the gruesomeness of the rendering and the recognition that the other "rewards" of fame are agony and maimed bodies. These graphic descriptions of battle hardly celebrate the violent lives of these warriors; they memorialize them, but they do so in a way that is realistic rather than idealistic.

The poets of the Black Arts movement, on the other hand, gloried in graphic depictions of violence, idealizing what the ancient epic poets had actually regarded with ambivalence. Baraka's "Black Art," emblematic of the Black Arts poetry, exults in graphic descriptions of violence:

We want poems
like fists beating niggers out of Jocks
or dagger poems in the slimy bellies
of the owner-jews. Black poems to
smear on girdlemamma mulatto bitches
whose brains are red jelly stuck
between 'lizabeth taylor's shoes. Stinking
Whores! We want "poems that kill."
Assassin poems, Poems that shoot
guns. Poems that wrestle cops into alleys
and take their weapons leaving them dead
with tongues pulled out and sent to Ireland.
[. . . . .]
Airplane poems, rrrrrrrrrrrrrrr
rrrrrrrrrrrrrr . . . tuhtuhtuhtuhtuhtuhtuhtuhtuh
. . . rrrrrrrrrrrrrrr . . . Setting fire and death to
whities ass. (12-23, 25-28)

The list of "poems" that Baraka's speaker wants resembles the epic not only in its graphic language but also in its form—the poem is a catalogue of violence. Like Homer's poetry, "Black Art" depicts violence realistically, even imitating the sounds of an aerial attack. Unlike the classical epics, however, the excesses and realism of the violence in Baraka's poem are held up as admirable—the speaker explicitly states that this is what he wants. A type of violence against the reader itself, the catalogue invites shock and horror, challenging and offending society's definition of poetry.

Whereas Baraka's poem seeks to outrage its audience with violence, the classical epics turn the violence of war to an instructive purpose. Against the horrors of pierced bladders and skewered necks, the peaceful society depicted on Achilles' shield presents an attractive alternative. The scene rendered on the shield of the *Iliad*'s most violent warrior is, ironically, one of weddings and peaceful resolutions:

> And on the shield [Hephaistos] fashioned two beautiful cities of mortal men;
> and on one there were weddings and feasts.
> And under shining torches, they led the maidens from their chambers
> through the city, and the loud marriage hymns were stirred up.
> The young men whirled in the dances, and with them
> the pipes and lyres gave forth their sound; and the women,
> each standing at her front door, stood marveling.
> And the people were assembled in the town center; there a quarrel
> had arisen. Two men argued over the blood-money for a man who
> had been killed. One publicly vowed to pay

> the full price; but the other spurned him and would take nothing.
> Both then started up to get an arbiter for a final decision.
> And the people were speaking on both sides to help both men
> but the marshals restrained them; and meanwhile the elders
> held council [sitting] on the polished stones in the sacred circle,
> and they had the staves of the loud-voiced heralds in their hands.
> To them both men rushed, and each spoke his case in turn. (18.490-506)

The shield's imagery of "weddings and feasts" is more appropriate to the lyric realm than to the epic poem in which it appears. The fact that it does appear in an epic, and in the hands of Achilles, signals that the warrior culture of the poem is in decline; the shield foreshadows the democratic Greek society that is to come.[28] That the scene is embossed on a shield rather than a sword or chariot emphasizes the importance of peace and suggests the proper role of violence for the future Greeks—war should be defensive, a means of upholding and protecting peaceful societies.

The end of violent epic society and the desire for a peaceful world are even more apparent in Homer's second epic, the *Odyssey*. While fate dictates that Achilles must ultimately choose the immortal glory of epic heroism over a long and peaceful life, Homer's other epic protagonist, Odysseus, rejects epic glory in favor of domestic peace. In fact, Odysseus' quest is as much psychological as it is physical—in order to return to Ithaka, he must learn not to act like an epic hero. The invocation of the *Odyssey*, like that of the *Iliad*, interprets the story that it plans to tell; after laying out the basic plot about the "man of many turns" and his sufferings at sea, the narrator observes that men tend to

bring upon themselves "suffering beyond measure / through their own foolish actions" (1.1, 6-7).[29] "Beyond measure" and "their own" stress that this suffering is not brought about by fate; it exceeds the portion of suffering that the fates allot each person and is caused rather by the choices a particular person makes. Throughout the *Odyssey*, Odysseus and his men bring unnecessary misery upon themselves when they choose to act like epic heroes. When they land on the Cyclopes' island, for example, they incur the wrath of Polyphemos because they raid his cave and carry off his possessions as booty; he eats several of Odysseus' men as retribution. Moreover, when Odysseus and his men blind the cyclops to escape from his lair, they bring the vengeance of Poseidon, his uncle, upon their heads. Poseidon harries Odysseus for years with storms and shipwrecks that result in the loss of many of his crew. Odysseus also endangers his crew when, as they sail away from Polyphemos' island, he taunts the cyclops with a heroic boast. The sound alerts Polyphemos to the position of the Greeks' ships, and he hurls boulders that nearly crush several of them.

Odysseus' behavior after the Polyphemos episode reveals his growth out of the epic mode, and the change in his actions foreshadows the transition of Greek society from a warrior culture to a democratic one. When Odysseus and his men face Scylla, he brandishes his weapons and yells, but his epic actions are ineffective; the monster still kills several of his men. Circe has warned Odysseus that his weapons cannot harm Scylla and urged him not to attack, lest he lose more than the six men whom Scylla will kill, but he clings to his heroic identity and tries to slay the beast anyway.[30] The futility and danger of his actions underscore the problems with the warrior code—not only does

violence bring suffering, but it is also doomed to failure when a hero is faced with a superior opponent. Having learned these lessons, Odysseus orders his men not to act like epic heroes when they wash up on the shores of an unknown island: he forbids them to plunder the island. When they disobey his orders, slaughtering and eating a number of cattle, they earn a terrible fate for themselves; Helios, who owns the cattle, sends a hurricane against the fleet as they sail away. Odysseus alone escapes death, lashing two boards together and clinging to them as his men are killed.

Odysseus' pathetic state when he washes up on Kalypso's shore after the hurricane illustrates that suffering is the "reward of fame." The ruler of Ithaka and hero of the Trojan war, rather than possessing large amounts of booty, owns nothing more than the clothes on his back, his sword, and a poorly made raft. The great leader and strategist has lost every last member of his crew and is arguably responsible for a number of those deaths. Yet, when Kalypso makes him an offer that would finally earn him the immortality that epic heroes seek, he turns her down. Kalypso holds Odysseus on her island as her lover, but he spends his days sitting on the shore weeping, longing to return to Ithaka. Life with Kalypso, a semi-divine figure, would no doubt be glorious, and she offers to make him immortal. But Odysseus chooses his mortal wife over his immortal lover, his mundane domestic life in Ithaka over living like a god, and the hope of winning figurative immortality through his reputation over the promise of literal immortality. In short, he chooses mortality and his domestic life over divinity and eternal life.[31] When Odysseus finally returns, his slaying of the suitors who have plagued his home in his absence threatens to destroy his hope for future peace, bringing more suffering upon

himself and his family, but Athene intervenes to make peace between Odysseus and the families of the suitors. The necessity of this intervention underscores one of the main problems with epic's warrior culture: one act of revenge necessitates another, setting off a cycle of violence that undermines the foundations of civilization.

Classical epic poetry, then, actually critiques the violence and warfare that it supposedly celebrates. These poems are not products of warrior cultures but, rather, of the peaceful civilizations that are built upon violent pasts. The poems thus memorialize the past but do so in a way that reminds audiences of the pain and ruin that are consequences of war and vengeance; they serve as reminders of the danger the quest for epic glory holds for a civilization. It is this theme and tradition to which Brooks ties her epic. "The Anniad," like the Homeric and Virgilian epics, concerns itself with the destructive consequences of warfare. "The Anniad" critiques both the traditional heroic quest for glory in warfare and the society that encourages men to take that path; in doing so, the poem reveals the consequences of not only war but also bad readings of the epic genre. The society that Brooks censures idealizes warfare and heroic "men of action" while keeping women cloistered in the domestic sphere; it follows an "epic tradition" that is based on a limited understanding of the genre, one that overlooks the classical epics' deep apprehension about warfare and the pursuit of glory, not to mention the fact that women play heroic roles in those poems.

The well-read Brooks writes an epic that emphasizes the neglected and misinterpreted aspects of epic by foregrounding these themes and characteristics while diminishing or subverting those that have encouraged shortsighted readings. Her

decision to make the hero of her poem a black woman recalls the fact that there are heroic women, and even heroic African women, in the classical epics. At the same time, the disparity between Annie Allen and what her society generally regards as an appropriate epic hero—a larger-than-life, usually white male whose heroic stature is earned through violent feats during war—subverts these traditional and misguided expectations and allows Brooks to reveal the negative effects of such a limited understanding of heroism. The consequences of the limited and limiting gender roles inherent in the traditional interpretation of epic poetry are evident from the first stanza of "The Anniad":

> Think of sweet and chocolate,
>
> Left to folly or to fate,
>
> Whom the higher gods forgot,
>
> Whom the lower gods berate;
>
> Physical and underfed
>
> Fancying on the featherbed
>
> What was never and is not. (1-7)

The poem announces itself as an epic by alluding to conventional invocation that begins epic poetry—it introduces the hero and her defining characteristics, and it outlines the role of fate and the gods in the poem. The allusion, however, calls attention to the lack of an actual invocation: the speaker calls upon no muse to recount Annie's story. Instead, the speaker addresses the reader directly. The lack of a conventional invocation exposes the fact that there is no muse to tell Annie's story; as a poor black woman, she is presumed to be beneath the notice of the muse of traditional epic. Further, the

description of Annie is the opposite of the descriptions of the epic heroes. She is not much-traveled, wrathful, or wily, but "sweet and chocolate." She does not flee the wrath or receive the aid of any gods or goddesses to fulfill a fate they have devised; instead, they have "forgotten" her, leaving her to "folly or to fate." Moreover, she is berated by the "lower gods," unlike the epic heroes who, with their divine lineage, *are* lower gods. Instead of valorizing Annie, the beginning of "The Anniad" creates sympathy for her by calling attention to her sweetness and underscoring her neglect and mistreatment by the gods and fate. Annie is "underfed" by the limiting tradition in which she finds herself. Because she does not resemble other epic heroes, her potential for heroism is stifled rather than nurtured. The epic tradition neglects her, and her society, whose ideals are reflected in that tradition, confines her to the domestic sphere. Her options are, as her mother puts it, to "[g]et a broom to whish the doors / [o]r get a man to marry" ("ballad of late annie" 7-8). Thus, the opening of Brooks' epic finds its hero not in the midst of a quest, but in bed imagining the man of her dreams.

The opening of "The Anniad" further resists the traditional understanding of epic and emphasizes the critical aspect of the original epics by de-emphasizing the importance of action. Epics begin *in medias res*, often saving exposition until later in the poem; in the *Aeneid* and the *Odyssey*, for example, the hero recounts the events that led up to the beginning of the poem at a feast where he relates his adventures to his hosts. The effect of the traditional *in medias res* beginning is that readers and listeners are transported into the main action of the epic as soon as possible—the middle of the Trojan War and the wanderings and shipwrecks of Aeneas and Odysseus are the first scenes of the classical

epics. These scenes are exciting and filled with violence and valor, the most important aspects of the poems for instilling the code of heroic virtue. Epic beginnings, by privileging action over exposition, seem to imply that feats and deeds are the most important thing of all—the war itself is more important than what caused the war, and the hero's struggle against Poseidon's wrath is more important than what caused that wrath. But the classical epics actually forecast their critique of violent action, as with the *Iliad*'s reference to Achilles' baneful wrath and its consequences, but such subtle details tend to be overlooked by received readings in favor of the obvious and exciting material—the violence itself.

"The Anniad," however, resists this traditional opening and thus avoids such misreadings. The poem appears in the middle of *Annie Allen*, following the first section, "Notes from the Childhood and the Girlhood," which begins with a poem about Annie Allen's birth and infancy. This placement prevents the poem from beginning *in medias res*; by the time one reads it, one already knows what has taken place prior to the beginning of the epic. Even if one reads the poem in isolation, however, it does not begin *in medias res*. It begins, instead, with young Annie's daydream about the "paladin" who will rescue her from her mundane life and sweep her away in a fairytale romance. The poem begins, then, before the critical action of the poem—Annie's romance with the tan man and her subsequent disillusionment. By beginning at the beginning of her story, rather than *in medias res*, Brooks shifts the focus of her poem from action and effects back to exposition and causes. While what happens to Annie Allen is important, *why* it happens is equally, if not more, important. Annie's romantic disillusionment is a result

of her unrealistic ideas. The reason her notions are unrealistic, in large part, is that they are based on the fairytales and ideals of dominant white culture. As she "[watches] for the paladin" (22) Annie prepares to play her role as the beautiful maiden by "printing bastard roses" (32) on her brown skin and "taming [. . .] down" (35) her "black and boisterous hair" (34). In short, she tries to conform to white standards of beauty: pale skin, rosy cheeks, and silky hair. The type of romance she wants is inaccessible to her because of her race and class; Annie cannot make herself into a fair-skinned maiden, the only type of woman "worthy" of winning a prince. As Betsy Erkilla and Claudia Tate have discussed, the fact that Annie's romantic ideals are both fostered by and forbidden to her by dominant society registers the poem's protest against the racist and sexist ideology that oppresses Annie and other black women. By not beginning *in medias res*, the poem calls attention to the larger culture's role in Annie's downfall.

"The Anniad" further de-emphasizes action to underscore the harmful effects of society's ideals by concentrating on Annie's household rather than the war her husband fights. The poem's concentration on the domestic sphere recalls the warnings against violence in the classical epics. Like the *Odyssey*, the poem reveals the consequences of men's war-making by illustrating how it destroys the household; but whereas Homer shifts his focus between Penelope's struggle and Odysseus', Brooks places her focus almost entirely on Annie's fight to keep her household together in her husband's absence. Only two of the forty-three stanzas of "The Anniad" represent the war itself; an additional eight stanzas describe the experiences of the "tan man" from his point of view, but the bulk of these deals not with the soldier's experiences on the battlefield, as a

typical epic would, but with his homecoming. The lack of attention to war demotes it from its traditional central role in epic to a mere side note. Similarly, the poem's treatment of the "tan man" as a minor character, one who doesn't even have a name, subverts those expectations further. In "The Anniad," the soldier is only a minor character, and his military experience is not nearly as important to the poem as his domestic role.

The "tan man's" experience in war, and the resulting dissolution of his relationship with Annie, reveals the destructive nature of epic heroism. The introduction of war into the poem "prophes[ies] hecatombs" (79), and it "spits upon the silver leaves" (82) and "denigrates the dainty eves" (83) of Annie's romantic fantasy. The poem also deflates the epic's supposed glorification of war as a valorous activity. Rather than elevating Annie's husband to heroic status, war

> Names him. Tames him. Takes him off,
> Throws to columns row on row.
> Where he makes the rifles cough,
> Stutter. Where the reveille
> Is staccato majesty.
> Then to marches. Then to know
> The hunched hells across the sea. (85-91)

Like Homer, Brooks depicts war realistically. The average soldier is not a powerful warrior but a passive pawn whom war "names," "tames," and "throws" into the ranks. The rifles do not boom but "cough" and "stutter." These weak sounds foreshadow the

diseases that many soldiers, including Annie's husband, will contract in the war and thus reveal the unromantic fact that many soldiers die in sickbeds rather than in the heat of battle. The "majesty" of the reveille is "staccato," cut off sharply, and echoes the stuttering coughs of the rifles. War is not glorious—it is "hell"; further, it is a decrepit "hunched" hell that weakens and dehumanizes men. The sacrificial "hecatombs" that war requires, rather than the traditional hundred cattle, will be the thousands of soldiers who are slaughtered like cattle. The allusion to slaughtering cattle drives home the point that black men like Annie's husband were killed for (and by) a country that did not acknowledge their humanity, much less their heroism. Moreover, the poem exposes the unheroic fact that war often destroys families when soldiers leave behind wives and children and return, if they return at all, scarred by their experiences. Annie's husband returns home "less than ruggedly" (99), not as a conquering hero but as a sick man who "twitches" (106) and still hears the "eerie stutter" (104) of rifles.

Even if war did not prove to be the glorious and heroic activity that epics are presumed to depict, however, it was still an improvement for Annie's husband: as a soldier fighting abroad, he has more status and power than he does as a disenfranchised black civilian in the United States. This brief, imperfect experience of epic masculinity proves both addictive and destructive:

> With his helmet's final doff
> Soldier lifts his power off.
> Soldier bare and chilly then
> Wants his power back again.

No confection languider

Before quick-feast, quick-famish Men

Than the candy crowns-that-were. (127-33)

Even though epic power and masculinity prove to be a sweet illusion, a child's "candy crown" rather than a golden crown of heroism, they are enough to give him a taste for power. War may have tamed him, but it also gave him a name, something the "tan man" lacks in the civilian world. The phrase "quick-feast, quick-famish Men" recalls the vitality and abundant feasting of epic heroes, while the capitalization of "Men" asserts the masculinity of those who participate in these rites. The quickness of these feasts and famines both alludes to the stereotypical notion that epic heroes are entirely action oriented and deflates the glory associated with these activities by revealing their transitory nature—a feast quickly becomes a famine once it is ended as the warriors must then rush off to new fights to earn their next feast. Such martial masculinity is undermined by the syntax and diction of the first lines of the stanza; the lack of an article before "soldier" and the simple word "wants" to describe his desire sound like the condescending baby talk used with toddlers: "soldier wants his power." The men who hunger for masculine power and glory become, in effect, petulant children who can be pacified with cheap candy.

The poem shows that these desires are not only childish but also destructive. Annie's husband tries to assuage his feelings of impotence and assert his masculinity by leaving his wife and children, and the romantic fantasy that Annie has constructed, for "a maple banshee. / [. . .] a sleek slit-eyed gypsy moan" (148-49). Carousing with wild,

witchy women is a suitable activity for epic heroes—Odysseus spent a fair share of his ten-year wanderings doing it. Odysseus, however, was trying to get home; he forsook his tantalizing witches in favor of his mortal wife. Annie's husband, following the ideals of a society that glorifies the exciting parts of epics while ignoring the warnings that attend those aspects, likewise misinterprets his desired role as an epic hero—instead of yearning for his Penelope, he scorns her and leaves again in search of a Kalypso "worthy" of his heroic stature:

> Not that woman! (Not that room!
> Not that dusted demi-gloom!)
> Nothing limpid, nothing meek.
> But a gorgeous and gold shriek
> With her tongue tucked in her cheek,
> Hissing gauzes in her gaze,
> Coiling oil upon her ways. (141-47)

Annie's husband finds his wild woman, but she is more Medusa than Kalypso: her "hissing" and "coiling" appearance and the "gauzes in her gaze" recall the Gorgon's snaky hair and petrifying glance. Focused on the glory of pursuing such women, the man of tan overlooks their danger. "Wench" and "whiskey" exacerbate the "tail-end / Of [his] overseas disease" and hasten his death (242-43).

When Annie's husband leaves her, her romantic fantasy unravels, and she falls apart psychologically. She seeks comfort and new experiences that can satisfy her starving imagination and need for beauty. She tries to enjoy the beauty of the passing

seasons, but their failure to satisfy her sends her into an increasingly manic search for distractions; she "seeks for solaces" in "snow" (162) and "green" (169), then "runs to" "summer gourmet fare" (176) and "November leaves" (183). Her frenzy increases as she seeks new sources of comfort: she "spins, and stretches" (190) to her friends, offering love to a populace that rejects her offering; she then "twists" (204) to studying ancient philosophy and, when that fails, "[s]hivers" (216) and "[p]irouettes" (217) as she "[t]ests forbidden taffeta" (212). Her increasingly excessive actions (from "running" to "pirouetting") signal her increasing desperation as her outlets prove insufficient. Annie's efforts are doomed to fail because she has the wrong motivations—she remains rooted in the lyrical and romantic mode that has caused her downfall. In her fit of philanthropy, she invites her friends to "Take such rubies as [they] list. / Suit to any bonny ends" (193-94); she seeks "kisses pressed in books" (210) in the pages of ancient philosophers (where she is hardly likely to find them); she dances and twirls in "forbidden" taffeta rather than exploring other, potentially redemptive and less conventionally feminine realms. Instead of pushing beyond her socially dictated role and embracing the epic identity that "The Anniad" creates for her and that will ultimately save her, Annie remains obsessed with the stereotypically feminine concerns of beauty and romance.

Annie eventually gives up as her socially prescribed "culprit magics fade" (218). She "[f]rees her lover. Drops her hands" and stands "[s]horn and taciturn" (223-24). She then turns to raising and nurturing her children:

> Petals at her breast and knee. . . .
>
> "Then incline to children-dear!

> Pull the halt magnificence near,
>
> Sniff the perfumes, ribbonize
>
> Gay bouquet most satinly;
>
> Hoard it, for a planned surprise
>
> When the desert terrifies." (225-31)

The impulse to turn to her children holds potential; in the following poems from "The Womanhood," Annie will find her voice and political power in her role as a mother. But in "The Anniad," Annie has not yet reached this level of agency; she turns to raise her children in the only way she knows—by replicating the gendered and romanticized ideals of her society. She shows them perfumes and ribbons, "hoard[ing]" the beautiful items for protection when "the desert terrifies." The bad example that Annie sets for her children in this process is revealed when her game of dress-up fails:

> Perfumes fly before the gust,
>
> Colors shrivel in the dust,
>
> And the petal velvet shies,
>
> When the desert terrifies. (232-35)

Just as Annie will have to learn to embrace her epic potential in order to recover from her psychic shock, she will have to teach her children non-stereotypical epic values rather than stereotypically lyric ones, encouraging them toward an awareness of the realities of their unjust world and toward political resistance rather than the dreams and stereotypical roles that have caused her such harm.

Annie's manic desperation recalls the *furor* of Dido in the *Aeneid.* When Aeneas leaves Dido, she too falls into a state of madness. Like Annie, she undergoes rapid shifts in emotion, first confronting Aeneas in a fit of rage, then begging him to stay, then calling down curses upon him and his people. As she slips further into insanity, she begins to experience nightmares and hallucinations. Dido, like Annie, desperately seeks a proper course of action and tries out several ideas in rapid succession: in vain, she sends her sister to supplicate Aeneas, offers prayers and sacrifices to the gods that are spurned, considers and rejects the ideas of accepting a former suitor or accompanying the Trojans to Italy, and fantasizes about what her life would be like if she had killed Aeneas and his men when they first got to Libya, before settling on suicide as her only course of action. Both Annie and her classical predecessor fall into *furor* because they have been deceived by love and romance. Just as Venus tricks Dido into falling in love with Aeneas and believing that she has a relationship that does not actually exist, the fairy tales and narrowly defined social roles that Annie's society has pressed upon her lead her to idealize romance and cast her husband in a role that he does not deserve—he is hardly the knight in shining armor that she imagines him to be.[32] Yet, the similarities between Dido and Annie emphasize Annie's heroism and potential for leadership by connecting her with the heroic Carthaginian leader. The difference in their fates lies in the fact that Annie has children. Dido tells Aeneas that she "would not see [herself] so entirely caught and deserted" (3.330) if she had "some little Aeneas to play in [her] halls" (328-29).[33] That Annie has children and lives while the childless Dido commits suicide suggests the redemptive power of motherhood. Indeed, it is Annie's attempt to raise her children to

avoid her fate that will lead her to realize her heroic role in the poems of "The Womanhood."

At this point in "The Anniad," Annie's opportunity to grow out of her stereotypical role is delayed by the arrival of her husband. He returns to her, the "smallness that [he] had to spend, / spent" (241-42) but only long enough to die an unheroic death—"[rotted] and [routed] by degrees" from consumption (244). In the end, Annie is left devastated, "almost thoroughly / Derelict and dim and done" (295-96) and clinging to the wreckage of her dream, "kissing [. . .] the minuets of memory" (300-01) in her tiny apartment. This pathetic image encourages one to pity Annie and, in turn, further critiques the ideals of masculine power that have contributed to her pain. While the quest for epic heroism might be the direct cause of Annie's desolation, it is not the only cause; her unattainable romantic ideals contribute equally, if indirectly, to her disillusionment. Annie's fantasy, her attempt to force the "tan man" into the role of the heroic paladin, and her struggle to cope with the failure of her romantic fantasy comprise the majority of "The Anniad." This degree of concern with love and romance, traditionally lyric subjects, in an ostensibly epic poem may at first seem surprising; however, even though epic and lyric are traditionally antithetical, they have never been mutually exclusive genres.

Classical epics usually contain romantic stories; however, epic romances are traditionally interpreted as impediments to the more lofty and important concerns of the heroes: Dido diverts Aeneas from his quest to found Rome, Achilles withdraws from the Trojan war because Agamemnon steals Briseis, and Circe and Calypso hinder Odysseus

on his way home.[34] Even Penelope presents a problem for Odysseus since the threat of her remarrying is also a threat to his heroic reputation. Such interpretations, however, tend shortsightedly to overlook that these women often help the heroes and that the men themselves are equally responsible, if not more so, for the delay in their quests. Aeneas reached Dido's land in a desperate situation, and she offered him the time and means necessary to recover and continue his quest as well as a model for building a new city. Dido does not hold him captive in Carthage, and whereas Dido is divinely deceived into a romance, Aeneas engages in it willingly. Similarly, there is no clear reason why Odysseus stays with Circe as long as he does, implying that he stays of his own free will, and she gives him invaluable instructions on how to proceed with his quest. Though Calypso does hold him captive for a while, she also provides him with the means to get back to Ithaka. The implication that Briseis is responsible for Achilles' withdrawal from battle ignores the poem's condemnation of his heedless wrath and tacitly condemns the ancient practice of treating women as spoils of war.

"The Anniad," in contrast, presents war as an impediment to love, emphasizing the epic theme of war's consequences and warding off the possibility that her poem can be similarly misread. But the combination of epic with romance in Brooks' poem goes beyond a simple critique of the traditional reading of the classical epics. "The Anniad," like Spencer's *The Faerie Queene*, combines lyric and epic themes in a lyrical form.[35] *The Faerie Queene* glorifies epic heroism and courtly romance at the same time, not privileging one over the other. The plot of Book 1 closely resembles Annie's fantasy: the valiant and holy knight Redcrosse rescues and later marries the meek and humble maiden

Una. Annie thinks of her ideal mate as a "paladin," a holy knight like Redcrosse, indicating the Spencerian character of her ideal relationship (18). This romance, of course, is impossible for Annie because of her race and class. "The Anniad" alludes to this later, more lyrical epic for the same reason that it alludes to classical epics: to reveal the harmful, exclusionary principles inherent in its ideology.

"The Anniad," then, combines lyric with epic in order to undermine and critique each tradition. The poem's lyrical language and focus on romance demote epic heroism from its position of primacy, and the destruction of Annie's fantasy and the life that she has built around it foregrounds the destructive consequences of the type of epic masculinity glorified by classical lyrics and *The Faerie Queene*. At the same time, the poem critiques the traditional lyrical romance by exposing it as a plot that is unavailable to women like Annie; by trying to live a story that is denied to her, by adopting the role of the passive maiden waiting for her paladin to rescue and adore her, Annie invites the pain and disillusionment that she ultimately experiences. "The Anniad" exposes the futility of trying to fit into a tradition from which one has been excluded. Just as traditional epic and lyric poems would regard Annie and her husband as "unfit" subjects, black women and men must in turn regard these genres and their conventions as unfit for their needs.

"The Anniad" models the solution to this dilemma. Rather than trying to adapt to literary conventions that regard black writers as "unfit," it challenges these conventions to create a new poetry that can reflect their experiences. Even as it combines lyric and epic elements in ways that undermine and challenge the conventions of each genre, "The

Anniad" is also able to employ the lyric's concern with private experience with the epic's focus on instilling cultural values in the public at large. The poem discards the narrowly conceived epic tradition in favor of the genre's overlooked aspects that are useful for creating a sense of shared identity in black people and for nation-building. By foregrounding the epic's warnings about the destructiveness of war and the stereotypical masculine pursuit of glory, "The Anniad" warns black men against the consequences of trying to find their identity in these traditional ways. Such behavior destroys both the men's homes and the men themselves and thus undermines the attempt to build a black national consciousness. By placing Annie and her domestic life at the center of the poem, reminding readers that epic heroism is not only for men, Brooks urges black women to resist narrowly circumscribed roles. The black woman's heroic quest to build a home and raise her children is the foundation for whatever must follow; in turn, black men must, rather than abandoning their families to pursue individual glory, stay at home and help black women in this quest.[36] "The Anniad" thus records the private experience of Annie Allen and transforms it into a public protest against the racist and sexist cultural values that make her disillusionment inevitable. By experimenting with and critiquing the epic form and its conventions, "The Anniad" encourages black people, and black women especially, to challenge the forms that embody and support destructive ideals and adapt them into new forms that are fit for protest.

"The Anniad" reveals the necessity of these actions through Annie's struggle to live within the confines of the role that society has dictated for her. The poem ends with Annie sitting alone in her kitchenette, clinging to her romantic memories. Her defeated

emotional state underscores the dangers of passively accepted the models provided by the white majority. Just as the pain and suffering of Achilles and Odysseus warn audiences about the consequences of violent heroism, Annie's downfall cautions against relying on idealistic romanticism instead of taking active responsibility for one's own fate. Though Annie's quest to achieve a fairy-tale romance has failed, she is not entirely defeated but rather "almost thoroughly / Derelict and dim and done" (295-96). The qualifying "almost" and the "Appendix to The Anniad" signal that Annie is in a state of transition. Her heroic quest, which she began to discover at the end of "The Anniad," is to raise her children so that they can negotiate their racist, patriarchal world successfully. Since her efforts to negotiate that world on its terms have failed, she attempts, in the poems of "The Womanhood," to blaze her own path.

Annie begins this phase of her quest by discovering her own voice and learning to use it. In "The Appendix to The Anniad," Annie moves from dealing with the effects of World War II on her family to taking up arms for the psychological and political battle that she will fight in "The Womanhood." The section's subtitle, "leaves from a loose-leaf war diary" hints at Annie's scattered emotional state as she begins to move on with her life after her husband's death. Further, it suggests the searching, experimental nature of the poems and an uncertainty about genre, especially following the highly-wrought "Anniad." Annie herself narrates the poems, marking the first time that she describes her own experience in Brooks' collection. Though Annie has found her voice, she is not yet certain how to use it; the three poems of the diary vary widely in form, tone, and subject matter as though Annie is trying out different ways of speaking.[37] The first poem,

"('thousands—killed in action')," extends Brooks' criticism of society's glorification of war by revealing its consequences not only for soldiers but also for civilians. The title of the poem, which asserts the bald fact that soldiers die in great numbers, appears in quotation marks and thus reads like a fragment of a newspaper headline. The poem acknowledges the emotions that allow people to read such headlines without considering the reality of death on such a mass scale. One needs "the untranslatable ice to watch" (1, 5) and "[t]he purple and black to smell" (6) war as it really is, and one has to engage in this unflinching observation of the horrors of war before grief can be "sweet" (67, "proper" (8), or "other than discreet" (9). These requirements preclude civilians from truly understanding war; they experience only a "half-hurt" (11) that heals quickly but "exhausts" (13). Civilians, tired out by their attempt at "sympathy," have neither the ability nor the energy to understand the soldiers who return home (13). Annie has gained this knowledge because, as a black woman trying to live in a racist and sexist world, she is also fighting a war in which "thousands" have been "killed in action." The fact that she has learned how to speak about such matters suggests a growing self-awareness of her role in this battle.

The other two poems of the "Appendix" return to the romanticism that had caused Annie so much difficulty in "The Anniad." Though she clearly has not left her idealism behind, Annie has learned from her experiences; the romanticism of the poems is tempered by irony, and in them Annie displays strength and agency that she previously lacked. The poem "[The Certainty we two shall meet by God]" is addressed to her lover, and it takes the form of a love lyric, recalling the sonnet, the Spencerian stanza, and "The

Anniad" stanza simultaneously. But the romantic sentiment expressed to her lover, "The Certainty [they] two [will] meet by God / In a wide Parlor, underneath a Light / Of lights" is "no ointment now" (1-3). Annie, having been disillusioned by such idealism before, is now unwilling to wait passively for a future majestic parlor; she wants immediacy and action. She describes herself and her husband as "worshipers of life" (4) and "masters of the long-legged stride, / Gypsy arm-swing" (5-6). This Annie Allen, who places herself in a position of equality with her lover by sharing his traditionally masculine body language, is a far cry from the passive, daydreaming girl from the beginning of "The Anniad." She no longer wants an idealized fairy tale but a love that is actual and physical: "nights / Of vague adventure, lips lax wet and warm, / Bees in the stomach, sweat across the brow. Now" (7-9). Annie describes a romance, but her language, with its realism and emphasis on action, physicality, and immediacy, is more consonant with the epic tradition than with the romantic. Whereas Annie's idealism hindered her, the romance she envisions here could help her in her quest for political action. As Melhem has argued, citing Clenora Hudson, the emphatic "now" at the end of the poem is "emblematic of the new 'young Black' who refuses the deferred dreams and gradualism of the 'older Blacks'" (Melhem 69). Annie still wants love, but she wants a love that can both survive the imperfect world and improve it; it must be an active, politically aware love in which the partners are equal and act together.[38]

The final poem of the "Appendix," "the sonnet ballad," is the most lyrical and romantic of the three. Both the sonnet and the ballad are lyric forms conventionally associated with romance and with romanticizing their subjects. The poem expresses

Annie's grief and lack of direction as she considers the loss of her husband. It begins and ends with a plaintive question: "Oh mother, mother, where is happiness?" (1, 14). That the poem ends with the same question with which it began would seem to signal that Annie has not progressed much, that she is passively lamenting her fate. At the same time, however, Annie's expression of grief reveals that she has abandoned some of her naïve idealism. The apostrophe "Oh mother, mother" invokes romantic clichés about motherhood (that they are conventionally nurturing and consoling), but it also alludes to Maxie Allen, who resists such stereotypes. Moreover, Annie fashions her lament in the highly wrought poetic form that the previous poems of the "Appendix" have struggled to achieve, suggesting that she has not simply made progress but arrived at an important point. The question demonstrates Annie's realization that her romantic ideals are responsible for her pain—she asks "where is happiness?" because she has realized where it does not reside. The form that her lamentation takes demonstrates that she is becoming more aware of her epic quest. Rather than envisioning a romantic reunion with her husband when he returns from the war, Annie flatly states that "He won't be coming back here any more" (5). She claims to have known, the moment he left,

> That [her] sweet love would have to be untrue.
> Would have to be untrue. Would have to court
> Coquettish death, whose impudent and strange
> Possessive arms and beauty (of a sort)
> Can make a hard man hesitate—and change. (8-12)

The phrase "would have to" serves as a refrain for the sonnet-ballad and emphasizes that there is a lack of choice for Annie's husband; he is a pawn of social and political forces that dictate how a man and a soldier should act. Annie's certainty that her husband will "have to" change, leave her, and die indicates that she is aware, on some level, of the influences at work on him. Moreover, Annie does not lament the loss of her husband himself but rather of his "tallness" (2). As Melhem notes, "tall" is a key word for Brooks's description of the "new black," whom she will come to describe as a "tall-walker" in her later writings (70). The "tall-walkers" are the young blacks who will answer the call, fighting to establish and legitimize a distinct black cultural heritage. When the tan man's "tallness" is called to war, he loses his ability to assist in that struggle; that is the loss Annie mourns once she has rejected stereotypical romance as a route to happiness.

To find happiness, Annie must become a tall-walker herself. The poems of "The Womanhood" document this process. The section begins with "the children of the poor," a sonnet sequence in which Annie ponders how she can raise her children to survive in a world that does not accept them. The fully realized sonnet, the form toward which the "Appendix" poems build, both represents Annie's successful transformation and places her voice in a tradition of protest. Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, and most other Harlem Renaissance poets employed the sonnet to decry the racism of American society. Brooks invokes that African American tradition by also using the form to condemn racism and to expose the effects of war on black families.[39] As she criticizes the effects of

actual war, Brooks inflects her sonnets with epic characteristics to wage an ideological war.

In the first poem in the sequence, Annie considers the complexity of her situation and acknowledges the difficulty of waging war when one has children:

> People who have no children can be hard:
>
> Attain a mail of ice and insolence:
>
> Need not pause in the fire, and in no sense
>
> Hesitate in the hurricane to guard. (1-4)

People without children can rush heedlessly, even recklessly, into battle and "perish purely" (6); they do not have the responsibilities that come with raising children. For Annie and others who have children, the "little lifting helplessness" (10) of children is a "trap" (12) and a "curse" (13) because it limits their actions. Annie cannot take great risks and leave her children to face the "throttling dark" (9) alone. To do so would be to replicate the mistake her husband made in trying to become a stereotypical epic hero. Annie's meditative evaluation of war undermines the traditional notion that dying in a war is noble by focusing on the consequences for children; it is difficult to glorify something that causes helpless children to be orphaned. Annie's responsibility presents a desirable alternative to the traditional epic hero. The poem's heavy alliteration and hyphenated coinages recall the Anglo Saxon epic and signal the heroic nature of the poem and of Annie's thinking. But Annie's epic quest to become a tall-walker will include raising children who will become tall-walkers too.

Annie ponders how she can accomplish this quest in the next two poems of the sequence. In "2," she asks "What shall I give my children?" (1). They are "adjudged the leastwise of the land" (2) by the dominant culture; they cry to Annie that they are "quasi" and "contraband" (6), words suggestive of legal status. Annie cannot help them because she is also a victim of racism. Her hand, though it is "stuffed with mode, design, device" (9), is deemed "less than angelic, admirable, or sure" (8), and she "lack[s] access to [her] proper stone" (10). Annie has learned from her relationship with her husband that one cannot build a life out of dreams, and she will not make the same mistake with her children. She knows that "mode, design, device" (11) and "plenitude of plan" are not enough "to ratify" (13) her children in society's eyes; action is needed as well. Annie comes to a similar conclusion when she considers religion in poem "3," wondering whether she should "prime [her] children [. . .] to pray" (1). She encourages her children to go to church and to have faith, and even to cling to it stubbornly, to be "metaphysical mules" (7). At the same time, Annie hints that such faith will not be enough; she tells her children that she will "wait, if [they] wish" to comfort them and restore their faith if their religion fails them:

> I shall wait, if you wish: revise the psalm
>
> If that should frighten you: sew up belief
>
> If that should tear: turn, singularly calm
>
> At forehead and at fingers rather wise,
>
> Holding the bandage ready for your eyes. (10-14)

Annie describes the comfort she will give her children in language that describes not only general repair ("revise," "sew up," "bandage") but also the treating of wounds ("sew up" together with "bandages" suggests medical stitches). The poem uses a lexicon of battle language to describe how her children will learn faith: they are to "invade" the "frugal vestibules" (2) of church and learn that the "Lord will not [. . .] leave the fray" (8). Annie gives advice to her children in a series of imperatives: "invade" (2), "instruct" (5), "confine" (6), "resemble" (7), and "learn" (8); she is both a general giving orders to her soldiers and a comforting nurse. The language of war inflects Annie's advice with epic overtones; the giving of these instructions is part of her epic quest, and following these instructions will be part of her children's quest. The battle metaphor also underscores the importance of taking action against society's injustice; faith is not an excuse to wait passively for change but rather a weapon to help Annie and her children in their struggle.

Having first made a strategic assessment of her family's situation, considered what aid she can offer her children, and armed them with faith, Annie then turns to call them to battle in sonnet "4." Having tried to build a life out of idealism and dreams while ignoring reality, to create a sculpture with only plans but no "proper stone," Annie gives her children the instructions that can help them avoid making a similar mistake: "First fight. Then fiddle" (1). Before they can enjoy the "silk and honey" (7) of art, romance, and idealism, Annie's children must fight to correct the social injustice that oppresses them. It might seem odd that a woman whose life was destroyed by war would call her children "to arms, to armor" (9), but Annie's call for war does not follow the tradition of romanticizing war. Rather than glorifying battle for its own sake, she views it as a means

to an end—securing the safety to establish a peaceful society. Annie follows the classical epics in regarding war as the necessary foundation upon which peaceful civilizations are built; she exhorts her children to

> Win war. Rise bloody, maybe not too late
>
> For having first to civilize a space
>
> Wherein to play your violin with grace. (12-14)

"Rise" and "civilize" create an internal rhyme, emphasizing the progress that can result from waging war. Annie/Brooks further resists glorifying the battle itself by qualifying its outcome: after the victory, "maybe" art and idealism will be possible if it is "not too late." The phrase "having first" underscores the speaker's view that war is not desirable—it is necessary. Moreover, Annie does not necessarily advise her children to wage a literal war. Her call to arms, itself an important part of the battle her children will wage, her individual epic struggle, and Brooks' protest, takes the form of a sonnet, an elaborate and highly wrought poetic form. Though she advises her children to "[c]arry hate / In front [. . .] and harmony behind" (9-10) the poem places harmony first, describing the act of fiddling before the act of fighting. This rhetorical strategy keeps the emphasis on the desired outcome of the war rather than the war itself, but it also reveals the fact that art can be a weapon.[40] Annie/Brooks uses a lexicon of battle imagery to describe the act of fiddling:

> First fight. Then fiddle. Ply the slipping string
>
> With feathery sorcery; muzzle the note
>
> With hurting love; the music that they wrote

Bewitch, bewilder. Qualify to sing

Threadwise. Devise no salt, no hempen thing

For the dear instrument to bear.

The lexicon of strategy language ("ply," "bewilder," devise") together with the language of magic ("sorcery," "bewitch") recalls the epic genre, which is filled with the clever strategies of heroes and deceptive sorcery performed by the gods. The overtone of war is heightened by Annie's instruction to "muzzle the note / With hurting love," which transforms the fiddle into a gun. Annie tells her children to bewitch not their own music, but that of another group, presumably the enemies whom they will fight. This strategy is, in effect, one that Brooks carries out in writing the poem. She bewitches the sonnet, a form associated with European love poetry, to exhort black people, extending the advice that Annie is giving her children to all African Americans. The poem calls for action, but it does not exclude the possibility of art being a part of that action. Rather, artists must also "[c]arry hate / In front [. . .] and harmony behind," placing politics before aesthetics in their work. The work can still be beautiful—carrying harmony behind implies using it as reinforcement rather than ignoring it altogether—but it must first and foremost be a weapon for the struggle. If her children follow this advice, Annie muses in sonnet "5," then they may see "[s]omething to recognize and read as rightness" (8) when they die. A life of faith and standing up for themselves will prepare them to "[a]ccept the university of death" (14).

In turning from the sonnet sequence to the rest of the poems in "The Womanhood," Brooks herself begins to leave harmony behind as she moves from the

tightly wrought forms of the "Anniad" stanza and the sonnet toward less ornate forms. The remaining poems in the section include two sonnets, a ballad, several poems of rhyming quatrains, and a tercet, but the majority of the poems are free verse. The expanding of the form from the tight sonnet to more open forms is accompanied by a widening focus; the poems move from Annie and her nuclear family to encompass the community around them as well. In poem "II," Annie compares her desire for the "joy of undeep and unabiding things" (4) with that of her son. The difference between them is that he has "never been afraid to reach" (16); though "[h]is lesions are legion" (17), "reaching is his rule" (18). Annie's emotional lesions have taught her to fear, but she must learn to reach anyway, and she does; her son's fearless reaching, meanwhile, demonstrates generational progress.

Significantly, Annie's sight reaches out to her community as she narrates poems similar to those Brooks wrote five years earlier in *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945). The poems "the ballad of the light-eyed little girl" and "the rites for Cousin Vit" focus on individual characters in the community, like many of the "Bronzeville" portraits, and they echo themes from that volume.[41] In the ballad, Sweet Sally buries the pet pigeon she had unintentionally starved to death, just as "Brucie" innocently burns his baby brother to death in "the murder." The poems share the theme of innocent cruelty and simple forms that belie their complexity. Beyond the dark humor of a ballad commemorating the burial of a dead pigeon, Brooks's "ballad" about the "light-eyed" and "villainous" (17) little girl and her "passive" (21) and "poor" pigeon allegorically depicts a world in which the powerful "innocently" kill the poor through neglect. Similarly, "rites for Cousin Vit,"

which resembles many of the character poems in *Bronzeville*, is more than a portrait of a colorful and vivacious woman. The poem celebrates the fact that her casket "can't hold her" (2) because she is "too much. Too much" (5). Cousin Vit "rises in the sunshine" (6) to return to her former haunts; she "does the snake-hips" (10), "slops the bad wine" (11), "comes haply on the verge / Of happiness" (12-13) again. She "is" (14). The one-word final sentence of the poem, like the final "Now" from poem "2" of the "Appendix," embodies the spirit of the new young black, the tall-walker who is indomitable even in death. Cousin Vit's irrepressible spirit and ability to celebrate life even with bad wine are held up as heroic, even superhuman, virtues.

Annie's poetic gaze extends beyond the individuals in her community to observe its interactions with the white majority outside. "I love those little booths at Benvenuti's" describes the disappointment of a group of white people who visit a restaurant in Annie's community to observe "dusky folk, so clamorous! / So colorfully incorrect, / So amorous, / So flatly brave!" (3-6). Their evening of entertainment is spoiled when the "colored people will not 'clown'" (44) but instead act no differently from the whites at dinner. In "Beverly Hills, Chicago," a group of black people goes on a similar sightseeing excursion to a white neighborhood. They drive by the "golden gardens" (3) and observe that "the leaves fall down in lovelier patterns" (7) than in their neighborhood. Such economic differences will not even be corrected by the equality of death because the well-off whites make such "excellent corpses, among the expensive flowers" (20). Annie's condemnation of this injustice is intensified by its understatement; she claims nobody is "furious" (21) or "hates" (23) the white people; rather, "it is only natural" (25) to notice

the economic differences and to think she and her neighbors "have not enough" (30). The repetition of the ironic "it is only natural" drives home the fact that the reaction she claims to have is not as natural as hate and anger might be as well as the fact that it is not natural for such differences to exist—institutional racism creates and maintains the economic and physical separation between black and white neighborhoods.

Having experienced racism and sexism and having perceived the extent of these social ills, Annie turns to the question of how to find a remedy. She identifies the need for a prophet and a leader in poem "XI": "One wants a Teller in a time like this" (1). The Teller would give advice and hope to people who "cannot walk [the] winding street with pride" (4) because injustice has rendered them "not certain if or why or how" (8). While Annie knows that such a figure is necessary, she is slightly skeptical about the advice the Teller might give:

> *Put on your rubbers and you won't catch cold.*
>
> *Here's hell, there's heaven. Go to Sunday School.*
>
> *Be patient, time brings all good things*—(and cool
>
> Strong balm to calm the burning at the brain?)—
>
> *Behold,*
>
> *Love's true, and triumphs, and God's actual.* (10-15)

The advice echoes Annie's desire for religious fate, but the Teller's simple, practical advice is suspiciously reminiscent of her mother's bad advice. Annie has already tried passively waiting for "all good things" and had disastrous results. One has to endure injustice and the "burning at the brain" that it causes while waiting for a solution that

might not come. Further, when people passively wait for improvement, they tend to "protest in sprawling lightless ways," as Annie observes in poem "XIV." As they suffer at the hands of "their deceivers," the oppressed tend to react in ineffectual ways; they

> Conceive their furies, and abort them early;
>
> Are hurt, and shout, weep without form, are surly;
>
> Or laugh, but save their censures and their damns.
>
> [. . . . .]
>
> You hear many crying up to Any one—
>
> "Be my reviver; be my influence,
>
> My reinstated stimulus, my loyal.
>
> Enable me to give my golds goldly.
>
> To win." (2, 3-5, 7-11)

The people Annie describes are angry, but they do not use their anger for any constructive purpose. They merely express it (or not) and then forget about it. Rather than working to correct injustice themselves, they call upon "Any one" else to do it for them. They are even willing to "follow many a cloven foot" (16) who they think might assist them (but instead lead them to perdition) rather than seeking their own way. This tendency illustrates the need for a Teller that Annie has previously observed; people need an "influence" and a "stimulus," but that leader must encourage them toward action and self-reliance.

In poem "XV," Annie takes that role upon herself and, in doing so, fulfills her epic quest. She takes action by addressing her oppressors herself and asking for equality:

Men of careful turns, haters of forks in the road,

The strain at the eye, that puzzlement, that awe—

Grant me that I am human, that I hurt,

That I can cry.

Not that I now ask alms, in shame gone hollow,

Nor cringe outside the loud and sumptuous gate.

Admit me to our mutual estate. (1-7)

Annie goes further than merely making a "plea for integration" (Melhem 78) and "appealing to whites to help" (*RPO* 175).[42] Her request is not a "sprawling, lightless" protest but a confident command. The fact that she is making it, as well as her use of the imperative rather than the interrogative, signal a newly found agency—she is not passively waiting for change or asking someone to make it for her but trying to bring it about herself. She makes it plain that she does not "ask alms." Rather, she wants access to something that has been wrongfully denied to her—the "estate" is "mutual," and her use of "our" signals that she is laying claim to it even as she asks to be admitted. Brooks uses "admit" as a pun here—Annie is asking the (white) men both to grant her entrance into the estate and to "admit" that the estate is mutual. If Annie were merely pleading for integration, she would hardly have enough leverage to tell the men to "admit" her equality. Moreover, Annie seeks more than simply racial equality; she also combats the sexism that she has experienced and demands that men acknowledge her heroism. The "men of careful turns" whom she addresses are not only white men but men of any color

who would exclude her. These men include the "higher gods" and "lower gods" of "The Anniad" who could not recognize her value; "careful turns" evokes the Homeric epithet of the careful hero Odysseus, "the man of many turns," and Annie's request to be granted not only that she can hurt and cry but also her "service at the human feast" (9) recalls the feasts in epic poetry where heroes tell of their exploits and suffering with many tears.[43] Though she is ostensibly asking for inclusion at this table, Annie expresses certainty that she will be included. She instructs the men not to "hoard silence / For the moment when I enter, tardily, / To enjoy my height among you" (10-12). Annie's "height" and her plan to enjoy it among the men signal her confidence, her heroism, and the fact that she has become a "tall-walker" at last. She does not ask the men not to fall silent *if* she enters; she tells them what to do "when" she enters, implying that she will enter anyway if the men do not "admit" her.

Though Annie has been polite, an undercurrent of potential force runs through her words. She has left the stereotypical notions of how a black woman should act behind. She tells the men that she plans

> to love [them]
>
> No more as a woman loves a drunken mate
>
> Restraining full caress and good My Dear,
>
> Even pity for the heaviness and the need—
>
> Fearing sudden fire out of the uncaring mouth,
>
> Boiling in the slack eyes, and the traditional blow.
>
> Next, the indifference formal, deep and slow. (12-18)

Annie distances herself from "caress," "pity," and "fearing," characteristics of a stereotypically timid and nurturing woman. At the same time, she transforms the men into a violent monster that breathes "sudden fire" from its mouth and has "boiling," "slack eyes." If the men are fire-breathing beasts, then Annie is the hero who will slay them—instead of waiting for a paladin to save her, she has become one and is prepared to fight if necessary.

Annie is met not by force but by rhetoric. A "gentle glider" (19) comes in and "requests [her] patience, wills [her] to be calm" (27). He argues that "prejudice is native" and "ineradicable" (30, 31). He suggests that "intelligence / Can sugar up [their] prejudice with politeness" and urges her to greet injustice with charm, patience, and good manners (36-37). His advice echoes the bad advice from Annie's mother and from the hypothetical Teller, and she has already dismissed such tactics as damaging. This time, she does not try to follow the advice or question it, as she has in the past, but turns to her people and gives her own advice. She meets rhetoric with rhetoric, condemning the glider's advice and taking on the role of Teller herself:

> The toys are all grotesque
>
> And not for lovely hands; are dangerous,
>
> Serrate in open and artful places. Rise.
>
> Let us combine. There are no magics or elves
>
> Or timely godmothers to guide us. We are lost, must
>
> Wizard a track through our own screaming weed. (47-52)

Politeness and patience are not tools or weapons but "toys," distractions that will only allow prejudice to continue; they are thus "grotesque" and "dangerous." Annie tells her fellow blacks to leave them alone—they are "not for lovely hands." Annie's assessment of her own hands and her people's as "lovely" signals an appreciation for distinctly black beauty; she is no longer the young woman of "The Anniad" who tried to straighten her hair and wear rouge to look more like white women. Her warning about the toys invites her audience also to regard their hands as lovely too. Her exhortation to her people to "rise," "combine," and "wizard a track through [their] own screaming weed" both urges them to take responsibility for ending injustice themselves and points toward the need for a distinctly black culture and literature to accomplish this task.[44] Annie has learned from experience that the "magics," "elves," and "timely godmothers" of white literature and cultural fantasy are forbidden to them and thus cannot help them. Rather than striving to live out a white fairy tale, they must invent and pursue their own fairy tales, "wizard[ing]" their own path. Annie's guidance both answers and echoes Brooks' call to black people. Annie has had to find her own path for herself and her children to get to the point where she is capable of being a Teller, and in doing so she has demonstrated the possibility of following Brooks' counsel. Moreover, Annie has done so without her husband, demonstrating that one can take political action even if her husband does not. Since Annie has already fulfilled Brooks' vision, she now has the knowledge and confidence necessary to exhort others to political action. Her epic quest is thus fulfilled—she has achieved both a Homeric home-coming, finding her place in black culture and her role as a tall-walker, and a Virgilian nation-founding, ensuring that her

children and those who heed her call will have the means to become tall-walkers like her and, in turn, raise their own children similarly.

In telling Annie's epic quest to survive the damage that racism and sexism inflict upon her and her family and to rise above these harmful influences to become a cultural hero, Brooks rehabilitates the epic tradition. Her epic critiques the misguided but widespread understanding of the tradition that glorifies war and stereotypical masculinity at the expense of society's health by revealing that individuals and families suffer when a culture's ideals are derived from bad readings. To remedy such misinterpretations, Brooks roots her epic in the classical epic tradition and foregrounds its critique of war and its inclusive definition of heroism while downplaying its aspects that have encouraged harmful interpretations. By minimizing the presence of war in the poem and focusing on its consequences, for example, Brooks echoes the classical theme, critiques the modern misunderstanding of epics as works that glorify war, and ensures that her own epic cannot be similarly misread. "The Anniad" and *Annie Allen* recover an alternative epic tradition that emphasizes the genre's ultimate celebration of peace and civilization. She joins the ancient epics in recognizing that war is often necessary to found peaceful civilizations ("First fight. Then fiddle."), adapting the militancy of the epic stories to the political struggles of black Americans, but her poetry's focus is always on the goal of the fight rather than the fight itself. Moreover, Brooks reveals that such fighting does not necessarily have to be physical and violent—Annie never resorts to acts of violence in her heroic struggle. Brooks's epic not only rehabilitates the ancient form but also

revitalizes it, pushing the formal boundaries of the genre and demonstrating that it can be a useful tool for modern political protest.

Notes

[1] George E. Kent states that Brooks translated a significant portion of Book 3 of the *Aeneid* into prose and verse in her 1934 notebook *The Scratch Book* (*A Life of Gwendolyn Brooks* 29). That these translations appear alongside her poems from this year suggests that they were not simply homework for a Latin class but, rather, a serious creative project.

[2] As is well-known to her readers, Brooks attended the Second Fisk Writers' Conference in 1967, where she was profoundly influenced by young black radical writers. Persuaded by them that traditional Anglo-European verse could not serve the revolutionary purposes of the Black Arts movement, Brooks rejected conventional forms and wrote almost entirely in free verse for the rest of her career. Karen Jackson Ford's "The Sonnets of Satin-Legs Brooks" provides a survey of the scholarship on Brooks' stylistic change.

[3] Some poems that focus on or give extended treatment to the heroes of the Black Power movement include "Riders to the Blood-Red Wrath" from Brooks's *Selected Poems*, and "Medgar Evers," "Malcolm X," and a sequence of poems titled "The Blackstone Rangers" from *In the Mecca*. Brooks has said that "[t]he Riders in 'Riders to the Blood-Red Wrath' [. . .] are the Freedom Riders, and their fellows the sit-ins, the wade-ins, the read-ins, pray-ins, vote-ins, and all related strugglers for what is reliably right" (*RPO* 187). The Freedom Riders were students of various races who protested in 1961 by riding interstate busses into pro-segregationist communities to test the Supreme Court's 1960 ruling against segregation in interstate public facilities. The Blackstone Rangers are a Chicago street gang formed during the Black Power movement that the Black Panthers tried, unsuccessfully, to turn toward political action rather than street crime. Brooks held a series of poetry workshops with some of its members during this period; *Jump Bad: a New Chicago Anthology* contains many of the poems from these workshops.

[4] The ability of her audience to have access to her poetry was a key concern for Brooks. In her 1969 interview with George Stavros, she says that black poets like herself "are interested in speaking to black people, and especially do they want to reach those people who would never go into a bookstore and buy a $4.95 volume of poetry written by anyone" (*Conversations* 39).

[5] The question of whether the *Aeneid* is Augustan propaganda is an enduring one. A case for reading Virgil's epic as propaganda can be made because it tells the story of

the founding of Rome by Aeneas, whom Augustus claimed as an ancestor, and it can be read allegorically with the fall of the Roman republic corresponding to the fall of Troy and Aeneas' war with the Rutili and defeat of Turnus corresponding to the Roman civil war and Augustus' victory. Moreover, Virgil had previously written poetry praising Augustus in the *Eclogues* and *Georgics*. Contemporary critics generally disagree with such an interpretation, but the question is by no means settled and is a frequent topic of classroom discussion for students reading the *Aeneid*.

[6] In addition to writing poems celebrating such heroes as Malcolm X and Medgar Evers, Brooks identifies and praises several poets as heroes in her interview with Stavros. She identifies Don L. Lee as a poet who does important cultural and political work, and when asked about LeRoi Jones's relationship to young black writers, she exclaims, "Oh, he is their hero! He's their semi-model, the one they worship" because "his work *works* [. . .] he speaks to black people. They appreciate that. And he's uncompromising in his belief that black people must subscribe to black solidarity and black self-consciousness" (*Conversations* 39-40). Her comment not only paints Jones as an important cultural figure but raises him to larger-than-life, epic proportions. For a study of the importance of heroism in Brooks' poetry, see Melhem's title, which tracks the theme throughout Brooks' body of work.

[7] The phrase "honest-to-goodness" is typically used to express veracity and sincerity ("I'm telling the truth—honest-to-goodness!") and thus to legitimize a claim. It can be used to establish authenticity and "appropriate" origins ("He gave me a real, honest-to-goodness diamond ring!").

[8] Betsy Erkilla, Jenny Goodman, Claudia Tate, Lesley Wheeler, and Melhem regard "The Anniad" as a mock epic while R. Baxter Miller sees it as a poem that Brooks meant to be an epic but that came out as a mock epic. Those who read "In the Mecca" as an epic poem include Miller, Goodman, and Erkilla. Miller regards the quest of Mrs. Sallie Smith to find her daughter Pepita as epic in nature, connecting her search through the labyrinthine Mecca building with Odysseus' and Aeneas' quests in the underworld, while Erkilla regards the poem as "a black blues epic of the urban ghetto"; she also points toward a quest theme, reading Mrs. Sallie's search for her daughter as a "blacken[ed]" version of the Demeter and Persephone myth (214). Melhem does not call the poem an epic, but she comments on its "heroic style" and calls Mrs. Sallie's search a "frantic pilgrimage," details that are consonant with the genre (157-58, 159).

[9] Lesley Wheeler's book provides a thorough account of Brooks' change from a lyrical to a hortatory mode. I borrow the concept "domestic heroism" from Valerie Frazier's essay "Domestic Epic Warfare in *Maud Martha*." Her argument about the epic nature of Maud Martha's struggle to maintain her home, family, and sense of self in the racist world around her can, I think, be extended to Annie Allen, who faces a similar struggle.

[10] One of the themes of the *Iliad* is the consequences of not behaving properly. The war is caused by a breach in social etiquette (Paris' abduction of Helen) and made longer and more devastating by impropriety on the battlefield. For example, Achilles withdraws from the war, causing great losses for the Greeks, because Agamemnon broke decorum by stealing Briseis, his spoils from a previous battle. When the Greeks and Trojans agree to settle the war by having their champions fight to the death, Paris' ignoble flight from the battlefield brings on a fierce battle with heavy losses for both sides. Achilles commits a great impropriety by abusing Hector's body rather than allowing the Trojans to recover it, but he repents when visited by Hector's aged father, Priam.

[11] Hector returns from battle briefly to see Andromache, and she shares with him her certainty that he will die in battle. He agrees and describes, at some length, the terrible fate that awaits her. He then bids her to go back inside and resume her "woman's work" while he returns to battle. She does so without argument, but once he has left, she and the servants lament him as if he were already dead. Andromache's obedient loyalty was famous in the classical world, and this scene (*Iliad* 6.461-600) was widely depicted in both Greek and Roman art. Several Roman authors even embellished Andromache's obedience by depicting her as encouraging Hector to go to the battle that will kill him. Ovid, for example, depicts her as putting Hector's helmet on his head herself (*Amores* 1.9.36).

[12] For a general overview of the Black Arts movement and its ramifications for women and women writers, see Karen Jackson Ford's chapter on the Black Arts Movement, which includes detailed discussions of the effects of its misogyny on the work of Sanchez, Rodgers, and other black women poets, or the second chapter of Michelle Wallace's book. Erkilla's chapter on Brooks offers a detailed account of how the movement's restrictive gender roles affected Brooks specifically.

[13] LeRoi Jones' "Black Art" is typical of the poetry that portrays women as the necessary recipients of black men's sexual violence. He calls for "Fuck poems" (5) that "shoot / come at you" (6-7), "Black poems to / smear on girdlemamma mulatto bitches" (15-16), transforming his poem into a phallus capable of politically motivated rape. (See note 13 for more on the Black Power movement's conception of rape as a political act.) For poetry celebrating women as (and only as) mothers, see Larry Neal's "For Our Women" and Roland Snellings's "Earth." Ford has analyzed these three poems and their reflection of the Black Power movement's gender dynamic in more depth than I am able to here.

[14] Cleaver specifically claims that raping white women is an act of vengeance for white men's treatment of black women, presumably a reference to rape. Yet he himself has just admitted to raping black women—as practice, "to refine [his] technique and *modus operandi*" (14). That Cleaver could view black women as "target practice" to prepare himself for the "real thing," raping white women as a political protest, illustrates

the point that the radical black movement did not extend its revolutionary thinking to gender.

[15] The phrase "up against the wall, motherfuckers" is from a poem by Jones. It became a popular protest phrase in the late 60s, beginning when it was scrawled on the mathematics building at Columbia University in 1968. A radical group in New York also adopted the phrase as their own name during this period, and they carried out a number of protests, demonstrations, and publicity stunts under this name throughout 1968-69.

[16] Erkilla, Tate, and Wheeler also make this argument. See their essays for a detailed analysis of how the Black Arts critics overlooked and underestimated Brooks's early work (especially *Annie Allen*).

[17] See note 5 for the critics who read "The Anniad" as a mock epic. For an alternative reading, see Ann Folwell Stanford's essay "An Epic with a Difference: Sexual Politics in Gwendolyn Brooks's 'The Anniad.'" Stanford is the only critic who reads "The Anniad" and *Annie Allen* as serious epics.

[18] The fact that the early working title for the poem was "The Hesteriad" signals that Brooks's thinking process in naming the poem was not as simplistic as she makes it out to be. "The Hesteriad" alludes to Hester Prynne from Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, a single mother who is ostricized by her community (like Annie), and to Hestia, the Greek goddess of the hearth and home. The name also sounds like *hyster*, the Greek word for "womb." Brooks' early title, with is multiple feminine allusions, would have fit her poem well, as Annie is a type of marginalized domestic goddess intended to represent all women. The change to "The Anniad" not only gives Annie a more common, diminutive name (which is in keeping with her character) but strengthens the epic overtones of the work by alluding aurally to Virgil's *Aeneid.*

[19] Penelope's struggle is in keeping with the "domestic heroism" that Frazier discusses in her essay on *Maud Martha*. Andromache faces a similar, though less extreme, plight in the *Iliad* as she tries to keep her household running even though she knows that Troy will soon be captured. Andromache's name, which means "a man's battle," describes the heroic nature of her actions—her battle is just as difficult as the physical battle her husband fights—and presents the possibility that Homer's ancient audience may have acknowledged her as a domestic warrior, so to speak.

[20] All translations for this chapter are my own. The English phrase "woman warrior" does not fully capture the meaning of the Latin word *bellatrix*. The word means "one who wages war" and has a feminine ending to indicate the warrior's gender (the masculine counterpart is *bellator*.) The word is similar to the English word "actress," which we use instead of "woman actor." That a word meaning "woman warrior" exists in Latin implies that Romans did not consider war (whether literal or figurative) to be an exclusively masculine activity. Another Latin word that does not translate well in this

passage is *concurrere*, which I have rendered as "to run together with." The original word means more than "to run"; the *con-* prefix stresses that Penthesilea is running as part of a group and thus emphasizes that she is equal in ability to the men around her. The somewhat awkward "together" is intended to convey this dimension of the word.

[21] Though the *Aithiopis* has not survived, a summary of it and the other works in the Epic Cycle (a group of six epics that are thought to be based on Homer's works) exists. Proclus' *Chrestomathy*, which Photius summarizes, describes the *Aithiopis* as beginning immediately after Hector's funeral, and the plots of the two works are thought to fit together seamlessly. After the funeral, Penthesilea joins the Trojans and dies in battle at the hand of Achilles. That Penthesilea enters the story as Hector leaves implies that, as his replacement, she is similar to the famous Trojan in both ability and renown. Achilles is taunted at the Amazon's funeral by Thersites, who accuses Achilles of being in love with her. Achilles murders Thersites, and the aftermath of this act occupies much of the poem. Though Penthesilea dies early in the poem, she is nevertheless a central character because many of the poem's events stem from her death.

[22] The *Troades* (which means "Trojan Women") tells the story of the fate of the Trojan wives after the fall of Troy. Seneca's tragedy, reflecting his Stoic values, depicts them as noble and brave as they wait to see to whom they will be given as spoils.

[23] Indeed, shortly before Aeneas meets Dido, Virgil refers to her as *dux* ("leader"), a traditionally masculine title (1.364).

[24] Dido has committed such an offense by getting involved with Aeneas. She had previously vowed, after her husband's death, never to engage in another romance. Though Venus' deceit and Virgil's sympathetic description mitigate Dido's offense, they do not necessarily absolve her. Her suicide, however, serves as atonement—Dido is reunited with her husband in the underworld. Other instances of suicides that the Romans regarded as honorable include the deaths of Marc Antony, Brutus, Cassius, Cleopatra, the German women captured after the battle of Aquae Sextiae, and Lucretia, a legendary Republican woman who stabbed herself after being raped because she could not bear to live an "unclean" life.

[25] "Tears of things" is a literal translation of the famous phrase "*sunt lacrimae rerum*." The renowned pathos of this particular line lies in its simplicity and in the all-encompassing word "things." Because the tone and starkness of the Latin are crucial for conveying Aeneas' disillusionment, I have opted for the literal translation, hoping to suggest these ultimately untranslatable qualities. Translated purely for sense, the phrase could be rendered "there is sorrow in life."

[26] This scene does not take place in the *Iliad*, but it is supposed to have been in the *Aithiopis* and also appears in the works of several Roman elegists.

[27] The gruesome fate of having one's body eaten by birds and dogs would have been especially horrifying to Greek audiences, for whom burial rites were extremely important. As I I have discussed in my chapter on H.D., a warrior could not fully attain immortal glory without proper burial; while his deeds might be remembered, his memory would be tarnished by the lack of funeral rites. Moreover, an unburied soldier could not enter the underworld. When Odysseus visits Hades, he meets one of his crewmen whose body lies unburied at its threshold; the man begs Odysseus to return and bury his body so that he can enter Hades. The idea of a soldier's body being eaten, then, would not only be ignoble but have permanent consequences for the man's afterlife—a body that has been consumed cannot be properly buried.

[28] Gregory Nagy makes this argument. See his chapter "The Shield of Achilles: The Ends of the *Iliad* and the Beginnings of the Polis" for a detailed analysis of how the warrior's shield foreshadows the peaceful civilization to come.

[29] "Man of many turns" is the literal translation of the Homeric epithet *polytropos*. The word suggests not only Odysseus' wily personality but also the "turn" that his heroic behavior takes over the course of the poem.

[30] Odysseus chose to sail past Scylla, knowing that he would lose the six men. Circe tells Odysseus that he can either sail past the Wandering Rocks, where either all of them will perish or all will survive, or past Scylla and Charybdis. Circe warns Odysseus that Scylla will eat six men but will only eat six provided he does not attack her; Odysseus plans to attack anyway but fortunately misses his opportunity and can only grasp his weapons and cry out as his men are eaten.

[31] Not only does Odysseus choose mortality and domesticity over literal immortal glory in the poem, but according to tradition, this was also his desire when he was recruited for the Trojan War. When the Greeks came to enlist Odysseus, he pretended to be mad in order to avoid going by yoking a horse and an ox together and plowing his land in a frenzy. Palamedes exposed the ruse by placing Telemachos in the path of the plow. When Odysseus swerved to avoid hitting his son, he revealed his sanity and was obliged to join Agamemnon and Menelaos.

[32] In Book 4 of the *Aeneid*, Venus sends a large thunderstorm while Dido and Aeneas are out hunting together. When they take shelter in a cave, the goddess deceives Dido into believing that a wedding ceremony takes place, and she consummates her supposed marriage to Aeneas. He later insists that no marriage took place, though Virgil's use of wedding imagery during the cave scene leaves room to doubt his claims, as I have discussed in my introduction.

[33] Dido's Homeric epithet, *infelix*, explicitly connects her downfall and her lack of children. The word means both "unlucky" or "ill-fated" and "not bearing fruit."

[34] Achilles explicitly states that he withdraws from the war because Agamemnon steals Briseis, and the majority of readers do not question this fact. Robert Fagles and Bernard Knox provide a representative example of readings that regard Dido and the sorceresses of the *Odyssey* as impediments; in discussing Virgil's borrowings from the *Odyssey*, they argue that "Dido portrays the temptresses in the *Odyssey*, Circe and Calypso, who impede the hero's progress" (392). However, many contemporary classical scholars now recognize that Dido does not do so deliberately; she merely "fulfill[s] Venus' desire to impede Juno's plans" (Smith 31).

[35] "The Anniad" recalls *The Faerie Queene* not only thematically, in the resemblance of Annie's fantasy to the plot of Book I of Spencer's epic, but also formally. "The Anniad" stanza, like the Spencerian, is roughly iambic and elaborate in its rhyme scene. Though the rhyme scheme of Brooks' poem varies considerably from stanza to stanza, it frequently begins similarly to the Spencerian *ababbcbcc*. (For example, the *ababbcc* pattern of lines 148-54, which mirrors the Spencerian for its first six lines, occurs frequently throughout "The Anniad.") The diction of both poems is also similarly ornate and lyrical. At the same time, Brooks' stanza formally registers her critique of the romance genre. The first foot of her iambic line is frequently acephalic, yielding a forceful, often jarring beginning that undercuts the lyric softness and fluidity of the poem.

[36] The dramatic increase of single-parent black families was a pressing issue during the post-war period. Daniel P. Moynihan's 1965 policy planning manual and Department of Labor research report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, asserts that the traditional matriarchal structure of black families causes divorce and prevents men from succeeding economically. Wallace argues that this report, and the ensuing debate, intensified tensions between black men and women and thus facilitated the misogyny of the Black Revolution. As Goodman notes, the epic was used to validate yet another rationale for men's desertion of their families: black male intellectuals cited men's stereotypical, Odyssean inclination to wander and pursue adventures as a reason why so many black men abandoned their families. Brooks herself engaged in this debate, publishing an essay that reversed the gender roles of the debate by examining why black women leave their husbands. See Goodman's essay for a detailed discussion of this debate and its epic roots as well as an analysis of *Annie Allen* as a response to male critics' arguments.

[37] The three poems of the "Appendix" work toward the sonnet, as Melhem has noted (69). While the first poem's irregular rhymes and stanza breaks suggest Annie's uncertainty and experimentation as she tries out her voice, its thirteen lines and slant-rhymed closing couplet nevertheless suggest the sonnet. The second poem roughly approximates the octave of a Shakespearian sonnet with its *a b a/ b/ b/ a/ b/ c b/* rhyme scheme ("/" representing the slant rhymes) and romantic subject, but the poem is formally more suggestive of the Spencerian, which also has nine lines, or the "Anniad" stanza, which similarly employs slant rhymes in an elaborate rhyme scheme. The final poem of the "Appendix," the "sonnet ballad," is a variation of the Shakespearian sonnet and thus

attains the form suggested by the previous poems. The gradual formal tightening evident in the progression of the "Appendix" poems registers Annie's growing confidence and skill as she practices speaking for herself.

[38] Melhem also observes the democratic character of Brooks' conception of heroism. In her analysis of "the preacher: ruminates behind the sermon," she remarks that by "questioning the idea 'of being great / In solitude,' the poet indirectly invokes her own concept of greatness and the heroic idea. A leader must be close to his followers [. . .]. Her view on leadership is democratic, not authoritarian" (28).

[39] Brooks had previously written a sonnet protesting war and racism, as Melhem also observes (73).

[40] A number of critics read the poem as a simple declaration of the need for political action before art; see: Gary Smith (173), Melhem (*Gwendolyn Brooks* 72); Erkkila (205); and Joanne V. Gabbin (256). Leslie Wheeler reads the poem similarly but recognizes that Brooks herself did not fight before fiddling. Marcellus Blount, on the other hand, argues that the poem "highlights the continuity between writing poetry and political activism" (238). Likewise, Gladys Margaret Williams shows that the form of the poem resists its imperative by conflating the acts of fighting and fiddling (234); Ford's formal analysis in "The Sonnets of Satin-Legs Brooks" makes a similar argument (358-61).

[41]Melhem also observes the formal and thematic similarities between "The Womanhood" and *A Street in Bronzeville* in several of her analyses of individual poems.

[42] Melhem reads poem "XV" as an integrationist piece that urges whites to help make a just world. She cites Brooks's later, post-Black Power conversion, assessment of the poetry ("appealing to whites to help us") as support for her reading.

[43] Epic feasts are frequently filled with tears. Odysseus weeps at lavish banquets while hearing or telling his adventures on three separate occasions during his stay with the Phaiakians. Menelaos and his audience also weep as he tells Telemachos about his return from Troy. Virgil, drawing upon these scenes, presents a similarly tear-filled feast when Aeneas tells Dido about his adventures.

[44] Erkilla makes a similar point:

> Like the personal and social transformation she imagines for her black heroine in *Annie Allen*, the transformation Brooks imagines for the black community will not come from outside—from the old magics and myths of white hegemony—but from within black people themselves as they "wizard" their own black track through the "screaming weed" of the present and future. (206)

Erkilla also connects Annie the Teller with the prophetic, militant female voice in Brooks' later work. The formal transformation of the poems Annie speaks, from sonnets

at the beginning of "The Womanhood" to free verse at the end, also anticipates Brooks' own poetic transformation. See Cheryl Clarke's essay for an analysis of Brooks' "loss of lyric" in *In the Mecca.*

CHAPTER IV

LOUISE GLÜCK'S *MEADOWLANDS*: EPIC AS TRAGIC OPERA

Louise Glück's poem "Parable of the Dove," from her 1996 collection *Meadowlands*, ends with a lesson that her speaker claims to be "true after all, not merely / a rule of art" (29-30): "change your form and you change your nature" (31). The poem describes a dove who, longing to experience "the violence of human feeling / in part for its song's sake" (13-14), transforms into a human and finds that its song "sour[s] and flatten[s]" (23). The speaker's interpretation of these events not only serves as the moral to the parable but also describes Glück's strategy in *Meadowlands*, which changes the form of the *Odyssey* in order to resist the sexist ideology underlying conventional interpretations of the epic. The volume also marks a point in Glück's career when she was changing her own poetic forms and thus the nature of her work: these poems tend to be longer and have a greater number of speakers than in her earlier work, and the book marks the first time that Glück overtly relies on Greek mythology to shape the narrative of a volume.[1] Her invocation of the epic, a lengthy form with public aspirations, in *Meadowlands* is also striking given her reputation as a poet of spare autobiographical lyrics.

Glück has been characterized, perhaps even caricatured, by critics as a private, austere, and reticent poet. Helen Vendler comments on the "obliquity and reserve" of

Glück's "cryptic narratives," which she describes as "independent structures, populated by nameless and often ghostly forms" (311). Joanne Feit Diehl also uses terms like "reserve" and "austere" in her "Introduction" to *On Louise Glück*:

> [she] writes poems that bear witness to intimate occasions—subtle psychological moments captured by the austerity of her diction [. . .]. [H]er poems embody an apolitical form of testimony that enables Glück to articulate feeling with an impassioned reserve. (1)

Many other critics have also discussed Glück's stark verse and the detachment of her speakers: Frank Bidart describes her poetry as having an " air of astringency" (23), Alan Williamson remarks on the "severe apartness" (68) of much of her work, and Stephen Burt has applied the psychological concept of depressive realism to Glück's emotional "distance from those she describes (including herself)" (74) and "denuded language" (75). Paradoxically, Glück's openness about her life may have helped to confirm and fuel such characterizations of her work. In "On the Education of the Poet," Glück exhibits a marked lack of reticence in writing about her emotional distance from her family, her experiences in psychotherapy, and her struggle with anorexia. Such information supports, if not encourages, critical essays like Burt's or like Lisa Sewell's "'In the End the One Who Has Nothing Wins': Louise Glück and the Poetics of Anorexia," which pathologizes the poetry's spare forms, diction, and rhetoric.[2]

But this characterization is more fitting of Glück's early work than of her poetic career as a whole. While her first four books of poems do, indeed, exhibit austerity, spareness of form and diction, and dispassion in treating their subjects, which frequently

are private and consonant with Glück's personal experiences, her most recent volumes shift away from autobiography and minimalism toward exploring multiple points of view and formal expansion. Glück's five most recent volumes have a narrative or thematic arc, as Burt, Linda Gregerson, and Diehl have shown, and the individual poems explore the central story or theme from a multiplicity of perspectives. As the number of speakers and characters in her poems have increased, the poems themselves have expanded as well; Glück's later work is longer and rhetorically more complex than her early writing. Her most recent collection, *Averno*, marks the first time that Glück has published a poem of more than four pages or a volume in which most of the poems are several pages long.

In keeping with "The Parable of the Dove," the nature of Glück's poetry has changed along with its form. As its descriptions of pathological human relationships have expanded, her work has emphasized that social forces, especially conventionally defined gender roles, are often at the root of such dysfunction. The detachment and dispassion that critics have noted in her work are apparent in poems like "Still Life," from her second volume, *House on the Marshland*:

> Father has his arm around Tereze.
> She squints. My thumb
> is in my mouth: my fifth autumn.
> Near the copper beech
> the spaniel dozes in shadows.
> Not one of us does not avert his eyes.

Across the lawn, in full sun, my mother

stands behind her camera. (1-8)

The poem exemplifies Glück's characteristic early style: it is brief, starkly declarative, and free of ornamentation. It is only six sentences long, and those sentences are broken up syntactically by punctuation and visually by line breaks. These frequent interruptions amplify the poem's disjointed, dispassionate tone. The speaker describes the taking of a family portrait, typically a symbol of a family's love and unity, in stark language that reflects a distinct lack of emotional ties in the family. The father does not "embrace" or even "put" his arm around Tereze but merely "has" it there. Tereze, whose relationship to the speaker and the rest of the family is pointedly unexplained, does not smile but "squints" (2), suggesting discomfort or concentration. The speaker, too, is not smiling for the camera but is sucking her thumb, a gesture of self-comforting. Most tellingly, the entire family stands with averted eyes. The poem itself maintains emotional distance by merely describing rather than interpreting the scene. Rather than exploring the feelings and motivations of the family members, or revealing what she felt as a child, the speaker tells only what happened.

A similar lack of familial ties is evident in "A Novel," from Glück's fifth volume, *Ararat*. Describing a family coping with the death of the paterfamilias, the speaker bluntly claims

No one could write a novel about this family

too many similar characters. Besides, they're all women;

there was only one hero.

Now the hero's dead. (1-4)

Ironically, of course, the speaker can write "A Novel" about the family. Her novel, however, deals not with the characters' lives and the grief they feel at the passing of the father but, rather, with the fact that the family is inadequate as an artistic subject. Since the father has died, "nothing changes: / there's no plot without a hero. In this house, when you say *plot* what you mean is *love story*" (6-8). Both "this family" and "this house" imply that the speaker is part of the family, so her sardonic criticism of the family's lack of plot and of their simple equation of "plot" with "love story" is unsettling; one would expect grief rather than blunt, clinical analysis from the bereaved. However, as the speaker continues her assessment of the family's literary potential, she betrays her emotions:

> The women can't get moving.
>
> Oh, they get dressed, they eat, they keep up appearances.
>
> But there's no action, no development of character.
>
> They're all determined to suppress
>
> criticism of the hero. The problem is
>
> he's weak; his scenes specify
>
> his function but not his nature. (9-15)

Here, unlike in "Still Life," there are hints about what the family members are feeling or thinking. They "can't get moving" because, presumably, they are grieving. They try to avoid thinking critically about their deceased father and husband. But the poem's

speaker quickly shifts from these moments back to her literary analysis; while she recognizes emotions, she does not admit their importance or their potential as plot points. Paradoxically, these silent emotions become the plot of "A Novel" despite the speaker's assertion otherwise. The poem ends with the speaker's amazement at "how they keep busy, these women, the wife and two daughters. / Setting the table, clearing the dishes away. / Each heart pierced through with a sword" (20-22). She does not transform the grief expressed in this final image into a complaint about her family's lack of plot as before, giving the women's unexpressed grief the final say in the poem. The speaker, who might well be one of the two daughters, presumably also has her heart pierced with a sword; in this light, her plot study seems more like a defense mechanism than cruelly objective analysis.

The family in the poem is dysfunctional and, like the family in "Still Life," seems to lack strong connections and the ability to communicate. In "A Novel," though, traditional gender roles clearly underlie the family's unhealthy dynamics. The women's criticism of the deceased is rooted in his failure, as a "weak hero," to be suitably masculine. Their behavior, similarly, is dictated by conventional notions of femininity: they "suppress" their criticisms and focus on "keep[ing] up appearances." The speaker of the poem tries to reject emotion in favor of dispassionate observation, which challenges the stereotypically feminine behavior of her family; however, her attempt fails because it suppresses her criticism of her father as effectively as her mother's and sister's determination to maintain their domestic routine does theirs. The poem thus

demonstrates that gender norms cause emotional impairment regardless of whether one adheres to them.

Averno, Glück's most recent volume, looks at family relationships and the social dynamics that complicate them in more depth than any of her previous works. The collection is based on the myth of Demeter, Persephone, and Hades, and it explores the tensions among these characters. *Averno* also includes a number of poems that are not explicitly based on the myth but that share the theme of familial dysfunction. The poem "Prism," for example, explores the dynamics between the unnamed speaker, her sister, and her parents. At eight pages, it is one of Glück's longest poems, reflecting the formal expansion of her work as well as her increased attentiveness to the thoughts and feelings of her various characters. A notable difference between "Prism" and the early poems is that the characters speak to each other:

> When you fall in love, my sister said,
> it's like being struck by lightning.
>
> She was speaking hopefully,
> to draw the attention of the lightning.
>
> I reminded her that she was repeating exactly
> our mother's formula, which she and I
>
> had discussed in childhood, because we both felt

that what we were looking at in the adults

were the effects not of lightning

but of the electric chair. (17-26)

Unlike "Still Life" and "A Novel," "Prism" depicts the interworkings of familial relationships and demonstrates that, though they are often impairing, they can also provide emotional support. While their parents' marriage may have been damaging, not only for the parents but also for their children, the two sisters are able to help each other cope with that trauma. Their interpretation of their parents' marriage, which they "had discussed in childhood," is the result of conversation, and it is these early conversations that enable the speaker to advise her sister against following their mother's bad example.

"Prism" not only illustrates Glück's increasingly generous depiction of families but also demonstrates that her writing itself has become more generous. Whereas "Still Life" describes a family with only eight lines of minimalist verse that imply, rather than discuss, its uneasy relationships, "Prism" devotes eight pages to a nuanced exploration of a similar subject. The individual sections of the poem retain Glück's characteristic minimalism in their plainspoken, unornamented language, but the poem as a whole presents a complex exploration of how the speaker's troubled relationship with her mother has impaired her own romantic connections:

5.

Riddle:

Why was my mother happy?

Answer: She married my father.

6.

"You girls," my mother said, "should marry

someone like your father."

That was one remark. Another was,

"There is no one like your father." (27-34)

Romantic love is a "riddle" to the speaker in general; she can acknowledge that her mother was happy because she was married to her father, but the relationship nevertheless strikes her as being like "the electric chair." She conceives of her own relationships as homework for a writing class: "the assignment was to fall in love" (93, 110). Love, to the speaker, is an obligation, an empty form that must be filled:

The author was female.

The ego had to be called the soul.

The action took place in the body.

[. . . . .]

The mind was a subplot. It went nattering on. (111-13, 117)

Even as she tries to fill the form, however, it remains empty because she does not relate to the content; it is a mere checklist that "natter[s] on." The speaker's pathological conception of love as a mere form is a consequence of both the formulaic equation of

marriage with happiness that she learned from her mother and the impossible ideal that instilled in her—to replicate her mother's happiness, she must marry a man "like [her] father," but "there is no one like [her] father."

Glück's more expansive form also includes the speaker's suspicion of her mother's directions. The sarcastic tone with which she recounts the advice ("that was one remark") suggests that she has doubts about its wisdom. Later in the poem, Glück makes this doubt explicit:

> The implication was, it was necessary to abandon
>
> childhood. The word "marry" was a signal.
>
> [.....................................]
>
> The word was a code, mysterious, like the Rosetta stone.
>
> It was also a roadsign, a warning.
>
> You could take a few things with you like a dowry.
>
> You could take the part of you that thought.
>
> "Marry" meant you should keep that part quiet. (43-44, 48-52)

While this passage expresses the speaker's pessimistic view of marriage and provides insight into why she might be suspicious of her mother's marital happiness, it also expands the scope of the poem beyond her private experience. The word "dowry" refers to a common, and sexist, marriage custom—the bride brings a dowry from her father to her husband, reflecting her social worth and her status as a commodity to be traded by men. In addition, the speaker's belief that she must silence "the part of you that thought" recalls the sterotypically silent, obedient wife. Glück thus extends the speaker's personal

apprehensions about relationships to a criticism of the traditional gender roles in marriage.

As "Prism" illustrates, the development of Glück's poetry has been expansive in several ways—her forms have grown longer and more elaborate, her depictions of relationships have become more generous, and her scope has widened from a focus on intimate, psychological exploration to include social critique. While critics have noted these changes in Glück's work, their reception of the later work has been lukewarm, and their remarks have not given attention to the political aspect of her most recent poems, in which the suffering of her speakers serves as a metaphor for the damage that traditional gender roles inflict on individuals. Burt, for example, offers a critique of *Meadowlands* that is entirely aesthetic, claiming that her "best new poems [. . .] sound like her best old ones, with the same astringent perceptiveness" (78). Paul Breslin, who analyzes at some length Glück's treatment of gender in her early work, barely touches on this aspect of *Meadowlands*, tending instead toward aesthetic appraisal. And his aesthetic judgment of the collection, like Burt's, expresses disappointment. While he appreciates the "playfulness, even wit" of the work, he finds it "like what other poets have done, and sometimes done better" (104). Moreover, his "reservation" that "where one hopes to find the myth reinterpreting a private experience," or vice versa, "one finds instead the private experience flattened or moralized by the received meanings of the myth" overlooks the collection's more public aspirations: the juxtaposition of the myth and the modern marriage does not simply interpret private experience; it also illustrates the endurance and consequences of conventional gender roles. Burt and Breslin, representing the trend in

criticism of Glück's most recent work, judge *Meadowlands* by criteria that are more appropriate to her earliest volumes, emphasizing stylistic stringency and representation of private life. Their criticism thus maintains the image of the poet as austere and apolitical despite the relatively expansive forms and sociopolitical themes of her recent work.[3] Glück's commentaries on her poetry, moreover, frequently emphasize the ideas of change and development and thus call attention to the shift in her work.

Glück's remarks about poetry in "The Restorative Power of Art" hint at the social dimension to her work. In this essay, she identifies the restorative power of poetry as its ability to act as "a revenge for loss" (191). To achieve this end, poetry does not have to construct a narrative of loss and recovery; in fact, doing so can prove to be a hindrance:

> We live in a culture almost fascistic in its enforcement of optimism. Great shame attaches to the idea and spectacle of ordeal: the incentive to suppress or deny or truncate ordeal is manifested in two extremes—the cult of perfect health [. . .] and, at the other end, what could be called a pornography of scars, the seemingly endless flood of memoirs and poems and novels rooted in the assumption that the exhibition of suffering must make authentic and potent art. [. . .] Trauma and loss are not, in themselves, art: they are like half a metaphor. In fact, the kind of work I mean—however true its personal source—is tainted by a kind of preemptive avidity. It seems too ready to inhabit the most dramatic extremes; too ready to deny loss as continuity, as immutable fact. It proposes instead a narrative of personal triumph, a narrative filled with markers like "growth" and "healing" and "self-realization" and culminating in the soul's unqualified or comprehensive

> declaration of wholeness, as though loss were merely a catalyst for self-improvement. (190)

Such poetry fails to be "revenge for loss" because it is overly concerned with recounting the loss itself and describing the process by which the subject "heal[ed]" and "grew" from the loss. Revenge requires a distinct motive—a payback specific to the injury done; merely describing the injury in the "most dramatic" way is too vague and artless an action to constitute revenge. The works Glück describes here provide only "half a metaphor" because they are focused solely on the experience itself. The verse to which Glück refers provides only a tenor; because there is no vehicle to extend or transform the subject's literal suffering, there is no metaphor.

Ironically, critics of Glück's early work have tended to read it as "a pornography of scars" by focusing squarely on the experiences of her speakers and reading them as stories about her own "trauma and loss." The lack of narrative in the early poems is conducive to such readings. Since poems like "Still Life" do not provide the story behind a family's dysfunction, it is all too easy (and perhaps tempting, given that Glück is vocal about her troubled family history) to fabricate a narrative based on the poet's personal experience. In Glück's more recent work, on the other hand, the expansive forms reveal the injuries that have been done to the speaker. In "Prism," for example, it is clear that the speaker's emotional impairment is a consequence of the ideas about marriage she has inherited from her mother. By not only providing this narrative but also exploring the causes and effects of her mother's indoctrination, the speaker is able to seek revenge by exposing and condemning the traditionally restrictive gender roles that are entailed by

marriage. The social critique transforms the speaker's suffering into a figure for the emotional damage that sexism inflicts on women; the work thus gains the "restorative power" that Glück envisions.

While *The Triumph of Achilles*, *Ararat*, and *The Wild Iris* foreshadow the shift in Glück's work, *Meadowlands* is the volume in which the transformation actually occurs. It is her first volume to feature not only expanded poetic forms but also multiple speakers and an extended treatment of mythological subjects. Each of these strategies emphasizes the element of social critique in Glück's work by extending the individual losses suffered by her female speakers into metaphors for the injuries that oppressive cultures inflict on women. *Meadowlands* juxtaposes poems about a failed modern marriage with poems about various characters from the *Odyssey*. By connecting the suffering of the modern wife, whose husband criticizes her for not being nurturing and sociable enough, with that of Penelope, Glück foregrounds the fact that the modern woman's problems are not simply an individual trial—the restrictive gender roles that society proscribes have endured for thousands of years, and they are as damaging to contemporary women as they were to Penelope.

The *Odyssey* is a particularly apt source for Glück because epics have traditionally been used to reinforce conventional notions of gender. As L. R. Lind has explained, the societies depicted in epic poetry are entirely dependent on women fulfilling the traditional expectations placed on them: men cannot leave home to fight battles for years at a time unless their wives stay at home to look after the household and raise their children—and remain chaste while doing so. If a wife does not perform these

duties properly, the man's *kléos*, his reputation, is tarnished, and any glory he has won on the battlefield is nullified. Later poets celebrate Odysseus and Penelope as paragons of masculine and feminine virtue because they seem to embody these expectations. Poems like Tennyson's *Ulysses*, for example, celebrate Odysseus' stereotypically masculine qualities: his desire and aptitude for "[roaming] with a hungry heart" (12) and "[drinking] delight of battle" (16), his "heroic [heart]" (68), and his perseverance; even in old age, he still longs "to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield" (70). Against the wonders that he has seen during his travels—"scudding drifts" (10), "ringing plains" (17), and "cities of men / And manners, climates, counsels, governments" (13-14)— life in Ithaka is unsatisfying. The "still hearth [. . .] barren crags" (2) and "aged wife" (3) are unable to nurture the hero who longs to "drink / Life to the lees" (6-7). The domestic sphere, traditionally a woman's space, is not nurturing to the masculine hero; in fact, it is practically a death sentence ("still," "barren.") Penelope, who has faithfully maintained the household during the years of his absence, is unsatisfying because she is "aged." In Ulysses' eyes, she is as barren and desiccated as the rest of Ithaka and thus presents another image of the death and decrepitude he wishes to escape. The voyage that Ulysses exhorts his men to take will entail certain death; he intends "to sail beyond the sunset [. . .] until [he dies]" (60-61), but this literal death is preferable to the figurative death of mundane domestic life in Ithaka because it conforms to the masculine ideals of heroic society. The poem thus presents the image of Ulysses, who is at least as aged as Penelope, trying to relive his youth as inspiring rather than pathetic, a discrepancy rooted in a sexist double standard.

Similarly, literature traditionally praises Penelope for her adherence to traditionally feminine qualities: her ability to take care of the household, her propriety, and her fidelity. Later classical poets frequently hold up Penelope as a paragon of feminine virtue. Aristophanes, Propertius, and Ovid, for example laud her as an exemplar of proper wifely behavior for her chastity, a characterization that has endured well into modern times.[4] This tradition depicts Penelope with unqualified praise, but it tends to value her only insofar as she enables Odysseus' heroism. Penelope's fidelity both protects and enhances the *kléos* that Odysseus wins for himself, and while it allows her to earn her own *kléos*, that reputation is entirely dependent upon her service to her husband. Dorothy Parker's poem "Penelope" pushes somewhat beyond the masculine poets' praise of Penelope's devotion to Odysseus by depicting her as a strong, praiseworthy character independent of her husband:

> In the pathway of the sun,
>
> In the footsteps of the breeze,
>
> Where the world and sky are one,
>
> He shall ride the silver seas,
>
> He shall cut the glittering wave.
>
> I shall sit at home, and rock;
>
> Rise, to heed a neighbor's knock;
>
> Brew my tea, and snip my thread;
>
> Bleach the linen for my bed.
>
> They shall call him brave. (1-10)

Parker's poem exposes the fact that the literary tradition tends to "call him brave" while saying nothing about Penelope. The poem rectifies this by giving almost equal space to Odysseus and Penelope; while six of the poem's ten lines are given over to Odysseus, only two actually describe what he is doing ("rid[ing] the silver seas" and "cut[ting] the glittering wave) while all four of the lines about Penelope detail her actions. This distribution both enacts and critiques the traditional lack of attention paid to Penelope—there is more talk of Odysseus, but Penelope does more. The poem suggests that Penelope is also worthy of being called brave through sonic variances as well. The lines describing Penelope's daily routine end with hard consonant rhymes and semi-colons and are frequently broken up by commas, whereas the lines describing Odysseus end in soft consonant rhymes and commas and are not broken in the middle by punctuation. That the description of Penelope's life is more abrupt and jarring to read than the description of Odysseus' adventures implies that her life of sipping tea, answering the door, and weaving is more difficult in some way than Odysseus' danger-fraught life. The bravery necessary to keep up the housework, socialize, and create during her husband's long absence constitutes a form of domestic heroism that merits, but rarely receives, praise. Even in Parker's revision of Penelope, though, her bravery and heroism are dependent upon her fulfillment of traditionally feminine tasks.

H.D.'s "At Ithaca" also reinforces feminine stereotypes. Like Parker, she acknowledges the difficulty of Penelope's life: her endless task of weaving and unweaving Laertes' shroud causes "weary thoughts" (16), and in her exhaustion she "wish[es] some fiery fiend / would sweep impetuously / [her] fingers from the loom" (13-

15) or that one of the suitors she "had spurned / might stoop and conquer [her] / long waiting with a kiss" (34-36). Although, H.D.'s characterization challenges the conventional depiction of Penelope as patiently enduring her chastity, her temptation is figured in negative terms: the "fiery fiend" alludes generally to Satan and enticement, and she is a lowly victim of the suitor who would "stoop" to "conquer" her. Her passivity is further emphasized as Athene "steels [her] soul," with the pun on "steals" reinforcing Penelope's victimization (41). The goddess' manipulation undercuts Penelope's assertion that "those lesser rivals flee" (50) when "matched" with Odysseus (48), thus undermining the tradition that celebrates her devotion, but H.D.'s revision ultimately reinforces stereotypical notions of women as passive and helpless. Because Penelope conforms so thoroughly to her society's expectations for women, feminist reinterpretations of her story prove complicated. While several writers, like Parker and H.D., have celebrated Penelope's bravery or depicted her suffering realistically, they have typically not managed to do so without indirectly praising her adherence to restrictive ideas of femininity.

Glück counters this reading tradition and its reinforcement of limiting constructions of gender by changing the form of Odysseus' and Penelope's story. In doing so, as in "The Parable of the Dove," the nature of the story changes along with its form. Rather than celebrating Odysseus and Penelope as masculine and feminine ideals, *Meadlowlands* exposes the consequences of the characters' conformity to stereotype. On one level, Glück follows writers like Parker and H.D. in changing the poetic form of the *Odyssey* from epic to lyric. Whereas the epic is a public form that seeks to record and

transmit cultural content, the lyric typically focuses on private experience. Because of its smaller scale and ambition, the lyric constitutes a generic demotion for the narrative: it lacks the public aspirations of epic that codify its characters' behavior, and it is regarded as a less prestigious genre in general. The lyric, as a form that focuses on personal experience, is also an apt choice for Glück because her poems explore various characters' thoughts and emotions as they meditate on their relationships with other characters from the *Odyssey*. This interiority works against the epic's valuation of action; rather than the actions, Glück depicts the emotional reactions of Homer's characters. The change of poetic genre, along with the juxtaposition of poems about an ordinary modern couple, works against the traditional idealization of Odysseus and Penelope. As in H.D.'s poem, they are depicted realistically, as flawed humans beings who experience ordinary emotions such as doubt, confusion, and insecurity, rather than as quasi-divine heroic ideals.

In "Penelope's Song," the opening poem of *Meadowlands*, Glück depicts Penelope not as a model of patient endurance but as a woman troubled by doubt and self-criticism. Knowing that her husband "will be home soon" (5), she urges her "little soul" (1) to climb a tree and "wait at the top, attentive, like / a sentry or look-out" (3-4). That Penelope must urge herself to watch for her husband, exhorting her soul to "do now as [she bids]" (2), communicates conflicting emotions about her husband's arrival. She is not eagerly anticipating his return, as would be fitting for a perfect wife. Her self instructions reveal that she is on guard, as though expecting an attack. Odysseus' return is dangerous because it poses the threat of rejection. After his adventures and affairs with

semi-divine women, she might not be good enough for him; he might view her as merely the "aged wife" of Tennyson's poem, unable to satisfy her heroic husband's "demonic appetite" (15). At the end of the poem, she adopts an almost frantic tone as she continues to encourage herself: "Ah, you must greet him, / you must shake the boughs of the tree / to get his attention" (19-21). This insecurity dampens her enthusiasm for his return, so she must coach herself into playing her traditional role:

> He will be home soon;
> it behooves you to be
> generous. You have not been completely
> perfect either; with your troublesome body
> you have done things you shouldn't
> discuss in poems. Therefore
> call out to him over the open water, over the bright water
> with your dark song, with your grasping,
> unnatural song—passionate,
> like Maria Callas. Who
> wouldn't want you? Whose most demonic appetite
> could you possibly fail to answer? (5-16)

Penelope assuages the self-doubt she feels as a result of her husband's infidelity by excusing it with self criticism—she has "not been completely / perfect either" and, like him, has "done things you shouldn't / discuss in poems" to deal with the needs of her "troublesome body." Her admonishment echoes the types of platitudes frequently offered

by self-help guides: "nobody is perfect," and one must remember this before criticizing a mate in order to maintain a tranquil marriage. Penelope continues to follow self-help advice by convincing herself of her desirability: "Who wouldn't want you? / Whose [. . .] appetite could you possibly fail to answer?" These questions would not be at all out of place in a modern self-affirmation exercise performed in front of a mirror. Glück's evocation of popular culture demotes Penelope from her traditional status as a paragon of womanly virtue or as a feminist ideal of strength—her renowned fidelity and endurance are not intrinsic traits here but products of self-help advice. Even as she follows these platitudes, though, Penelope is aware of their insufficiency. Her tone is sarcastic as she reminds herself that it "behooves" her to overlook her husband's infidelity. The archaic word draws attention to itself and underscores the fact that Penelope is merely following a prescription of what she is supposed to do as a good wife. The fact that the word she uses is antiquated also implies that the advice she will (at least pretend to) follow is similarly outdated. The anachronism of Penelope, who has been regarded as a paragon of wifely virtue for thousands of years, exposing the datedness and infeasibility of this ideal suggests that this interpretive tradition is based on a false premise.

In fact, the depiction of Penelope as an imperfect and conflicted woman rather than the epitome of feminine or feminist virtue is not Glück's invention but Homer's; the *Odyssey* provides evidence that such praise might not be fitting. As Marilyn A. Katz has noted, the epic complicates Penelope's reputation.[5] While many of the characters in the poem heap praise upon her for her "great virtue" (24.193), "noble thoughts" (24.194), "working of fine fabrics" (2.117), and fidelity (24.195), traditionally feminine traits, they

also frequently attribute her with cunning (*metis*) and speak of her renown (*kléos*).[6] Both *metis* and *kléos* are typically reserved for describing male heroes—*metis* is the faculty that Odysseus draws from when he devises the Trojan Horse strategem and when he deceives Polyphemus; these feats, in turn, win him *kléos*. Traditionally, women cannot earn *kléos*; because they are confined to the domestic sphere, they have few opportunities to do deeds that would earn them fame. When women do earn *kléos*, it is generally because they have done something evil, destroying a man who has good *kléos*. Clytemnestra, for instance, earns negative *kléos* for having an affair with Aigisthis and helping him plot to kill her husband, Agamemmnon. Helen, another Homeric woman who earns *kléos*, is similarly famed for her infidelity to Menelaos, which caused the Trojan war and destroyed many Greek and Trojan heroes.[7] Each of these women earns her negative *kléos*, in part, through *metis*: Clytemnestra plots Agammemnon's murder with Aigisthus, contriving a *dolos*, or trick, to lure him to his death; Helen, while she did not scheme with Paris to deceive her husband, exhibits duplicity at several points during the Trojan war. As we observed in chapter two, Odysseus infiltrates Troy disguised as a beggar; Helen recognizes him but agrees to stay silent, and he kills a number of Trojans. While she would seem to be loyal to the Greeks in this instance, she later almost spoils the Trojan horse plan—recognizing that the horse is filled with Greek soldiers, she calls to them seductively to thwart the ambush and almost succeeds. While *metis* allows men to achieve glory, it is an undesirable quality in women because their craftiness typically harms or destroys their husbands and tarnishes their *kléos* in turn.

Penelope's *metis*, however, is a key aspect of her renown. Like Clytemnestra and Helen, she contrives a *dólos*, but her trick helps Odysseus secure his own *kléos* rather than destroying him. By declaring that she will not marry until she finishes weaving Laertes' funeral shroud, then unweaving her work at night, Penelope forestalls the remarriage that her father and brother push her into long enough for Odysseus to return and revenge himself upon the suitors, an act that augments his reputation. While this would seem to be a noble act, and while the characters in the *Odyssey* praise Penelope accordingly, the text itself leaves room for suspicion. That Penelope exhibits *metis* and earns *kléos* aligns her with a tradition of deceitful women; she is treading dangerous ground when she resorts to scheming. As Katz observes, the language used to describe Penelope's plan "endow[s] her actions with the appearance of duplicity" (10). She is described not only as having *metis* (19.158), but also having knowledge of "contrivances" and being more "acquainted with scheming" (*kerdea*, *omoia noemata*) than any other heroine (2.118, 121-22), and her weaving and unweaving is explicitly referred to as a *dólos* ("cunning, treachery," literally "bait" for fishing) (19.137). Each of these words or phrases is ambiguous, having both positive and negative connotations. In praising Penelope, then, men like Agamemnon and Eurymachus also expose her to suspicion.

And several of the *Odyssey*'s characters express doubt about Penelope, sometimes even as they praise her. Indeed, after Eurymachus has praised Penelope's resourcefulness to Telemachus, he claims that she has "made poor use of [it]" (2.129) in delaying remarriage because "she makes great glory for herself / but a great lack of livelihood" for him (2.125-26). Penelope's *kléos* cannot be regarded in an unwaveringly positive light

because it comes at a terrible cost—her son is put in a precarious situation (the suitors later plot to kill him), and her household is being consumed since she must feed and support all the suitors while they wait for her decision. While she has little recourse—remarrying would tarnish Odysseus' reputation and leave her open to charges of betrayal—Penelope is nevertheless censured by Eurymachus for appearing to value her reputation over fulfilling her primary duty as a wife: keeping up the house and taking care of her son. Odysseus has previously given Penelope permission to remarry if he does not return from the war, and if she does not wish to remarry, she has the socially sanctified option of turning over the household to Telemachus and his guardians and returning to her father's house. Maintaining control of the household while allowing herself to be courted for an entire decade is not a proper course of action for Penelope, so criticism of her is socially justified even though she ultimately helps Odysseus.

Similarly, Agamemnon exposes Penelope to critique even as extols her virtues. He praises Penelope when he hears of her trick and Odyseus' revenge from the suitor's ghosts; after glorifiying her fidelity and comparing her favorably to his own treacherous wife, however, he claims that Clytemnestra gave "a bad name [. . .] to womankind, even the best" (24.227-28).[8] His final remark not only retracts the praise that he has just given to Penelope but also recalls the suspicion with which he has previously regarded her. When Odysseus encounters Agamemnon earlier in the poem, the ghost tells him of his murder and implies that Penelope could pose a similar threat, even as he denies that possibility:

But [Clytemnestra],

plotting such a low thing, defiled herself

and all her sex, all women yet to come,

even those few who may be virtuous.

[. . . . .]

Let it be a warning,

even for you. Never indulge a woman

and never tell her all that you know. Some things

a man may tell, some he should cover up.

Not that I see a risk for you, Odysseus,

of death at your wife's hands. She is too clever,

too clear-eyed, sees alternatives too well [. . .].

(11.501-04, 514-20)

Although Agamemnon praises Penelope, this is buttressed by condemnations of Clytemnestra that encompass *all* women, "even those few who may be virtuous." Moreover, the qualities he praises in Penelope—her cleverness and ability to "see alternatives"—are the very ones that Clytemnestra used to kill him. Odysseus heeds the advice "never tell [a woman] all that you know," not revealing his identity to Penelope until after he has killed the suitors; even then, he subjects her to a test to see if she remembers him. Odysseus, it seems, has doubts about his famous wife despite the assurances he receives from Agamemnon and, later, Athena. When he arrives at Ithaka, she assures him that despite the suitors' advances, Penelope has been "grieving for [him],

missing [his] return, / she has allowed them all to hope [. . .] though her true thoughts are fixed elsewhere" (13.476-77, 479). Odysseus' response, however, belies his suspicions:

> An end like Agamemnon's
> very likely may have been mine, a bad end,
> bleeding to death in my own hall. You prevented it,
> goddess, by telling me the state of things. (481-84)

Odysseus attributes his safety and opportunity for revenge not to Penelope's loyalty, which Athena has just emphasized, but to the advanced warning she has given him about the suitors. As Katz observes, his remarks assume Penelope's betrayal; he could not meet "an end like Agamemnon's" without having a duplicitous wife to assist with his murder, as Agamemnon had.

Even in books 18 and 19 of the *Odyssey*, when Penelope would seemingly have vindicated herself by proving her loyalty and fidelity to Odysseus, the poem continues to depict her in an ambivalent manner. Just after Odysseus arrives home, Athena compels Penelope to make an appearance before the suitors "so that she might open / their spirits all the more and might be all the more honored / before her husband and son even than she was before" (18.160-62). When Penelope makes this appearance, she inspires lust amongst the suitors, whom she censures for not bringing courtship gifts. Odysseus interprets this as a *dólos*; his "heart laughed when he heard all this, / her sweet voice charming gifts from the suitors / with talk of marriage though she intended none" (18.349-51). What Penelope actually intends, however, is unclear. Her appearance, and the effect it has on both the suitors and Odysseus, are Athena's doing. All the text

reveals of Penelope's intention is that she laughs "senselessly" when the idea comes into her head (18.163). Penelope's laugh and its implications have been a critical crux since antiquity. The laugh could indicate delight, confusion, defeat, coquettishness, sardonic humor, or a moment of simple-mindedness; depending on the nature of the laugh, Penelope could intend to deceive the suitors as Odysseus thinks, could be resigning herself to a seemingly inevitable marriage, or could be enjoying the idea of flirting with the suitors. Each of these interpretations, and more, has been proposed by critics, but even today no consensus exists.[9] Compounding the difficulty of interpreting this section is the possibility that Penelope fails to recognize her husband in book 19. In contrast, the nurse who attends him after Penelope leaves remarks almost immediately that the disguised man resembles her master and soon realizes that he is, in fact, Odysseus. It would seem, then, that Athena's plot does not reveal to Penelope her husband's proximity. If Penelope does not know that her husband is present, then her decision to hold a contest to determine which of the suitors she will marry, knowing full well that Odysseus is the only man capable of winning the contest, is puzzling. If she is, in fact, aware of his presence and plans the contest specifically for his benefit, then her seeming failure to recognize Odysseus and his decision to test her by not revealing his identity are troubling. This conundrum has inspired a tradition, relatively unknown today, that views Penelope as untrustworthy and unfaithful. Penelope's failure to recognize her husband and her duplicitous nature (established by her previous *dólos* and her capacity for *metis*) are interpreted as signs that she is sympathetic to, if not secretly aligned with, the suitors.

In fact, several classical authors, most notably Herodotus, claim that Pan, the god of the forest, is the offspring of Penelope's illicit affair with all of the suitors (2.145).

Glück's poem recalls this long-standing but little-known tradition. That Penelope, like her husband, "[has] done things you shouldn't / discuss in poems" (9-10) during her husband's absence alludes to her supposed infidelity with the suitors. Similarly, the ambivalence with which Penelope regards her husband's return in Glück's poem recalls the ambiguity in the *Odyssey* surrounding Penelope and, especially, her desires and intentions. In connecting her poem to this undercurrent in Homer, Glück not only subverts the interpretive tradition that regards Penelope as a paragon of virtue but also exposes its shortsightedness by recalling the complexity and ambivalence of Homer's characterization.

By presenting a realistic Penelope grounded in Homer's text instead of the idealized version of popular tradition, Glück's poem is able to serve as a revenge for loss. Rather than conforming to and thus confirming restrictive and harmful gender roles, Glück's Penelope challenges these forces, and her flaws are what enable her to do so. The allusion to Penelope's possible infidelity, for example, emphasizes the double standard that celebrates Odysseus' extramarital affairs while preferring women to remain chaste or, at the least, perfectly faithful. The strict gender codes of Greek society demand that women deny their sexuality; Penelope must endure over a decade of chastity, and even then her desire for her husband is considered suspect. Glück's poem alludes to and subverts this repression:

call out to him over the open water, over the bright water

with your dark song, with your grasping,

unnatural song—passionate,

like Maria Callas. (12-15)

Penelope's song, necessitated by her "troublesome body," is figured as "dark," "grasping," and "unnatural." But even as she echoes the sentiments of her restrictive culture, Penelope resists them. After a brief pause, she amends her description and describes herself as a "passionate" singer "like Maria Callas." Callas' intense, dramatic voice and unusually broad vocal range made her songs "dark," "grasping," and "unnatural" too, but those descriptors take on positive connotations in this context. By aligning her song with those sung by Callas, Penelope resists her culture's repressive conception of women's sexuality by transforming its condemnatory language into praise. In likening herself to Callas, who is most famous for her roles as tragic heroines, Penelope casts the song she sings as an aria, which invests her actions with a sense of tragedy while emphasizing that her attempts to entice her husband are a performance. In fact, her precarious situation—having to hide an illicit affair in order to avoid tragic punishment—is a common plot point in many operas, including *Norma*, which is referenced at the end of *Meadowlands*. In depicting Penelope as an operatic rather than epic heroine, Glück implies that she is a flawed figure who should not be emulated but, rather, pitied. After all, opera originated as an attempt to revive classical tragedy and follows the ancient genre's structure and themes; therefore, like tragedy, it warns against the flaws of its heroes and heroines and stimulates a cathartic response. Glück's presentation of a sexually subversive Penelope thus acknowledges the character's

renowned courage and patience and even presents them as heroic, but it does not affirm or encourage emulation of her behavior.

While Penelope's infidelity might emphasize that women, despite what society demands, are sexual beings, the fact remains that doing "things [she] shouldn't" would have serious consequences. The men in Homer's poem, including her husband, regard Penelope as a potential threat on account of her *metis*; although she remains loyal to Odysseus, the unresolved question of her intentions prior to their reunion nevertheless casts suspicion on her character. Glück's poem suggests that Penelope's intention is self-preservation. If she has been unfaithful, her husband's return would ruin her. At the very least, she would earn bad *kléos* and thus join the ranks of women like Clytemnestra and Helen, who are reviled for their infidelity. More seriously, though, Odysseus could leave, which would ruin her utterly.[10] Since Greek women in classical times were not allowed an autonomous existence, she would be forced to return to her father's house or pass under the care of her son, and her bad reputation would render an honorable remarriage out of the question. To avoid such an ignoble fate, Glück's Penelope relies on her *metis*: playing the part of the ideal wife by planning to greet Odysseus enthusiastically is a *dólos* that enables her continued existence as a member of Greek society. In interpreting Penelope's intentions and *metis* this way, Glück foregrounds the fact that Penelope's duplicity in the *Odyssey* is a survival strategy. Penelope is socially obligated to marry a suitor because her husband is presumed dead and because the men who are her guardians want her to remarry; if she does take a suitor, though, she can be accused of infidelity because Odysseus is, in fact, still alive. The *dóloi* of unweaving Laertes' funeral shroud

and of holding a contest among the suitors allow Penelope to delay making a decision that will damn her; even this evasive action earns her suspicion and censure, but it is arguably less severe than the scorn she would face for either defying her father's and son's wishes or obeying them and slighting Odysseus. By engaging with the duplicitous Penelope of Homer's text, then, Glück emphasizes her dangerous contemporary situation and exposes the oppressive gender roles that create it. Further, Glück extends this critique to the modern world. Penelope's anachronistic use of self-help language as she constructs her *dólos* indicates that this modern pop culture phenomenon supports oppressive traditions. While American women might enjoy more autonomy than they would have in ancient Greece, the modern Penelope's precarious situation underscores the fact that there are still consequences for women who do not maintain perfect marriages—they might not have to spend the rest of their lives in exile, but they must contend with the embarrassment of a failed relationship. Self help guides, which often advise how to maintain a happy marriage, can lead women to deny their own feelings and desires, like Penelope did, in order to keep up appearances.

Glück accomplishes this social critique by pulling not only Penelope but also Odysseus off the traditional pedestal. As we saw earlier, the poem's exploration of Penelope's distress shows the consequences of Odysseus' ostensibly heroic behavior and tarnishes his reputation by revealing it to be destructive rather than praiseworthy. Further, Glück depicts Odysseus as undeserving of Penelope's efforts. By the end of the poem, she reduces the famed hero of "demonic appetite" to an average, stereotypically insensitive husband: "Soon / he will return from wherever he goes in the meantime, /

suntanned from his time away, wanting / his grilled chicken" (16-19). Odysseus is famed for his powers of invention and has spent almost two decades sacrificing and preparing large beasts for ritualized feasting, yet he returns home wanting his wife to make him a mundane dinner of grilled chicken. This humorous incongruence diminishes Odysseus; instead of the wily strategist who contrived the Trojan Horse plan, he resembles a caricature of the inconsiderate average Joe who returns home from carousing with his buddies expecting the Mrs. to have a warm dinner waiting on the table for him. Placing a heroic couple from an ancient poem into roles familiar from modern American culture furthers Glück's critique not only of traditional readings of the *Odyssey* but also of contemporary society—how much progress toward women's equality has been made if characters from a famously misogynistic culture that flourished between 3,200 and 3,400 years ago can so easily resemble characters from a television sitcom? By casting epic characters in roles familiar from contemporary popular culture, Glück implies that Odysseus and Penelope are not to be idealized and also exposes the endurance of restrictive constructions of gender identity.

Glück demonstrates how the conventional notions of masculinity and femininity that endanger Penelope have endured. "Ceremony" illustrates that not only ancient Greek heroes and amusingly dense '50s sitcom husbands arrive home expecting a warm dinner cooked to their liking but also contemporary men. In the poem, which takes the form of a conversation between the modern husband and wife, he repeatedly complains about her cooking:

I stopped liking artichokes when I stopped eating

butter. Fennel

I never liked.

[. . . . .]

Living with you is like living

at a boarding school:

chicken Monday, fish Tuesday. (1-3, 11-13)

He extends his critique of his wife's failure to perform her stereotypically feminine duties by also complaining about her lack of socializing and decorating:

One thing I've always hated

about you: I hate that you refuse

to have people at the house. Flaubert

had more friends and Flaubert

was a recluse.

[. . . . .]

Another thing: name one other person

who doesn't have furniture. (4-8, 21-22)

The husband's reference to Flaubert presumably expresses his sophisticated taste. It comes in the context, however, of his adolescent complaints; the things he complains about—not liking his vegetables and eating the same thing every week—are the stuff of childhood. This humorous disjunction makes the husband appear as silly, and as backwardly chauvinistic, as the sitcom husband in "Penelope's Song." Meanwhile, the

wife exhibits *metis* in her responses to her husband's petulance, which combine logic with sarcastic wit:

> Flaubert was crazy: he lived
>
> with his mother.
>
> [. . . . .]
>
> I have deep friendships.
>
> I have friendships
>
> with other recluses.
>
> [. . . . .]
>
> We have fish Tuesday
>
> because it's fresh Tuesday. If I could drive
>
> we could have it different days. (9-10, 14-16, 23-25)

As in "Penelope's Song," though, the wife's *metis* aims to convince her husband that she is, in fact, a good wife. Rather than observing that her husband's remarks are sexist or reminding him he is perfectly capable of cooking his own dinner, which would not be an unusual response in an affluent '90s household, the wife objects that she does socialize, to an extent, and that "a taste / for ceremony" drives her predicable menu (18-19). Ceremony relies upon conventions, and the conventions underlying the wife's set menu are not only those that she imposes by deciding on the food but also those that society has placed on her—a wife cooking dinner for her husband each night of the week is a sexist ritual that contemporary American culture idealizes. Both the modern wife and Penelope face restrictive expectations, and while each challenges them with her *metis*, both women

ultimately turn that skill towards trying to appear as though they meet their respective societies' standards. "Ceremony" also, like "Penelope's Song," recalls operatic and tragic forms. The witty and stylized verbal exchanges that comprise "Ceremony" are a form of stichomythia. The device, which is a formal feature of tragic episodes, is preserved in operatic recitative.[11] But whereas Penelope's aria was consonant with the themes and *gravitas* of tragic opera, the banality of the couple's argument marks it as a burlesque. The parody conflates operatic performance with the performance of conventional gender roles, suggesting that both are works of fiction. Penelope, herself a fictional character, can play these parts and create poignant art by doing so, but the modern couple's attempts to embody these gendered ideals fail and are darkly humorous rather than tragic.

The juxtaposition of Penelope with the modern wife reveals not only the endurance of restrictive gender roles but also their consequences. Penelope must deny her anger at Odysseus and conform or else become a social outcast. The contemporary woman, though she would not be a social pariah for leaving her husband, nevertheless endures a clearly failing marriage and, like Penelope, denies her feelings of anger at her husband's potential infidelity and her frustration at having to suppress such feelings in order to maintain her marriage. In "Midnight," the wife has a conversation with herself in which she tries to convince herself to be a "better wife," as Penelope does in "Penelope's Song." In fact, the opening line, "Speak to me, aching heart" (1), recalls the first line of Penelope's monologue ("Little soul, little perpetually undressed one"),

underscoring the similarity of the women's situations. Like Penelope, the modern wife is in a state of frustrated self-doubt; she asks herself

what

ridiculous errand are you inventing for yourself

weeping in the dark garage

with your sack of garbage: it is not your job

to take out the garbage, it is your job

to empty the dishwasher. (1-6)

She denies her pain and anger at her husband by glossing over the fact that she is "weeping" and turning her trip to the garage, presumably for privacy, into a "ridiculous errand." She scolds herself in a voice that focuses on the disparity between her behavior and that of an "ideal" wife; her errand is "ridiculous," in part, because she is performing a stereotypically masculine activity. Even as she chides herself for "showing off" (6) by taking on extra chores, however, the wife asks herself "where / is your sporting side, your famous / ironic detachment?" (8-9). This question reveals that she recognizes, to some extent, that she is trying to force herself into a role for which is ill suited. Having a "sporting side" implies an appreciation for tricks and jokes that is congruous with the cunning and craftiness of *metis*. Like Penelope, then, she relies on her wit and intelligence to cope with a difficult marriage. Even beyond this similarity, the two women have to play the good wife for the same reason. Just as Penelope must shake the boughs of a tree to gain her husband's attention, the contemporary woman must keep her husband's attention to sustain their relationship. She has noticed that he is attracted to

other women—in "Anniversary," she advises her husband to remember "[her] cold feet all over [his] dick" the "next time [he sees] a hot fifteen year old" (2, 12)—and fears that he will leave her for another woman:

> is this the way you communicate
>
> with your husband, not answering
>
> when he calls, or is this the way the heart
>
> behaves when it grieves: it wants to be
>
> alone with the garbage? If I were you,
>
> I'd think ahead. After fifteen years,
>
> his voice could be getting tired; some night
>
> if you don't answer, someone else will answer. (12-19)

The question she asks herself emphasizes that she is wrestling against the role society encourages her to play. Like the wife in "Penelope's Song," she sardonically employs self-help language: "is this the way you communicate / with your husband"? "Communicate" is a by-word in self-help guides. In order to follow this advice, though, the wife must deny her pain and her understandable desire for a moment of privacy. She distances herself from her feelings by talking not about how *she* grieves but how *the heart* (not even her heart) grieves. She then diminishes that grief with humor—the heart "wants to be / alone with the garbage." The poem presents this self-denial as a survival mechanism. Even though the ramifications of her husband leaving her are not as serious as they would be for Penelope, they are not negligible. Divorce and infidelity would

result in a considerable amount of emotional pain, so the wife warns herself that she must "think ahead" and respond to her husband before "someone else" does.

Just as his wife resembles Penelope, the contemporary husband resembles Odysseus. The two men share an inclination towards womanizing that is socially sanctioned. While the modern man's wandering eye might not be celebrated in legends, as Odysseus' affairs are, there are no social consequences for his actions. His wife must entice him, but he is not expected to make any effort to attract her—a double standard that encourages the husband's emotional absence, and apparently frequent physical absence, from the marriage. This absence, like Odysseus', is the cause of his wife's grief. The contemporary husband's selfish behavior is not simply an unpleasant individual character trait but yet another consequence of broader gender constructions going back to Odysseus' culture.

Women are not the only ones harmed by such narrow conceptualizations of gender—Glück also explores the ways that men suffer from the equally restrictive rules that society imposes on them. The masculine pursuit of *kleos* that causes Penelope so much difficulty also harms Odysseus and his men. As Brooks illustrates in "The Anniad," the quest for fame and glory typically leads to death and destruction. Glück is also mindful of these consequences. In "Parable of the Hostages," the recently victorious Greek soldiers do not want to return home "to that bony island" (4) because they are enjoying their ultra-masculine lives as soldiers too much:

[E]veryone wants a little more
of what there is in Troy, more

> life on the edge, that sense of every day as being
> packed with surprises. But how to explain this
> to the ones at home to whom
> fighting a war is a plausible
> excuse for absence, whereas
> exploring one's capacity for diversion
> is not. (4-11)

The soldiers' desire to keep pursuing their life of adventure is not admirable here, as Tennyson had depicted it, but immature. "Life on the edge" and "packed with surprises" are clichés from action movies that favor special effects and thrills over substance and quality. The Greek men want to be action heroes, but the characters they imitate are superficial and unrealistic. In trying to emulate them, the men try to deceive their wives and children by finding a "plausible excuse" for their absence. A far cry from Penelope's *metis*, which helps her survive, the men's deception will simply allow them to keep having fun while their families continue to wait, some of them (like Odysseus') in precarious situations. The men are not only behaving irresponsibly, but childishly—they are merely looking for an "excuse" rather than a "scheme" or "plan," and they quickly discard the attempt to come up with one because they are "men of action" (14) who are "ready to leave / insight to the women and children" (14-15). Children, even, have more intellectual depth and maturity than their action hero fathers, who perceive insight as trivial and weak.

Despite its sharp critique of the hypermasculine mindset of the Greek men, the poem is nevertheless sympathetic to them. As they try to come up with excuses to stay away from home, they begin to have doubts:

> [S]ome
>
> begin to miss their families a little,
>
> to miss their wives, to want to see
>
> if the war has aged them. And a few grow
>
> slightly uneasy: what if war
>
> is just a male version of dressing up,
>
> a game devised to avoid
>
> profound spiritual questions? Ah,
>
> but it wasn't only the war. (18-26)

Several of the men, even as they plan their next adventure, suspect that there is a problem with their wanderlust. They recognize that it affects their familial relationships and that there is something immature about it—"dressing up" is not simply a "game" but a game for young girls, specifically. In their doubts, the men thus complicate their previous conceptualization of gender. The hypermasculine activity of waging war is associated with the stereotypical behavior of the "women and children" whom they are charged to protect, and the "insight" that they had dismissed as weak and feminine becomes a valuable, and distinctly masculine, trait: men are traditionally the only people worthy for considering "profound spiritual questions."

As for whether war helps men avoid profound questions, the poem provides a clear answer. The soldiers have already dismissed the question of what constitutes a "plausible excuse" for leaving one's family because they perceive themselves as "men of action," and they dismiss this troubling question about war. The enjambment of the lines containing the question and the men's response emphasizes the panicked immediacy of their rejection of the idea; they literally answer without missing a beat. The poem encapsulates the men's dilemma as the question of "how to divide / the world's beauty into acceptable and unacceptable loves!" (33-34), emphasizing the tension between their desire to pursue "properly" masculine courses of action and their love for their families. The men are hostages because they are trapped by a restrictive code and because, in following their heroic code, they are forced into a tragic fate. As Glück observes, none of Odysseus' men ever makes it home with him: "some would be held forever by the dreams of pleasure, / some by sleep, some by music" (40-41). What the men seek in their travels is a mere dream: the "sleep" of the Lotos Eaters robs the men of their senses and their families forever, the "music" of the sirens is dangerous, and the "pleasure" of sailing, pillaging, and feasting ends in death for most of the crew. As a parable, the poem offers these fates as a lesson. After the men have considered whether war is merely a form of "dressing up," the poem ironically describes their decision to pursue further masculine adventure in operatic terms:

> The world had begun
>
> calling them, an opera beginning with war's
>
> loud chords and ending with the floating aria of the sirens.

> There on the beach, discussing the various
>
> timetables for getting home, no one believed
>
> it could take ten years to get back to Ithaca. (26-31)

The references to opera emphasize the performative nature of masculinity and suggest that war and pillaging are, indeed, a "male version of dressing up," but one that is tragic rather than absurd. The cultural prestige of opera and its roots in tragedy endow the men's fatal choice with *pathos* and suggest that the "hostages" are to be pitied and their fates avoided. The poem emphasizes that it is not only Greek warriors who face the "insoluble dilemmas" posed by restrictive conceptualizations of masculinity. It uses anachronistic language to extend the scope of the parable: the depiction of the men "discussing the various / timetables for getting home" renders them as modern men consulting train schedules, and they are well versed in the language of psychoanalysis ("exploring one's capacity for diversion"). The poem thus proposes that ordinary men, whether in the ranks of Odysseus' crew or living in the contemporary world, are held hostage by social expectations.

The modern husband in *Meadowlands* emphasizes the truth of this parable; he acts in stereotypically masculine ways, and he suffers as a result. The fights that he has with his wife, detailed in poems throughout the volume, are usually occasioned by his relating to her in conventionally gendered terms: he attempts to correct her behavior or instruct her, then reacts defensively when she retorts with a sarcastic remark. In "Ceremony," for example, the fight begins because the husband wants his wife to change her behavior to be more in line with his tastes and, not coincidentally, with traditional

gender expectations. Similarly, in "Anniversary," the wife's thinly veiled threat follows her husband's attempt to regulate her bedroom behavior:

> I said you could snuggle. That doesn't mean
> your cold feet all over my dick.
>
> Someone should teach you how to act in bed.
> What I think is you should
> keep your extremities to yourself. (1-5)

Traditionally, men are supposed to be the experienced partners who teach their naïve wives about sex. The husband's assumption of this masculine authority is signaled by his strict bedroom protocol: there is a proper way to snuggle, and he must grant his permission first. His labeling of his wife's feet as "extremities," a cold, clinical term incongruous with its context, suggests that controlling his wife's behavior in bed is of the utmost importance to him: his need for her obedience to his rules supercedes his sexual desire for her. Her "cold feet" reveal that his authoritarian demands have cooled more than his wife's physical passion; the phrase, which is commonly used to describe one who is nervous about entering a commitment, also signals that she has reservations about her relationship in general. The husband's authoritarian attempt to teach his wife "how to act in bed" is interrupted when his wife threatens to continue her "misbehavior" if she catches him indulging in another stereotypically male activity: leering at younger women.

In addition to causing arguments and physical discomfort, though, the husband's need to control his wife causes him internal conflict similar to what the Greek men

experience. As he watches his wife gardening in "Purple Bathing Suit," he initially conforms to conventional gender expectations:

> I like watching you garden
> with your back to me in your purple bathing suit:
> your back is my favorite part of you,
> the part furthest away from your mouth. (1-4)

Here, the man not only expresses his distaste for his wife's "mouthy" behavior but also reduces her to a physical object. The part "furthest away from [her] mouth," both physically and figuratively, is not just her back but, specifically, her backside. There is a sexual dimension to his appreciation of his wife's physical position as well: on her hands and knees, with her butt facing him, she is in a posture conducive to anal intercourse, an act that the poem associates with the dominance and degradation of women. The physical desire the husband expresses here reveals a stereotypical fantasy about his wife that would "teach her a lesson" for her shrewish behavior. Her mouth, as previous poems illustrate, is the weapon she uses to fight back when he tries to control her. As the man watches his wife, he grows increasingly frustrated. He silently criticizes her gardening technique, again assuming the role of instructor to his incompetent wife, then has an emotional outburst:

> How many times do I have to tell you
> how the grass spreads, your little
> pile notwithstanding, in a dark mass which
> by smoothing over the surface you have finally

fully obscured? Watching you

stare into space in the tidy
rows of the vegetable garden, ostensibly
working hard while actually
doing the worst job possible, I think

you are a small irritating thing
and I would like to see you walk off the face of the earth
because you are all that's wrong with my life
and I need you and I claim you. (13-21)

The tirade begins in the fifth line of the poem's third stanza, which is the only stanza to have five lines. The extra line and the enjambment of the rest of the poem's eight lines, which are comprised of a single sentence, emphasize that the man's emotions exceed his control and, further, suggest that something is erupting that he has previously kept carefully suppressed: the fact that he needs his wife. His emotional breakdown, itself a violation of the gender norms that he has been trying to fulfill and reinforce, exposes that the husband, like the Greek soldiers, actually cares for his wife underneath his masculine posturing. He, too, has to decide which is the appropriate love—his love for his wife or his love of the conventional power and authority that he continually attempts to assert. The poem's final words, "I need you and I claim you," expresse the tension between his

emotional dependence on his wife and his chauvinistic desire to assert his power by claiming her as his property.

By juxtaposing modern speakers with those from the *Odyssey*, *Meadowlands* exposes the endurance and consequences of adherence to restrictive gender roles. These comparisons also undermine traditional readings of the epic, which reinforce those roles by praising, or at the least condoning, the stereotypical behavior of Homer's characters. To counter such readings, Glück changes the form of her presentation of the *Odyssey* narrative to underscore aspects of the poem that are overlooked by conventional interpretations. Rather than writing an epic poem, for example, she writes a series of lyrics. Since the lyric is driven by private reflection rather than public action, this formal choice allows Glück to minimize Odysseus and his adventures and focus on the personal experiences and emotions of Homer's other characters, who have tended to be overlooked by scholars.[12]

And yet Glück's strategy of deemphasizing Odysseus in her work recalls the structure of the *Odyssey*. The epic begins not with the hero but with his son. In fact, Odysseus is not mentioned by name at all until Book 5, and the poem does not focus on him in earnest until Book 9. Instead, the beginning of the poem focuses on the consequences of Odysseus' absence and, in particular, the ways it has harmed his son. Telemachus is coming of age, but his father's absence has caused his household to be overrun by the suitors, whom he does not have sufficient status to repel or to control. When Athena comes to urge him to take a voyage to search for news of his father, she finds Telemachus moping at the feast, "sad at heart" and yearning for Odysseus to return

and throw the suitors out so that he "himself might win honor and rule over his own house" (1.115, 118). When he discusses the rude behavior of the suitors with Athena, who is disguised as a guest, he gives voice to his inner turmoil:

> Friend, let me put it in the plainest way.
> My mother says I am [Odysseus'] son; I know not
> surely. Who has known his own engendering?
> I wish at least I had some happy man
> as father, growing old in his own house. (1.258-62)

Odysseus' absence causes his son "trouble and tears" (1.288): the suitors "use / [his] house as if it were a house to plunder" as they court Penelope (1.294). Telemachus' complaint reveals, however, that his tears are caused by more than material loss and dishonor; his bitter remarks about his parents show that he is also suffering emotional pain. The scene not only emphasizes Telemachus' deep suffering but also demonstrates an interiority that is not traditionally associated with epic poetry. While Telemachus is his father's son by birth, he does not share his father's nature—he is not a young "man of action" but, rather, a moody teenager. In his remarks to Athena, he expresses anger at his parents in a common adolescent manner: insulting his mother and fantasizing about having a better father. This outburst of angst and pouting reveal that he is introspective and emotional, qualities at odds with the conventional masculinity of epic. By beginning with Telemachus and his troubles, the *Odyssey* calls attention to him as a crucial figure; indeed, the negative consequences of Odysseus' behavior are a recurring theme in the poem, and the differences between the heroic father and his introspective son foreshadow

Odysseus' rejection of traditional epic heroism and the transition of the Greek states, generally, from warrior culture to the stable democracies that were the foundation for classical Hellenic cultural achievement.[13]

Glück draws heavily on the *Odyssey* in her own treatment of Telemachus: he takes a prominent position in *Meadowlands*, narrating seven poems (more than any other speaker), he shares the angst of Homer's Telemachus, and he points toward an interpretation of his parents' behavior that discourages their idealization. The titles of most of the poems allude to his emotional conflict: "Telemachus' Detachment," "Telemachus' Guilt," Telemachus' Dilemma," "Telemachus' Burden." His conflict stems from his cynical view of his parents' relationship:

> Patience of the sort my mother
>
> practised on my father
>
> (which in his self-
>
> absorption he mistook
>
> for tribute though it was in fact
>
> a species of rage [. . .]. ("Guilt" 1-6)

Telemachus' perspective undermines the traditional praise heaped upon his parents. His father is not the noble, worthy recipient of Penelope's devotion; rather, he is "self-absorbed." The only thing Telemachus finds admirable about his father is his capacity to hurt his mother:

> I was proud of my father
>
> for staying away

even if he stayed away for

the wrong reasons;

I used to smile

when my mother wept. (23-28)

The assertion that his father "stayed away for / the wrong reasons" recalls and indirectly answers the questions posed by the Greek soldiers in "Parable of the Hostages": Odysseus' adventures after Troy, though they bring him *kléos*, are not a "plausible excuse" for his absence. As for Penelope's renowned loyalty, Telemachus identifies it as a passive-aggressive "rage," not a virtue but a sickness that "infected / [his] childhood" (9-10). His parents' behavior leads to his neglect; Telemachus claims that his mother's vengeful patience made him feel that he "didn't exist, since / [his] actions had / no power to disturb her" (18-20). These lines recall Telemachus' inability to persuade his mother to marry and his rebukes of her behavior in the *Odyssey*.[14] Telemachus regrets this immature "cruelty" (30); it is the source of his guilt, and it leaves him with an interpretive crisis: he is able to read his parents, but the proper emotional response to their flaws is unclear.

The difficulty of interpreting his parents' lives becomes a pressing issue in "Telemachus' Dilemma" as he considers the problem of what he will write on their tomb. They have made their own recommendations: Odysseus wants "*beloved*" for his epitaph while Penelope "prefers / to be represented by / her own achievement" (5, 12-14). The epitaphs that Odysseus and Penelope envision for themselves are consonant with the common reading of the *Odyssey* that romanticizes their relationship: Penelope's

"achievement" is the *kléos* she earns by waiting patiently and faithfully for her "beloved," an epithet that expresses Odysseus' supposed worthiness of her devotion. Telemachus, however, rejects these ideas:

> It seems
> tactless to remind them
> that one does not
> honor the dead by perpetuating
> their vanities, their
> projections of themselves.
> My own taste dictates
> accuracy without
> garrulousness. (14-22)

"Vanities," "projections," and "accuracy without / garrulousness" imply that the epitaphs, and the interpretive tradition they reflect, are inflated and even foolish idealizations, and Telemachus' affected diction ("my own taste dictates") mocks their pretension. To counter this artiface, Telemachus seeks a more accurate and nuanced description for his parents and their marriage, "sometimes inclining to / *husband and wife*, other times / to *opposing forces*" (25-27). "Husband and wife" answers the "vanities" and "garrulousness" by demoting Odysseus and Penelope to the level of ordinary, mundane existence, while "opposing forces" works against the romanticization of their relationship. The juxtaposition of the two epithets, creating a paradox of antagonistic unity, resists the one-dimensional idealization of the epic couple.

Throughout *Meadowlands*, Telemachus exhibits the impulse to diminish his parents' stature while revealing the complex contentiousness of their relationship. In "Telemachus' Detachment" he describes the evolution of his interpretation of his parents:

When I was a child looking
at my parents' lives, you know
what I thought? I thought
heartbreaking. Now I think
heartbreaking, but also
insane. Also
very funny. (1-7)

"Heartbreaking," frequently used to describe tragedy, imparts *gravitas* to his parents' lives; however, the word is equally fit for describing melodrama. Telemachus, then, paradoxically acknowledges his parents' suffering as well as their high social and literary rank while implying that their behavior is histrionic. His language thus reflects the operatic dimension of his parents' relationship: opera frequently combines elements of tragedy, romance, and melodrama. The subsequent adjectives "insane" and "very funny" demote their relationship from tragic romance to comic farce, introducing another operatic genre that emphasizes the unrealistic and untenable nature of their marriage. The line breaks underscore this digression: each of the descriptions comes at the beginning of a line, for emphasis, while the gradual shortening of the lines gives a visual sense that the poem is coming to a conclusion: "very funny." At the same time, though, the poem mitigates its demotion of Odysseus and Penelope by also structurally emphasizing

paradox. The repetition of "also" conveys a sense of accumulation that opposes their loss of status, and the repetition of "heartbreaking" balances the emphatic final line "very funny," undercutting its apparent certainty. Moreover, Telemachus' "detachment" is belied by the undercurrent of anger in his tone when he says "you know / what I thought? I thought / heartbreaking." His apparent conclusion that his parents' lives are "funny" is thus rendered suspect; it is not the result of objective analysis but of the resentment he shows towards his parents in other poems in *Meadowlands* and in Homer's text.

Telemachus' emotional conflict and inability to find a satisfying interpretation of his parents' lives affirm the complexity and richness of their story, while his criticism emphasizes that they are not to be emulated. In fact, Telemachus explicitly rejects becoming an epic hero like his father. In "Telemachus' Fantasy," after imagining his father's life of adventure and encountering younger women "evidently / wild for him" (15-16), he bluntly asserts, "I never / wish for my father's life" (26-27). He recognizes that the masculinist ideal his father represents is merely a "fantasy." In pursuing epic glory, "one becomes a monster or / the beloved sees what one is" (25-26), not a great hero but a desperate man "about to go to pieces" (8). In renouncing the heroic role he might have been expected to assume as a grown man, Glück's Telemachus emphasizes one of the major themes of the *Odyssey*: the decline of epic culture.

Homer's Telemachus serves as a foil to his heroic father. Where Odysseus is a man of action who must learn to resist his violent impulses in order to return to Ithaka, Telemachus possesses an intellectual nature and attempts to use peaceful means of resolving his problems. When Athena spurs him from his morose passivity with the news

that his father is still alive and returning to Ithaka, Telemachus first tries to get rid of the suitors by reasoning with them. He tells them that he plans to call an assembly where he will publicly tell them to leave and, when mocked, responds with logic rather than violent revenge for the slight:

> "Zeus forbid you should be king in Ithaka
> though you are eligible as your father's son."
> Telemachus kept his head and answered him:
> "Antinoös, you may not like my answer,
> but I would happily be king, if Zeus
> conferred the prize. Or do you think it wretched?
> I shouldn't call it bad at all. A king
> will be respected, and his house will flourish.
> But there are eligible men enough,
> heaven knows, on the island, young and old,
> and one of them may perhaps come to power
> after the death of King Odysseus.
> All I insist in is that I rule our house
> and rule the slaves my father won for me." (1.436-49)

Telemachus' treats the jeer as though it were a reasoned counterargument, deploying rhetorical rather than physical force. He wryly asks Antinoös whether it is the idea of he himself as king or the idea of being king in general to which he objects, a rhetorical strategy that outwits his opponent's verbal and logical skills, then provides reasoned

responses to both alternatives: being king is good because it is profitable, and being king himself is not relevant to the issue at hand. Odysseus, on the other hand, tends to respond to slights with insults, threats, and displays of physical force. When he is invited to participate in the Phaiakians' field games, he declines until one of the men implies that his refusal betrays a lack of skill. Then Odysseus "leap[s] up," grabs a discus larger than the ones customarily thrown by the Phaiakians, and "let[s] it fly from his great hand" with such force that the crowd must duck for cover (8.195, 198). As an epic warrior, Odysseus' *kléos* is his primary concern; he must answer challenges and take revenge on those who slight him. It is for this reason that the drawing of the bow at the end of the *Odyssey* is an apt means for him to destroy the suitors; he not only gains revenge for their usurpation of his household but also proves his superiority by besting them in a physical contest. Telemachus also participates in the contest but foregoes his chance to beat the suitors:

> Three times he put his back into it and sprang it,
> three times he had to slack off. Still he meant
> to string that bow and pull for the needle shot.
> A fourth try and he had it all but strung—
> when a stiffening in Odysseus made him check. (21.142-46)

He then gives up and loudly complains about his physical ineptitude before handing the bow to one of the suitors. There is a great deal of critical debate about this passage and its implications, centering mostly on the question of why Odysseus stiffens: is it an involuntary reaction or a signal to his son, and is he reacting to the possibility that

Telemachus will ruin his plan or the possibility that his son will prove himself to be his equal? Regardless of Odysseus' motivations, it is certain that his son voluntarily gives up his chance to string the bow, and with it, the chance to build his reputation. His failure to string his father's bow, a symbol of his military prowess, signals that Telemachus will not follow in his footsteps.

Telemachus' departure from his father's way of life is evident even when he does pursue traditionally epic goals. Like his father and many other epic heroes, he undertakes a long quest; however, his goal is not to win glory for himself but to gather information about his father. Rather than disrupting his domestic life, Telemachus' journey seeks to stabilize it. Similarly, although Telemachus takes part in the slaying of the suitors, he is more concerned with justice than with vengeance. Odysseus' plans for the slaying are merciless; he intends to question every one of his servants and to slay anyone who has shown disloyalty to him. Telemachus agrees, but he urges him not to test the fieldhands and stresses that he should "make distinction / between good girls and those who shame your house" (16.378-79). During the slaying itself, Telemachus checks his father's wrath and spares those he deems innocent. As Odysseus prepares to kill Phemios, the suitors' singer,

> Telemachus in the elation of battle
> hear[s] him. He at once called to his father:
> "Wait—that one is innocent; don't hurt him.
> And we should let our herald live—Medon;
> he cared for me from boyhood." (22.397-401)

Unlike his father, whose primary concern is protecting his household's *kléos*, Telemachus distinguishes between intentional and circumstantial guilt and is willing to bestow mercy. This scene, and one when Telemachus apologizes to his father for leaving a door open through which some of the suitors try to escape, make up the majority of Telemachus' involvement in the bloodshed. Homer downplays Telemachus' role, briefly mentioning that he kills one man while devoting long, often graphic, descriptions to Odysseus' rampage. Telemachus plays a greater role in the punishment of the servants: he hangs the serving women who slept with the suitors. These killings bear a closer resemblance to justice than the slaying of the suitors—they are a particular, uniform punishment for specific crimes (adultery and treason) rather than rampant violence in the name of vengeance and upholding a hero's reputation. The *Odyssey* closes with the suitors meeting Agamemnon in the underworld and Athene intervening to prevent the suitors' families from seeking revenge against Odysseus. This ending emphasizes the reasons warrior culture must end: it is a self-perpetuating cycle of destruction. "Clear-headed" and justice-minded, Telemachus represents the end of that way of life and the possibility for social growth and improvement.[15]

Glück, invoking this aspect of the *Odyssey*, uses Telemachus to signal the possibility and necessity of transcending the restrictive gender roles that are codified by conventional readings of the poem. In "Telemachus' Kindness," he again describes the emotional suffering caused by his father's womanizing and his mother's passive-aggressive anger. His remarks make it clear that these gendered behaviors are part of a wider social problem: "I realized no child on that island had / a different story; my trials /

were the general rule" (7-9). As in "Telemachus' Dilemma," he claims to be observing his parents objectively:

> as a grown man
>
> I can look at my parents
>
> impartially and pity them both: I hope
>
> always to be able to pity them. (25-28)

Telemachus' tone here is matter-of-fact and free from the anger he exhibits or describes in other poems; his claim of impartiality is thus not suspect. In fact, he is self-conscious of his tendency to make hurtful statements when he is angry, adding to his expression of pity the hope that he can sustain such "kindness." Pity, rather than empathy or sympathy, signals that he has assumed a position superior to them: he will not replicate their mistakes. Further, pity indicates a cathartic response that underscores Glück's depiction of Odysseus and Penelope as the characters of a tragic opera. Odysseus' and Penelope's behavior is hubristic, resulting in suffering and loss; they are thus to be pitied rather than emulated so that their tragic fate—an emotionally debilitating marriage—can be avoided.

But unlike Telemachus, the modern couple in *Meadowlands* has repeated the mistakes of Odysseus and Penelope. The husband is emotionally, and often physically, absent from the marriage, while the wife, like Penelope, nurtures a quiet rage as she "hypothesiz[es] / her husband's erotic life" ("Kindness" 5-6). The poem "Moonless Night" emphasizes the couples' similarities:

> A lady weeps at a dark window.
>
> Must we say what it is? Can't we simply say

a personal matter? It's early summer;

Next door the Lights are practicing klezmer music. (1-4)

The poem is followed and preceded by poems based on the *Odyssey*; the vague description of "a lady" weeping therefore seems to allude to Penelope until the fourth line, where a contemporary detail indicates the modern setting. This initial ambiguity accentuates the women's similarity: both are abandoned by husbands whom they believe to be unfaithful and both respond to the situation passively. The similarities between the ancient and modern woman illustrate the endurance of the sexist ideology that underlies their marital problems. However, the poem still emphasizes a key difference between the two women:

> But is waiting forever
>
> always the answer?
>
> Nothing is always the answer; the answer
>
> depends on the story.
>
> [. . . . .]
>
> On the other side [of the night], there could be anything,
>
> all the joy in the world, the stars fading,
>
> the streetlight becoming a bus stop. (9-12, 17-19)

The *Odyssey* depends on Penelope "waiting forever." If she does not, the story cannot exist: Odysseus' need to return home, slay the suitors, and reclaim his wife is the conflict that drives the poem's plot. The modern woman, however, is not bound by such strictures, so waiting is not necessarily "the answer." The image of the streetlight

"becoming a bus stop" at the end of the poem suggests transformation and departure, offering an alternative answer to the woman's marital problems: she can leave. Doing so may bring her "all the joy in the world," but it would require her to defy the conventional idea that a good woman must be quietly and patiently self-sacrificing and always stand by her man.

Meadowlands does not reveal whether the woman actually leaves her chauvinistic husband, but the couple eventually divorces. Just as Telemachus exposes the fact that idealistic readings of his parents' lives are mere fantasy, the modern man and woman reveal that the perfect marriage they sought to maintain was merely "a dream":

> I keep thinking of how we used to watch television,
> how I would put my feet in your lap. The cat would sit
> on top of them. Doesn't that still seem
> an image of contentment, of well being? So
> why couldn't it go on longer?
>
> Because it was a dream. ("The Dream" 13-18)

Although the woman describes the "image of contentment" and the man is the one who declares it "a dream," he is stating a shared conclusion rather than trying to educate her as he does in previous poems. The woman has just revealed that she "keep[s] [diaries] when [she's] miserable and that she "had a lot of diaries" during the marriage (5-6), that "half the guests" at the wedding called the marriage a mistake (10), and that she "took a valium" the night of the wedding (12). Between these remarks and "Anniversary," which

memorably describes anything but "an image of contentment," it is evident that the woman also recognizes she is describing "a dream."

Having chosen to abandon her pursuit of this dream, the woman discovers a new confidence and vitality:

> I want to do two things:
>
> I want to order meat from Lobel's
>
> and I want to have a party.
>
> You hate parties. You hate
>
> any group bigger than four.
>
> If I hate it
>
> I'll go upstairs. Also
>
> I'm only inviting people who can cook. ("Heart's Desire 1-8)

Ironically, the ex-husband who once denigrated her for not entertaining guests now criticizes her for doing just that; he reverts to his chauvinistic behavior and tries to control his ex-wife's thoughts ("you hate parties") as well as her actions ("start with the meat order"). The way that the fourth line is broken emphasizes his negativity as well as his attempt to advise his wife by both beginning and ending with the phrase "you hate." She, on the other hand, responds not with her characteristic sarcasm but with assertiveness, and she continues her planning despite his nay-saying, displaying neither shrewishness nor docile acquiescence. In rejecting these stereotypically feminine behaviors, she exhibits emotional growth and is able to turn her *metis* towards

constructive ends; rather than merely trying to preserve her self-esteem, she turns her cunning toward planning an event that will be affirming for everyone who attends:

> Trust me, no one's
> going to be hurt again.
> For one night, affection
> Will triumph over passion. The passion
> will all be in the music.
> [. . . . .]
> I have it all planned: first
> violent love, then
> sweetness. First *Norma*
> then maybe the Lights will play. (26-30, 33-36)

She envisions her party in unrealistic terms: it is difficult to believe that a party of "old lovers" and "ex-girlfriends" can take place without some hurt feelings (9-10). Yet she has moved beyond seeking domestic bliss or romantic "passion," instead setting her sights on the more realistic goal of shared "affection" among her guests. Her idealism, rather, lies in her aesthetic vision: that music will be capable of containing the pain and violence of "passion." In other words, rejecting the social strictures that tied her to her marriage enables her to turn her *metis* toward realizing Glück's own aesthetic ideal, using art as a "revenge for loss." *Norma* is a tragic opera about a Druid priestess whose love for a Roman soldier violates the social strictures that demand her chastity and thus results in her death. Its plot, which reflects Penelope's dilemma in "Penelope's Song," therefore

concerns the tragic effects of sexist ideologies. As a tragic drama, which stimulates catharsis, Norma's fate is rendered as noble but pitiable. Against the pity and fear that the opera inspires, the modern wife hopes that the Lights, her neighbors whose clarinet is frequently out of tune, will play. Their music, mundane and imperfect, will represent the "sweetness" of affection (34, 35), a realistic ideal that, while not as aesthetically pleasing as the "violent love" of opera, she nevertheless finds more desirable because it does not threaten emotional harm.

The contemporary woman's desire for art to serve as a means of healing reflects the project of *Meadowlands*, which exposes the sexist ideologies that underpin conventional readings of the *Odyssey*. Like the dove in "Parable of the Dove," she "sour[s] and flatten[s]" the song's "sweet notes" (23, 22), presenting Odysseus and Penelope as flawed characters unworthy of their traditional lionization. In changing the form of Homer's story, however, she does not change its nature; rather, she makes it apparent. Circe's argument in "Circe's Power" provides a fitting description for Glück's strategy:

> I never turned anyone into a pig.
>
> Some people are pigs; I make them
>
> look like pigs.
>
> I'm sick of your world
>
> that lets the outside disguise the inside. (1-5)

Just as Circe changes outside forms so that they reflect the individual's inner essence, Glück alters the outward appearance of Homer's narrative so that his critique of epic culture is evident. She foregrounds aspects that have been overlooked, such as Telemachus' disposition and the ambivalence surrounding Penelope's *kléos*, and omits elements that are emphasized by superficial readings, such as the recounting of Odysseus' adventures. Circe's remarks serve as a defense against the stereotyping of her as an evil witch who preys on men by offering a more nuanced interpretation of her actions. She depicts herself instead as a reform-minded "pragmatist" (23): "undisciplined life" had corrupted Odysseus' crew, but "[a]s pigs [. . .] they / sweetened right up" (7, 8, 10-11). Similarly, Glück's telling of the *Odyssey* aims to rehabilitate its tradition. Changing the form of Homer's story does not change its nature, as "Parable of the Dove" implies, but rather reveals it. Drawing on Homer's criticism of Odysseus' stubborn adherence to an outmoded code of heroism and his ambivalent depiction of Penelope, Glück exposes their flaws. Her Circean transformation of the *Odyssey* into a lyric opera exposes the characters' tragic nature and emphasizes that the gender ideals they supposedly represent are mere performances, thus urging that, although they are compelling figures, Odysseus and Penelope should be pitied rather than emulated. The modern couple's failed marriage illustrates the consequences of conforming to such gender stereotypes: their ostensibly epic behavior, far from ennobling them, transforms their lives into an absurd farce.

Both epic and opera are highly conventional forms intended for public performance; in invoking them, Glück not only emphasizes that conventions have a

performative nature but also emphasizes the element of social critique in her work that critics have thus far disregarded. The mythological characters of *Meadowlands* do not merely reinterpret the private experiences of the modern couple or help narrate the "pornography of scars" of Glück's own difficult marriage and divorce. On the contrary, they are central to the poet's commentary on contemporary culture: sexism is as rampant today as it was thousands of years ago in ancient Greece. Although Glück does not offer the hope of a solution to this social problem, as H.D. and Brooks do, she does emphasize that women no longer have to pretend to be perfect wives like Penelope did: if their husbands are pigs masquerading as heroes, they can get on a bus and leave.

Notes

[1] I do not mean to imply that Glück ignores classical mythology in earlier texts—several poems in *The Triumph of Achilles* clearly allude to Ovid and Homer—but, rather, that *Meadowlands* is the first volume in which a single myth resonates throughout the book, informing and advancing a distinct narrative arc.

[2] As Paul Breslin has observed, critics have focused on Glück's depiction of anorexia more than any other aspect of her work. See Lynn Keller's and Leslie Heywood's essays for further examples of this trend. Even when they do not focus extensively on the connection between Glück's life and her poetry, critics often make remarks that reveal that the poet's biography informs their thinking. For example, after stating that Glück's early work "identif[ies] poetic truth with self-absorption," Bonnie Costello asks "what else should we expect from a firstborn?" (48). Similarly, in the course of analyzing the shift in Glück's work, Stephen Burt wryly restates a question that one of Glück's poems asks: "[a]nother way to put *that* question is to ask what psychological poets should do once they have exhausted their best personal material" (80).

[3] Although austerity does not logically imply a lack of political content, Glück's critics tend, as in the remarks by Diehl cited at the beginning of this chapter, to remark on the spareness of her writing in the course of characterizing it as apolitical.

[4] These classical poets all praise Penelope's chastity in the course of discussing women who do not meet the feminine ideal. Aristophanes and Propertius regard her as an exception among women, who are perfidious by nature, while Ovid employs her as a supporting example that women are not inherently bad. For a detailed analysis of Penelope's depiction in these classical sources, see Katz's introduction and first chapter.

[5] This is the argument of Katz's book: the *Odyssey* presents Penelope in a complex, often ambivalent, way that challenges the straightforward praise many of its own characters and its later readers have heaped upon her. Her deconstructive approach to the text has proven invaluable in helping me to develop and express my own ideas about Penelope.

[6] The Greek vocabulary here contains complex connotations that are not captured well in English translation. Penelope's "great virtue" and "noble thoughts," for example, express qualities that represent feminine ideals; they would not be used to describe a man. Both *metis* and *kléos* are cultural concepts that transcend their denotations. *Metis*, for example, implies not only cunning but also wisdom and intelligence. It is derived from the mythological character Metis, who was the goddess of wisdom and the first wife of Zeus, whom she could match in power. Zeus, fearing a prophesy that Metis would give birth to a son more powerful than he, swallowed her; Athena, the daughter they had already conceived, later burst from his head and assumed her mother's role as goddess of wisdom. The word *metis* thus, in its etymology, conveys the idea that feminine power is a threatening force to men. *Kléos*, similarly, conveys more than simply "renown" or "glory." It refers to the heroic reputation that epic warriors sought to create in order to achieve immortality. I have elected to preserve the Greek words *metis* and *kléos* rather than translating them in order to preserve and convey these vital but untranslatable aspects of their meanings.

[7] Katz offers a detailed discussion of Clytemnestra's and Helen's *kléos*. She argues that there is a complex intertexual relationship between the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* crucial for interpreting Penelope's *kléos*: the stories of the reviled women of Homer's first epic resonate through Penelope when her *kléos* is referenced, thus complicating the praise that evocations of her good reputation would seem to grant.

[8] I am using Robert Fitzgerald's translation of the *Odyssey* for this chapter. For discussion of Greek vocabulary, I have consulted W. B. Stanford's edition.

[9] David Levine's article, in which he argues that Penelope's laugh is a sign of her *metis*, provides an overview of this critical debate.

[10] The reality of this threat is affirmed by the myth that describes Penelope's infidelity: when Odysseus discovers the bastard Pan, he leaves Ithaka for good.

[11] Stichomythia is a technique in which characters alternate speaking single lines, or even half lines. The resulting dialogue is typically rapid, dramatic, and often marked by witty ripostes. Recitatives, the narrative songs that progress the plot of the opera between arias, often include stichomythic dialogue; they are analogous to the episodes (scenes of dialogue) in classical tragedy.

[12] Surprisingly little has been written about Telemachus, for example, considering his prominence in the poem. A search of *L'Annee Philologique*, a database of scholarship on classical literature, shows that Telemachus' name appears in the titles of only 36 books and articles written since 1945. Odysseus, on the other hand, appears in 383 titles.

[13] As we have seen, the destructiveness of warrior culture's militarism is a central theme in the *Odyssey*. The bellicose behavior of Odysseus and his crew cause their ruin, and it is only through rejecting his heroic identity that Odysseus is able to return to Ithaka; Homer thus commemorates the violent history of the Greek world while warning against its ideals.

[14] When the suitors try to convince Telemachus to send his mother back to her father's house or else command her to marry one of them, he claims that he cannot because of his familial obligation to "the mother who bore [him]" and because he fears that "[her] parting curse would call hell's furies / to punish [him]" (2.139, 144-45).

[15] Telemachus demonstrates cruelty towards his mother on several occasions in the poem: his sardonic questioning of his paternity suggests to Athena, who is disguised as a stranger, that Penelope is dishonest and promiscuous, and Telemachus sharply rebukes his mother's behavior in front of the suitors and guests at dinner during Book 1 and during the contest of the bow.

CHAPTER V

DOMESTICATING THE EPIC

When I began this project, I thought I would argue that H.D., Gwendolyn Brooks, and Louise Glück invoke the epic in order to subvert its masculinist values. But once I began to investigate the intertextual relationships between their texts and the work of Homer and Virgil, I realized—or, to be more accurate, recollected—that epic verse is not a monolithic, inherently misogynist genre that celebrates violence. Over the course of my graduate career in English, having discovered the ways that epic verse has been employed to marginalize women writers since the classical period, and having repeatedly heard condemnations of the genre, I internalized the stereotype of epic poetry that is prevalent in contemporary literary criticism. Essentially, in the early stages of planning my dissertation, I replicated the mistake that so many scholars of twentieth-century poetry have made: instead of reading the ancient poems themselves, I formed my ideas from what I had read and heard about them from critics like Bakhtin, Gilbert and Gubar.

Not having read the classical epics for almost six years, I had forgotten that the complexity of classical epic poetry is what initially drew me to pursue the study of literature as a career. When I encountered the *Aeneid* during the second year of my undergraduate career, I was so moved by the pathos of Virgil's depiction of Dido and her tragic fate and intrigued by his ambivalent treatment of war that I switched the focus of

my studies from pre-medicine to Classics and English. When I encountered Homer's epics, I found myself captivated by the ways the poems expressed subtle criticism of the destructive events they recount and by the frequently sympathetic portrayals of women in a hostile world. I was moved by Hektor's tender farewell to his wife and child in the *Iliad*, the rendering of a heroic world in decline in the *Odyssey*, and the striking contrast between a violent world and the bucolic conceits used to characterize it. Throughout my studies, I repeatedly saw that while the cultures depicted in epic verse are unquestionably misogynistic and militaristic, the texts themselves often question and criticize these values.

The work of the poets I have examined in this dissertation has renewed this forgotten lesson and reminded me of what drew me to epic verse at the beginning of my academic career. The continued interest of twentieth-century poets, and of women in particular, in the classical epics illustrates that they are not one-dimensional celebrations of violence and misogyny. So many poets would not find inspiration in, and produce work in close dialogue with, these texts if they were diametrically opposed to their aims. The disjunction between poets' and critics' perception of classical epic poetry presents a problem, but it also points toward its solution; what poets are doing that critics are not is reading the epics closely and sympathetically. The poets of this study are not classical scholars: H.D. could read ancient Greek, but not fluently, and while she read classical scholarship on some authors, her writing preceded feminist and deconstructive readings of Homer's work by several decades; Gwendolyn Brooks knew her high school Latin well enough to translate portions of the *Aeneid*, but she was by no means an expert and

was unfamiliar with academic literature on the poem; Louise Glück cannot read Greek or Latin at all. These women have relied more than anything on their own careful readings of the poetry—as opposed to readings of the languages—to uncover the aspects of classical epic that inform their feminist projects. Beyond exemplifying the value of close reading, though, the poets of this study emphasize a challenge facing twentieth-century women who work in the epic tradition: how does one deal with the sexist history of the texts that one finds inspirational?

H.D., Brooks, and Glück revise the misogynistic tradition they have inherited by emphasizing that it is not the classical poems themselves that must be discarded or condemned but rather the ideologies that have invoked the epics to valorize war and to reinforce repressive gender roles. The careful reading of epic that informs the work of these women, and the extent to which they are able to use epic form, themes, and figures to support their feminist projects, demonstrates that the ancient poems are not monolithic celebrations of misogynistic violence. Each poet domesticates the epic, removing from it the qualities that have facilitated the masculinist interpretive tradition. Their poems describe the emotional struggles of women rather than the physical trials of men, are set in the home rather than on the battlefield, and explore romantic rather than martial conflict. At the same time, their work retains the qualities of the classical epics that run counter to the received tradition and have thus been suppressed and forgotten: their realistic depiction of the devastating consequences of war, emphasis on the incommensurability of militarism and civilization, and anxiety about masculine heroism. In turning these qualities towards criticizing sexism and other social problems, the

modern poets extend the revisionist impulse of the Alexandrian (heterodox, stereotypically feminine) line of transmission while undermining the Athenian (masculinist, orthodox) transmission of the conventional epic tradition.

In their work, H.D., Brooks, and Glück invoke the classical epics to create the possibility of a world in which women can function free of the strictures that society has traditionally placed on them. *Helen in Egypt* proposes the bisexual ideal of the Greater Mystery as a means of ridding the world of war, which the poem understands as a consequence of sexism. Drawing on Freud's theories, H.D. argues that war is a result of the strict separation of men and women by socially prescribed gender roles: men fight because ideologies like the heroic code have separated them from their mothers, with whom they long for union. H.D. takes up the epic trope of the heroic quest for immortality, transforming it from male warriors' pursuit of *kléos* into Helen's struggle to be inducted into and to articulate the Mystery. The palimpsest of life-death-rebirth myths that Helen uncovers and reconciles throughout her psychological journey begins in the *Iliad*, with Homer's allusion to Helen's previous abductions. It is by tracing this history back to its archetypal origins that Helen is able to reconcile Greek, Trojan and Egyptian myths, Achilles with his mother and herself (whom the poem conflates), and thus masculine and feminine identities. Through further allusions to the *Iliad*, H.D. asserts the primacy of the Greater Mystery's ideal. Like Homer, she demonstrates the ruin caused by "death cult" of the heroic code, emphasizing that the immortality of *kléos* will not be given to most men. Further, she combines the Homeric rendering of Helen as the embodiment of the fame and glory men seek with the Euripidean *eidolon* story to figure

kléos itself as a destructive illusion that perpetuates itself by luring men into battle and anesthetizing them to the pain it causes through epic *kléa andron.* H.D. takes up the Homeric rendering of Helen as an epic poet capable of granting immortality and healing psychological wounds, but she domesticates it by turning Helen into a bard of the Greater Mystery rather than of *kléa andron.* In singing the epic of her induction into the Mystery, Helen offers the hope of *nepenthes* to assuage the trauma of war, and she reveals a path to immortality that can bring about peace by reconciling male and female into a bisexual ideal of equality: participation in the love-rites of the Mystery.

Like H.D., Gwendolyn Brooks takes up the traditional motif of the epic quest and domesticates it by exploring a woman's internal struggle against the sexist forces that have damaged her. But, whereas H.D. offers a mystical, abstract solution to the problems that repressive gender roles cause, Brooks offers a concrete, pragmatic means of dealing with sexism: militant self-assertion. Annie Allen's emotional trauma results from desire to conform to conventional, specifically white, notions of femininity. She idealizes the traditional fairy-tale romance, not recognizing its fictional nature or the fact that, as a black woman, she cannot hope to play the part of the stereotypical heroine. She waits passively for the valiant paladin of her fantasy to arrive and rescue her from the mundane life that she detests; when she meets and falls in love with the "man of tan," her romantic and idealistic nature prevents her from seeing that he is less than the man of her dreams. Brooks' invocation of the epic tradition criticizes Annie's conformity; the genre's public, collective nature and the value that it places on action provide a pointed contrast to Annie's private, isolating obsession with romance and her passivity.

Brooks also draws on the classical epics to condemn the traditional masculine heroism that destroys Annie's family. Like H.D., Brooks draws on the anxieties about warrior culture that the poems express and thus reveals *kléos* to be a destructive illusion. The masculine camaraderie and glory of military combat attract the man of tan, but these prove to be empty promises; as a black man, he is never really accepted and will not be regarded as a hero by the racist culture in which he lives. Moreover, Brooks follows the epics in treating war realistically, acknowledging that thousands of men are maimed and slaughtered pursuing glory that most of them will never win.

The classical poems not only provide Brooks with a means of challenging the traditional ideologies that marginalize her characters; they also offer a precedent for Annie's heroism. The title of Brooks' long poem alludes to Virgil's epic, which includes an example of feminine heroism. Both Dido and Annie are deluded by love and emotionally devastated by men who pursue the conventional masculine quest for glory. Although Dido commits suicide, she nevertheless provides a model for Annie. The Carthaginian queen is a noble, strong leader who overcomes the death of her husband to found a great empire. Annie follows the same course: she outgrows her immature romanticism to emerge as a strong, self-actualized "tall-walker" who exhorts black men and women to join her in building a world in which their children can thrive. Granted, Dido abandons her people when she commits suicide, but the vow of eternal enmity and warfare against the Romans that she makes before her death is analogous to Annie's call "to arms, to armor" as she urges black Americans to wage war against the racism and sexism that oppress them ("[First Fight]" 9). Although Brooks and H.D. employ similar

strategies for condemning traditional masculine violence in their work, they advise quite different tactics for creating a world where women can thrive: Brooks' call for rejection of conventionally defined gender roles and militant resistance to racism and sexism is the antithesis of H.D.'s syncretic, pacifist vision.

Louise Glück's *Meadowlands*, like Brooks' and H.D.'s texts, relies on allusions to a classical epic to condemn conformity to gender stereotypes and to expose the damage that such repression causes in individuals' lives. Subverting a poetic tradition that has held up Odysseus and Penelope as paragons of masculine and feminine virtue, Glück invokes the *Odyssey* to show that these gendered ideals are a dangerous fiction. Her collection, like *Helen in Egypt* and *Annie Allen*, exposes the ways that men's conformity to the ideal set by the heroic code destroys homes and relationships. Through allusions to the *Odyssey*, Glück illustrates the dangerous predicament in which Odysseus leaves his wife and the distress that his absence causes his son. Her Odysseus is not heroic, but insensitive and immature, because of his stereotypically masculine behavior. She also demotes Penelope from her traditional pedestal. Drawing from Homer's ambivalent portrayal of Penelope, Glück's heroine is a cunning, duplicitous, and possibly unfaithful woman rather than the patiently long-suffering and chaste wife that she has been celebrated as throughout history; her famous trick of weaving and unraveling Laertes' funeral shroud to forestall marriage to one of the suitors is not a sign of her faithfulness to Odysseus but a means of self-preservation. Her renowned endurance, Glück shows, is not an intrinsic virtue but a consequence of necessity. The commentary of Telemachus, whose characterization Glück draws from Homer's poem, emphasizes that his parents are

not paragons of virtue but, rather, immature and passive-aggressive people to be pitied rather than emulated. The opera motif that runs through *Meadowlands* reinforces Telemachus' lesson. By recasting Homer's epic as an opera, Glück emphasizes that Odysseus' and Penelope's relationship, like the gender roles they uneasily inhabit, is a tragic performance.

The juxtaposition of the ancient couple with the modern man and wife whose marriage is falling apart represents the endurance of damaging gender ideals. The contemporary husband, like Odysseus, is frequently absent from home, possibly having an affair. When he is home, he is emotionally absent or heaps criticism on his wife for her failure to act feminine enough to suit his sexist standards. Trying to embody the ideal that Penelope supposedly represents, the modern woman adopts the same survival strategy: she suppresses her emotional turmoil and plays the role of a good wife, patiently enduring his absences and verbal abuse. The couple's similarity to the ancient husband and wife suggests that they are trying to live up to the ideals that Odysseus and Penelope supposedly represent, not realizing that those ideals are entirely fictional. Their marriage plays out as an opera, though the banality of their arguments makes it more burlesque than tragic in nature. Like Brooks, Glück encourages resistance to idealized gender roles: rather than trying to be a perfect Penelope (who, of course, was never perfect in the first place), the modern woman can get on a bus and leave or divorce her husband and find "affection" and "sweetness" at garden parties ("Heart's Desire" 28, 35). But unlike the other poets, Glück does not envision a world free from repressive notions of gender; rather, she offers the pessimistic advice that women and men should lower their

expectations to a realistic level rather than trying to live up to impossible ideals of femininity, masculinity, and marriage.

Still, H.D., Brooks, and Glück employ similar strategies and work toward a shared goal: undermining the socially prescribed gender roles that repress and psychologically damage their characters. Their allusive methods challenge the notion that they are women writers working with masculine texts by repeatedly exposing that it is not the epics themselves but particular interpretations and ideologies that are misogynistic. But the weight and endurance of the masculinist epic tradition is daunting, and its orthodoxy has led to the marginalization or misconception of these poets' work. Modernist writers lambasted H.D. when she diverged from their Athenian model of classicism to pursue the Alexandian line, and her epic was relegated to obscurity while Pound's *Cantos* became a canonical modernist text. Although feminist critics have rediscovered *Helen in Egypt*, their misconceptions about classical epic have led them to overlook her text's deep engagement with the *Iliad*, which is crucial for understanding the bisexual nature of the Greater Mystery. Similarly, the Black Arts Movement's exclusion of female writers who did not embrace its masculinist ideals led Brooks to disavow the epic context of *Annie Allen* and work, instead, to write poetry valorizing stereotypically masculine revolutionary heroes. The prize-winning collection has received relatively little attention compared to her other works, and the critics who have treated it mischaracterize "The Anniad" as a mock-epic because they fail to see the extent to which Virgil's *Aeneid* provides the basis for Annie's heroism and nation-building project. Time has not proven whether *Meadowlands* will be similarly ignored, yet there is

evidence suggesting it will be. Like H.D, Glück has been faulted for changing the style of her poetry; critics, especially those who persist in characterizing her as an austere and apolitical writer, have criticized her new poetry for failing to resemble her early work. Working from misguided assumptions about epic texts, they are unable to see the complex intertextual relationship between *Meadowlands* and Homer's *Odyssey*, and thus overlook Glück's feminist project. The work of these writers challenges the masculinist tradition, but the dominance of that tradition prevents their projects from being understood, so the perception that they are female writers who invoke and reject misogynistic texts remains in place.

More recently, Anne Carson has taken up the project of these poets in her book *Autobiography of Red* (1998). Like H.D., Brooks, and Glück, she invokes the epic to criticize conventional definitions of gender and thus challenges the stereotypical notion that epic poetry is a thoroughly masculinist genre. And, like H.D. and Brooks, Carson offers a strategy for creating a world where people can live free of repressive social strictures. Her solution is similar to H.D.'s bisexual ideal, but more extreme: whereas H.D.'s text reconciles masculine and feminine, giving everyone the conventionally defined qualities of each gender, *Autobiography of Red* eliminates gender categories altogether.

The long narrative poem that makes up most of Carson's book, "A Romance," tells the story of Geryon's struggle for acceptance in a world that regards him as freakish. The classical source of her poem is not a Homeric or Virgilian epic, but the myth of Herakles' Twelve Labors. A much-celebrated epic poem recounting the Greek hero's

exploits existed in the ancient world, Peisander's *Heraklaie* was regarded as a masterpiece, and the Alexandrian scholars enshrined the author in the epic canon alongside Homer and Hesiod. The poem has not survived to the present day, but its influence is nonetheless pervasive: it codified the story of the Twelve Labors, and it was the first work to depict Herakles in his characteristic lion-skin cloak. Carson thus enters an epic tradition that has no seminal text. Rather, the most immediate source for her poem is one of the early texts in the heterodox tradition that grows out of epic poetry. Like *Helen in Egypt*, Carson's *Autobiography of Red* claims Stesichoros' work, which exists only in fragments today, as its origin. Just as H.D. cites his assertion in the *palinode* that "the story is not true; / [Helen] did not go in the benched ships, / did not come to the Trojan city" as the idea that inspires the plot of her revisionist epic, Carson locates the concept for her own subversive epic in the Greek lyricist's *Geryoneis* (44). The subject of Stesichoros' *Geryoneis* is the tenth labor of Herakles: the hero, as part of his servitude to Eurystheus, was ordered to bring back the red cattle of the winged monster Geryon from the island of Erythia; Herakles killed Geryon and his equally monstrous dog, Orthos, in the process of accomplishing the feat. Stesichoros' *Geryoneis* departs utterly from this tradition, taking the point of view of the doomed Geryon. Carson emphasizes the implications of Steisichoros' departure from tradition: "a more conventional poet [than Stesichoros] might have taken the point of view of Herakles and framed a thrilling account of the victory of culture over monstrosity" (6). Indeed, Herakles is the greatest of the mythological heroes; no other figure is held in such great esteem. Tales that recount, and celebrate, Herakles' slayings of dangerous beasts and

monsters pervade ancient Greek literature, and he is almost universally figured as the protagonist of these stories. There is little doubt that Peisander's lost epic would have taken Herkles' point of view. By rendering Geryon sympathetically, then, Stesichoros troubles the conventional monster-civilization dichotomy.

Carson follows her ancient predecessor in making Geryon the protagonist of *Autobiography of Red*, and she extends the revisionary impulse of his work. She domesticates the mythological three-headed, six-armed giant by transforming him into a small, shy boy whose mother "neaten[s] his little red wings" before sending him to school (36). Carson updates Stesichoros' poem by transporting Geryon to the contemporary world, relocating his island home, Erythia, from ancient Greece to twentieth-century Canada; Herakles travels to the fictional island not in an enchanted golden cup but on a Greyhound bus from New Mexico. Rather than pursuing heroic endeavors with implications for an entire culture, Carson's characters lead average modern lives: Geryon attends kindergarten, eats canned peaches, flies on airplanes, and takes photographs for his autobiography; he and Herakles paint graffiti, eat in diners, and go sight-seeing in Peru. Carson also departs completely from the plot of the traditional tale; she reframes the myth as "A Romance," making the central characters homosexual lovers: rather than killing Geryon, Herakles breaks his heart.

Although Carson draws from a lyrical source and removes the conventional epic grandiosity from her story, the epic genre informs her work nonetheless. Her book designates itself as a "novel in verse" (a form reminiscent of the epic), which features the long narrative poem "A Romance." The poem is divided into 47 separate lyrics, each

preceded by a line of commentary: a format reminiscent of H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt*. Like H.D. and Brooks, Carson utilizes the motif of the heroic quest to valorize her protagonist's struggle to overcome the psychological trauma that social strictures have inflicted on him. Geryon , like Annie Allen, must overcome his emotional impairment to emerge as an autonomous individual, and his victory has similarly collective implications.

The poem follows Geryon's childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood, during which he repeatedly suffers the emotionally devastating rejection. He longs for love and acceptance but is continually thwarted because of the oddity of his appearance and his introspective, sensitive nature. As a child, he is rejected by his peers at school because of his strange appearance and neglected by his father and bullied by his older brother for his lack of stereotypical masculinity. Though his mother is tender, she is unable to fill his desire for sustaining love due to her repeated absence from home. Geryon's brother compounds his emotional trauma by sexually abusing the young boy. As he enters adolescence, Geryon meets Herakles as the young man steps off a bus and falls instantly in love. The two begin dating, but it quickly becomes apparent that they have very different interpretations of their relationship: Geryon feels an all-consuming love for Herakles, whereas the object of his affection is interested in little more than a sexual fling. The two take a roadtrip to Hades, Herakles' hometown, where Herakles seduces and then breaks up with Geryon, who returns to Erythia alone and heartbroken.

Following this episode, the poem skips ahead to Geryon as a young adult. Still devastated by Herakles' rejection and longing for acceptance, he takes an escapist trip to

Buenos Ares where, painfully, he runs into Herakles and his new boyfriend, an indigenous Peruvian named Ancash, who are traveling South America filming volcanoes. He follows them to Peru to film the volcano Icchantikas. While there, he experiences an epiphany that releases him from the pain of his frustrated desire. While wrapping Geryon in a blanket to protect him from the chilly nights in Lima, Ancash happens to see the wings that he keeps carefully hidden. Ancash tells him about the ancient Quechua practice of throwing people into Icchantikas as a "testing procedure" to see if they were "wise ones" (128). The wise ones were called *Yazcol Yazcamac*, "the Ones Who Went and Saw and Came Back," and they emerged from the volcano "*as red people with wings, / all their weaknesses burned away— / and their mortality*" (129). Learning that there are others with bodies like his, and that these people are not only accepted but revered, has a profound effect upon Geryon, though he does not realize it initially. The trio travel to the ancient volcano in Huaraz, Geryon suffering the pangs of eros and taking numerous photographs along the way. While in Huaraz, Geryon and Herakles sleep together. The next morning, Ancash punches Geryon and the two discuss Herakles. Geryon realizes that he no longer loves the man he has desired for so many years. Early the next morning, acting on Ancash's request, he uses his wings for the first time in years and videotapes himself flying into the volcano. Having accepted his monstrous appearance and burned away the weakness of his self-destructive love for Herakles, Geryon stands comfortably with the couple at the end of the book, watching men bake bread in ovens heated by the volcano.

The frustrated desire for acceptance that structures Geryon's life stems from his physical and psychological deviance from normalcy. In emphasizing the ways that difference occasions Geryon's anguished longing, Carson challenges the societal practice of normalizing and compartmentalizing bodies and identities. Equating queerness with monstrosity or depicting queer people as actual monsters (or vice versa) is a long-standing motif that literalizes and reinforces the perception of queerness as an abnormality. Monsters embody the ways that queer people are stereotypically described: they have abnormal, if not grotesque, appearances, they are immoral, they prey upon the innocent, and they present a threat to society. Carson invokes and subverts this motif by transforming Geryon, a mythical monster, into a homosexual man who is less monstrous than the conventionally normal people who surround him, thus challenging conventional definitions of normality and abnormality and domesticating Geryon's supposedly monstrous homosexuality.

"A Romance" can be read as an epic coming-out narrative centered on Geryon's monstrous appearance, the metaphorical representation of his queerness. He becomes aware of his difference at an early age when his peers reject him. As he matures, he attempts to cover up his abnormality in an attempt to fit in: he "lashe[s] [his] wings tight" with a "wooden plank," wears a "huge overcoat" and "tighten[s] his wings" in public, and he panics and struggles when Ancash removes his coat (53, 82). When Ancash tells Geryon about the *Yazcol Yazcamac*, the young monster experiences an epiphany that Sacvan Bercovitch and Cyrus R. K. Patell describe as central to coming-out narratives, which "often turn on the realization that the narrator's experience is shared by a broad

community of other individuals" (561). After learning that there are other red, winged people like him, Geryon is finally able to accept his identity, coming out of the closet, so to speak, by videotaping himself flying over a volcano, thus fulfilling his heroic quest for autonomy. As is the case with Brooks' *Annie Allen*, the fulfillment of the quest has collective implications: just as Annie overcomes sexist and racist notions of her proper place in society to emerge as a model for black women, Geryon's victory valorizes coming out as an act of resistance and establishes him as a cultural hero for queer people.

As a coming-out narrative, "A Romance" resists the stereotypical conception of homosexuality as dangerously abnormal and illustrates the damaging consequences of society's marginalization of those whom it deems deviant. Indeed, though Geryon's body marks him as different from what society deems normal, Carson's poem downplays his difference to challenge the very notion that he is abnormal. Carson removes the most grotesque aspects of the mythical monster's appearance: his three heads and torsos, six arms, and giant stature; all that she retains from the original depiction are his red color and wings, the original monster's most non-threatening physical features. She describes these features in "Red Meat: the Fragments of Stesichoros," the section of unorthodox translations that precedes the long poem, but they do not enter into Geryon's narrative until the fifth section of the poem. The late and incidental appearance of his unusual physiology in the story, and the matter-of-fact manner in which it is presented, depict his supposed monstrosity, and hence his sexuality, as unremarkable, thus completing the domestication of Geryon that begins with Stesichoros' poem. Carson also removes the original creature's giant stature and violent ferocity, instead turning her Geryon into a shy

and sensitive young boy. Not only does this rendering earn sympathy for her protagonist and make him seem more human than monstrous, it also undermines the notion that homosexuals are dangerous. Society presents a far more serious threat to Geryon than he presents to it.

The supposedly normal people who surround Geryon appear monstrous in comparison with him. When he goes out in public, he regularly experiences the outside world as grotesque and threatening. The schoolyard is an "intolerable red assault of grass" that "pull[s] him towards it / like a strong sea," threatening to drown him in the "children pour[ing] around him" and to maim his body: his eyes "[lean] out of his skull / on their little connectors" (23). He is similarly overwhelmed in Buenos Ares. As he walks through the streets, "people [flood] around his big overcoat on every side" and "traffic crashe[s] past him" (84, 85). In the tango bar where he seeks respite from his pain, the accordion threatens to "crush him flat," the dancers "[stalk] / one another," the singer has a "throat full of needles," and he is forcibly "tumbled [. . .] into a recollection" of the "hours of music [that] crashed / on his ears" at a school dance, the entirety of which he spent standing alone against a wall, sweating profusely in his jacket (99, 100, 101). He perceives that he "[is] disappearing" in the flood of "pocket calculators, socks, / round loaves of hot bread, televisions, lengths of leather, Inca Kola, tombstones, / bananas, avocados, aspirin" in Huaraz (135). These scenes emphasize Geryon's separation from the rest of the world (he is unmoving in floods of people, sits alone at the tango bar and stands alone at the dance, disappears in the bustle of the market place) and reference the reasons for his alienation: his redness, suggested by the "red assault of

grass," and the wings that he hides under his coat. The grotesque and threatening nature of the outside world inverts the conventional depiction of monsters/homosexuals as grotesque figures that threaten civilized society. Carson similarly subverts the conception of such deviants as preying upon innocent (heterosexual) people. Geryon's naivety and desire for acceptance, a consequence of his marginalization, allow him to fall victim to the predations of his brother and Herakles.

Geryon's victimization reveals the consequences of repressive gender normalization. Like the other poets in this study, Carson emphasizes that traditional masculinity is inherently destructive. Both of the men in Geryon's family are stereotypical males, and they shun or abuse him for his lack of masculine qualities. The poem only mentions his father once, when it describes Geryon's enjoyment of being alone with his mother on Tuesday evenings while his father and brother attend hockey games together, implying that the young boy's preference for time with his mother over watching violent sports results in his father's neglect. Beyond having a suitably manly appreciation for sporting events, Geryon's brother throws rocks, likes to wrestle, watches Clint Eastwood movies, and gorges on bologna sandwiches, leaving the bologna wrapper and condiments on the counter (with the lids off, of course) for someone else to clean up. Geryon's introspective nature repels his masculine brother, who finds that the "look in [Geryon's] eyes ma[kes] a person feel strange" (24). His younger brother's gentleness, passivity, and desire to please others (traditional feminine qualities) make him an easy target; he bullies Geryon into submission emotionally ("*Stupid*, said Geryon's brother [. . .] Geryon had no doubt *stupid* was correct") and physically (putting a fruit bowl over his

head, putting him in "*the silent death hold*," snapping him with a rubber band), only showing him kindness after he has molested Geryon, thus conditioning him to accept the abuse (24, 31). Geryon's stereotypically feminine qualities contribute indirectly to his abuse: they are the reason he is alienated from the male members of his family, thus creating the intense desire for attention that his brother exploits. Yet his brother's conformity to masculine ideals is also a factor. Because gay men are stereotyped as effeminate, the older brother's homosexual desire presents a supposed threat to his masculinity, which he compensates for through his hyper-masculine behavior and abuse of his effeminate younger brother. In molesting Geryon, who is too young to understand what is happening to him and whom he can silence through a cycle of bullying and rewards, he is able to indulge his desire while keeping his homosexuality hidden. The sexual abuse inflicted on Geryon is a disturbingly common phenomenon that is often cited as so-called evidence of homosexuality's perversity. In revealing the gender dynamic that underlies the young boy's molestation, Carson's poem suggests that it is heteronormativity and a repressive definition of what is masculine, rather than homosexuality, that cause such abuse.

Geryon's relationship with Herakles extends Carson's criticism of conventional gender categories. The mythological figure of Herakles has been regarded as a masculine ideal from ancient Greece up to the present day: he is handsome, strong, courageous, bellicose, and a prolific lover. This promiscuity included both male and female lovers, a detail that is conveniently omitted in most modern representations of ancient heroes (the epic warriors in the movie *Troy*, to cite just one recent example, are all depicted as

straight). In depicting Herakles as Geryon's gay lover, Carson proposes that masculinity and homosexuality are not mutually exclusive categories. Her characterization of Herakles reminds her audience that the figures who have informed contemporary conceptions of what constitutes proper masculine behavior regularly engaged in homosexual relationships. She further undermines traditional conceptions of masculinity by reducing the great, manly hero to a stereotypical teenaged boy. He paints graffiti, shocks his grandmother with profanity, uses Geryon for sex, dumps him with an insulting cliché ("*Geryon we're true friends you know that's why / I want you to be free*"), and callously enthuses to the broken-hearted young man that his new boyfriend will teach him how to box (74). He is no more mature as a young man: he has impulsively turned to making documentaries, steals a painted wooden tiger from Harrod's, toys with Geryon by kissing and fondling him on the plane to Lima and by making suggestive remarks to him in front of Ancash, then exploits his enduring love to cheat on Ancash. As Ian Rae has observed, drawing from Teresa de Lauretis' discussion of the masculine ideal in quest narratives, "Carson's portrait of [Herakles] matches his traditional profile as 'the heroic individual performing incredible feats, single-handed[ly], in remote corners of the earth'" (243). While she retains the hero's masculine qualities—he is a handsome and adventurous conqueror—she depicts these qualities as anything but ideal: his "single-handed" exploits are selfish and cruel, his "incredible feats" amount to little more than petty crime, and his conquests "in remote corners of the earth" leave behind a trail of angry and despondent lovers like Ancash and Geryon.

Geryon extends Carson's criticism of conventional gender identities by emerging as a genderless epic hero. As Rae has argued, "if one tries to determine the gender of this [. . .] monster, an important fissure emerges in the narrative" (245). While the text straightforwardly refers to Geryon with masculine pronouns, the character himself identifies with, and occasionally thinks of himself as, female. As a child, he stares with "amazement" at his mother, who "look[s] so brave" as she "rhineston[es] past" him with "all her breasts on" (30). Beyond subverting gender stereotypes by coding bravery as feminine, the scene suggests that Geryon envies not only his mother's courage but also her cultural markers of femininity: it is her female body and clothing that make her look brave to him. This scene is recalled later in the poem, when Geryon enters Herakles' mother's room: when he switches on the light, the room suddenly appears

> like an angry surf with its unappeasable debris
>
> of woman liquors, he saw a slip
>
> a dropped magazine combs baby powder a stack of phone books a bowl of pearls
>
> a teacup with water in it himself
>
> in the mirror cruel as a slash of lipstick—he banged the light off.
>
> He had been here before, dangling
>
> inside the word *she* like a trinket at a belt. Spokes of red rang across his eyelids
>
> in the blackness. (57)

The "angry surf," "unappeasable debris," and "cruel slash" of the woman's belongings threaten to overwhelm him, but they are nevertheless intoxicating "liquors" to Geryon, who at this point in the narrative still struggles to suppress his queer monstrosity—a

component of which is his perception of himself as female. Beyond literally depicting him surrounded by symbols of conventional femininity, that Geryon finds himself "inside the word *she*," as he had "before" during his childhood, suggests he is part of the "she" category. The lack of punctuation and the enjambment of these lines includes Geryon "himself" in the catalogue of feminine items, and the similes comparing him to lipstick and to a trinket on a woman's belt amplify his characterization as feminine. Similarly, the night before he enters Herakles' mother's room, Geryon lies awake at night, wondering "what [it is] like to be a woman / listening in the dark" and imagines a disturbing scenario in which a woman lies awake listening:

> Black mantle of silence stretches between them
>
> like geothermal pressure.
>
> Ascent of the rapist up the stairs seems slow as lava. She listens
>
> to the blank space where
>
> his consciousness is, moving towards her. Lava can move as slow as
>
> nine hours per inch. (48)

The ambiguity of the pronouns in this passage blurs Geryon with the woman. Grammatically, the "them" between whom the "black mantle of silence stretches" most immediately refers to the woman and the boy, both of whom lie awake in upstairs bedrooms "listening in the dark." She "listens to the blank space" of the rapist's "consciousness" just as Geryon listens to the "black central stalled night" of a "house of sleepers" that includes a predatory male: Herakles. At this point in the narrative, as Geryon still struggles to suppress his abnormal body, his identification with women

makes him uneasy because he perceives femininity in stereotypical terms, associating it with rhinestones, breasts, perfume, lipstick, passivity, and victimization. However, Icchantikas, the volcano into which he flies during his coming out is gendered female and thus figures femininity as a powerful force. He "peers down into [. . .] her ancient eye" as he flies into the crater, his male body merging with the female volcano (145). The poem thus suggests that gender is one of the "*weaknesses*" that is "*burned away*" as Geryon fulfills the heroic quest to come out, not as a gay man, but rather as having transcended gender and identity categories.

Carson's hero helps her avoid the critical problems that H.D., Brooks, and Glück have faced. Because Geryon is genderless, *Autobiography of Red* cannot be regarded as a feminist text operating in a masculine tradition. Further, Carson cannot be characterized as a woman writer struggling to revise misogynistic texts. Peisander's text has been lost, and Steisichoros' text exists only in fragments, so they have not spawned a masculinist reading tradition. Also, Carson refuses gender identification. In an interview with the writer, Mary di Michele cites Carson's claim in "Anthropology of Water" that she "rarely use[s] the word woman" and asks: "what is the relationship of your writing to this word 'woman'? To being a woman," to which Carson responds: "a relationship of dis-ease" (14). Her punning reply not only conveys her discomfort with being defined as a writer by gender but also characterizes the practice of applying such labels as an affliction. As a writer seeking to elude gender categories writing an epic about an ambiguously gendered hero based on a barely-extant textual tradition, Carson makes it difficult to stereotype her

work or its tradition; indeed, many of her critics are bewildered by her work's resistance to easy categorization.

Carson's domestication of the mythical monster Geryon serves as a metaphor for the collective project of the writers I have examined in this dissertation. Many twentieth-century critics have come to regard epic poetry as a monster whose monumental stature and brutish conventions are outdated in the contemporary world. Yet, just as Carson humanizes Geryon by taking away his multiple heads, many pairs of arms, and violent disposition, thus rendering him as a man who happens to have red skin and wings, the poets of this study domesticate the classical epics. In using the supposedly monstrous genre for "civilizing a space" ("[First Fight]"), as Brooks says, undermining sexism, racism, and heterocentrism to point toward a world where historically marginalized people can flourish, H.D., Brooks, Glück, and Carson have, in turn, worked to create a literary landscape in which the epic tradition can flourish again.

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