

Monologue and Dialogue: The *Odyssey* in Contemporary Women's Poetry

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Homer's *Odyssey* is enriched by the telling and retelling of stories: the poem presents versions of Odysseus' journey to Ithaca told by the hero, witnesses of the Trojan War and court bards, and the audiences within the poem are also seen to shape the narrative. The text seems particularly to invite and encourage further reworking of its materials, inspiring formal experimentation and informing changing notions of the role of the poet. A crucial aspect of the epic tradition is the poet's virtuosity in the handling of inherited materials, and the *Odyssey* itself exhibits a playful approach to allusion and appropriation in its 'simultaneous dependence on and disengagement from the Iliadic tradition' (Pucci 1987: 18). Homer's selective and episodic approach to narrative offers diverse resources for appropriation in subsequent texts, whether in Greek tragedy, the dramatic monologue or the novel. One of the most celebrated examples of Homeric reception is Tennyson's dramatic monologue 'Ulysses' (1842), in which the poet both pays tribute to Homer (and Dante) and claims his own place in the epic tradition. Following Tennyson's example, modern poets have favoured the dramatic monologue as a form which allows them to enter into dialogue with a revered canonical text, often in an irreverent or subversive manner. The prominence of such poems in the reception of classical texts is evident in anthologies such as Deborah de Nicola's *Orpheus & Company: Contemporary Poems on Greek Mythology* (1999) and Nina Kossman's *Gods and Mortals: Modern Poems on Classical Myths* (2001). Women writers often represent female characters who are peripheral and largely silent in classical texts in order to articulate some element of the story that was previously untold. Dramatic monologues are crucial to the 'revisionist mythology' of women writers in a period of 'increasing self-consciousness, increasing irony, and increasing awareness that the poet ... may also deviate from or explicitly challenge the meanings attributed to mythic figures and tales' (Ostriker 1986: 215). In 'Re-Reading the

Odyssey in Middle Age' (1988), Linda Pastan supplies the stories 'that no one bothers to tell', from speakers such as Circe, Eurycleia and an anonymous suitor. Carol Ann Duffy's 'Penelope' and 'Circe' appear in her collection of dramatic monologues, *The World's Wife* (1999), with other poems disputing established versions of literature and history from the disenchanted or furious perspective of women who are commonly ignored in favour of their husbands' stories, such as 'Mrs Midas', 'Mrs Lazarus', 'The Devil's Wife' and 'Pygmalion's Bride'. Sequences in which multiple perspectives can be juxtaposed are used to retell the story of Penelope and Odysseus: Louise Glück's *Meadowlands* (1996) interweaves the ending of a marriage between anonymous contemporary speakers with elements of the *Odyssey*. The idea of Odysseus's unreliability as a narrator is a frequent theme: in Judith Kazantzis' *The Odysseus Poems* (1999) other characters speak in 'Asides' that contradict his stories. Such rewritings may relocate Odysseus to the margins of the story and question the importance of his heroic adventures, emphasising instead the 'romantic, domestic *Odyssey*, filled / With goddesses, mortal women, pigs, and homecoming' (Ostriker 1982: 49-50).

Storytelling for entertainment, in return for hospitality or to establish a stranger's identity is a repeated motif in the *Odyssey*. Characters such as Menelaus, Nestor and Helen tell stories of the Trojan War and the journey home. Phemius demonstrates the role of the bard in establishing and maintaining the hero's *kleos* by immortalising his deeds in song, and Telemachus rebukes Penelope for responding emotionally to the performance. Odysseus weeps at hearing his conflict with Achilles and the episode of the Trojan horse sung by Demodocus. Odysseus also tells stories of his adventures, embellishing or concealing details to suit the occasion. His proficiency is so great that his voice supplants that of the narrator for four books of the poem. Seth Schein points out that for many readers Books 9-12 form 'the most memorable section of the *Odyssey*' but cautions that 'these stories are narrated in the first person by Odysseus and constitute *his*, not the poem's, versions of heroic experience'

(1995: 19). He is a skilful speaker, using ‘detailed narrative, similes, elaborate direct speech, and conversational exchanges to slow the tale and to quicken suspense in his audience’ (Minchin 2007: 266-7). He tells the Phaeacians the story of his experiences on Calypso’s island in Book 7 without identifying himself. In Book 9, following the endorsement of his heroic reputation by the bard, he begins his narrative with his escape from Troy and tells of the adventures that the audience of the *Odyssey* might have expected to hear at the start of the poem. The brutality of the Cyclops, the languorous island of the lotos-eaters, Circe’s enchantments, the visit to the underworld and a painstaking navigation between Scylla and Charybdis are just some of the episodes that appear for the first time in the poem in Odysseus’ words. He ends his long tale on Calypso’s island, where Homer picked up the story and showed Odysseus as a surprisingly vulnerable hero in Book 1. No other character has as much control over the narrative of Odysseus’ homecoming as he does. Although Helen, Circe, the Sirens and Penelope briefly narrate parts of the story, these ‘female narratives tend to be followed – and thus answered, completed, or even undercut – by male narratives’. The ‘gesture of inclusion’ ends up ‘reinforcing androcentric norms for female behaviour’ (Doherty 1995: 22-3). However, these short speeches can be seen as offering a way into the poem, inviting a creative response to the brevity of what is disclosed.

The dramatic presentation of character makes the Homeric poems especially appropriate sources for monologues: Elizabeth Minchin comments on ‘the frequency with which Homer’s characters speak in their own voices, the sustained nature of their speaking turns, and the liveliness of their presentation’ (2007: 3). In the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, speeches by the characters make up more than half of each poem, and in the *Odyssey* a particularly ‘high proportion’ (68%) of the poem represents speech (Griffin 2004: 156). Odysseus’ reputed rhetorical skill is a challenge to the poet who seeks to emulate Homer. Competitiveness is part of the epic tradition: the poet attempts to surpass predecessors by incorporating features

of previous poems into a work that is distinctively new. Such reworkings do not necessarily take the form of epics of twelve or twenty-four books but may recast epic materials in shorter forms and in a comic or mock-epic mode. Hellenistic poets such as Callimachus and Apollonius of Rhodes chose to create erudite, self-conscious poetry such as *Hecale* or the *Argonautica* instead of inferior imitations of Homer; their stylistic influence re-entered the epic mainstream in Virgil's *Aeneid*, which reworks the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* for an audience familiar with the Alexandrian distrust of epic. In secondary epic the poet also begins to 'add a private note to his public voice' (Hainsworth 1991:10). The idea of multiple or 'further' voices undermining the official narrative is particularly associated with readings of Virgil, and especially with those characters who seem to threaten the destiny of Rome, such as Dido and Turnus (Lyne 1987: 224). These subversive voices within the poem itself may help to explain why there are fewer dramatic monologues spoken by Virgil's characters than Homer's.

Critics have argued that a poem spoken by a character who is not the poet derives from the rhetorical practice of *prosopopoeia* (impersonation), and is found in poetic forms such as 'the complaint, the epistle and the humorous colloquial monologue' (Sinfield 1977: 42) or monodrama (Culler 1975: 368). Ovid's *Heroides* are presented in the form of epistles by deserted heroines to their absent lovers, with Homeric figures such as Penelope, Briseis and Helen prominent in the collection, and they show 'what became of the people who just happened to be in the hero's way' (Mack 1988: 19). As Lawrence Lipking observes, 'the poetry of abandoned women is highly subversive,' since such poems question the importance of heroic activity (1988: 3-4). Penelope in *Heroides* 1 draws attention to the discord created by war for those left at home: she is lonely and cynical about the likelihood of Ulysses' fidelity to her over the twenty years of his absence (Kennedy 1984; Verducci 1985; Fulkerson 2005). Her anxiety that she will appear rustic and dull informs Ulysses' disparaging allusion

to his 'aged wife' in Tennyson's poem (Markley 2009). By choosing a speaker from an existing myth or literary text, as Ovid does, the poet can assume that the traditional characters of Odysseus and Penelope are already known to the reader and that details of the character's history can be omitted from the poem itself. Any digressions from the familiar narrative draw attention to the poet's inventiveness. In 'Ulysses', a poem only a fraction of the length of a single book of Homer, Tennyson creates a new and distinctive voice for the hero. In place of the active, devious adventurer of the *Odyssey* who seeks to return home, Tennyson presents an older, dissatisfied king who finds Ithaca remote and uncivilised, and his wife and son too dull to hold his interest. Set against the world-weariness of Ulysses' condemnation of his home is his desire to embark on a new voyage; his skill in speaking of his heroic past and his compulsion to keep testing the limits of human achievement have made the poem a touchstone (Tennyson 1987: 1. 613-20). In alluding to a well-known story, the poet can create dramatic irony by setting the speaker's emotion against 'external factors that are known to the reader but not to the speaker' (Sinfield 1977: 47). Ulysses' longing 'To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths / Of all the western stars, until I die' is undermined for the reader not only by the Homeric account of Tiresias' prophecy that he will die far from the sea but also by Dante's *Inferno*, which shows that Ulisse and his men sailed past the end of the world and into hell.

The dramatic monologue is particularly associated with the Victorian period (Tennyson and Browning developed the form in the 1830s), and it has been described as "the most significant poetic innovation of the age" (Slinn 2002: 80). The dramatic monologue is spoken by an 'I' who is explicitly identified as someone other than the poet; narrative is implied rather than told and an aspect of personality is dramatized. The poet can avoid confessional subjectivity and the constraints of gender and history, or explore psychological extremes whilst remaining separate from the speaker. Conflict between Romantic notions of

spontaneity and self-expression in poetry and rigid notions of propriety made the use of a mask a powerful mode of dramatizing the self. The genre evokes the nineteenth-century preoccupation with Shakespeare's soliloquies (although the monologue represents speech addressed to an auditor), and many dramatic monologues are written in blank verse. Without any scenery, costumes or commentary from other characters, the mental state of the speaker has to supply the dramatic interest of the whole within a relatively brief poem. The poet attempts to ventriloquize a character, while remaining detached enough to manipulate the tone of the speech to pass judgement on the speaker (Langbaum 1957). The speech may seem to reveal more than the speaker intends (a notable example is Robert Browning's 'My Last Duchess'). Alan Sinfield comments that the reader of a dramatic monologue is confronted with "a divided consciousness. We are impressed, with the full strength of first-person presentation, by the speaker and feel drawn into his point of view, but at the same time are aware that there are other possible, even preferable, perspectives" (1977: 32). The dramatic monologue is a popular and pleasurable form of poetry, but also one that requires active participation on the part of the reader to interpret 'a range of ambiguities' (Hughes 2010: 15).

Later Victorian poets found the classical dramatic monologue (like Tennyson's 'Ulysses' or 'Tithonus') a valuable model. Tennyson's intertextual experimentation and Browning's fascination with the psychology of the mad or the murderous could be merged in the voice of a single character from a classical text, such as Medea or Clytemnestra. For women writers such as Augusta Webster and Amy Levy, Greek tragedy and history offered heroines who spoke eloquently about women's thwarted potential and the flagrant double standards about sexuality for men and women in a way that resonated with contemporary gender ideology. To speak directly and unapologetically of the suffering of women in a patriarchal culture in a dramatic text, as Augusta Webster did in the heroine's speech to the women of Corinth in her 1868 translation of Euripides' *Medea* and then in her dramatic

monologue 'Medea in Athens' (1870), offered some level of protection to the poet. The mask of the ancient heroine made it possible for a Victorian woman writer to express anger that she could not otherwise articulate so directly, in a heightened form of expression (Brown 1995; Scheinberg 1997). As Glennis Byron demonstrates, women poets played 'a primary role in establishing and defining that line of development which has proven most enduring: the use of the monologue for purposes of social critique' (2003: 84). Protesting about the restrictions imposed on women was not the only function of the dramatic monologue for women writers, since the mask also enabled them to adopt a more overtly sexual persona: Webster's Circe speaks of her own desires using sensuous imagery that would be incongruous or shocking in a poem about the life of a nineteenth-century woman. Circe remains a liberating mask for women writers in the late twentieth century, like Linda Pastan and Carol Ann Duffy, enabling them to explore ideas of power and sexuality outside the constraints of marriage.

Character is central to the readability of the dramatic monologue. For Victorian readers, the dramatic monologue was 'the poetry of psychology', a science which developed alongside and in dialogue with nineteenth-century literature (Faas 1988: 12). Dorothy Mermin suggests that Victorian critics looked for 'narrative and characterization' in poetry, praising the 'novelistic qualities' of poets such as Tennyson. However, the dramatic monologue does not allow for the complex process of character development that the novel can accommodate, and is best suited to 'a romantic, pathetic, or melodramatic anecdote' (1983: 9-10). This means that using an established character as the speaker and focusing on an incident or a mood which illuminates a new aspect of the character can be an effective strategy. Elizabeth Dodd writes of 'personal classicism' as a poetic mode rooted in the nineteenth century and developing through the twentieth century: 'poetry founded on emotion, particularly sexual and familial love, often based on the writer's own experience', in which the expression of universality is achieved through the particular. The emotion in such

poems is controlled, Dodd suggests, using distancing techniques such as the use of personae or allusion (1992: 6). Modernist uses of myth and appropriations of the dramatic monologue also inform contemporary women writers' poems with classical characters. Glennis Byron argues that Eliot and Pound reacted against their Victorian predecessors by attempting to 'undercut any naturalistic notion of character' through 'an intensification of the sense of the controlling hand of the poet', so that the speaker is both poet and character (2002: 113).¹ The sense that the speaker of a dramatic monologue has a double voice may help to explain the prominence of the form for women poets who attempt to negotiate between the confessional mode and the universal (or what Browning called subjective and objective poetry).

Adrienne Rich claimed that 'Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction' is 'part of our refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society' (1979: 35). Penelope has been reinterpreted by feminist poets and scholars as a complex and indeterminate character, whose epithet 'circumspect' conceals a subtle type of heroism that is as essential to the preservation of Odysseus' kingdom as his more spectacular feats (Felson-Rubin 1994; Clayton 2004; Heitman 2005). Women poets' responses to Penelope frequently focus on her weaving, making her a figure for creativity within the home and engaging with the vexed question of how to balance art and domesticity (Hurst 2009). Her strategy of resisting her unwelcome suitors by weaving and unweaving Laertes' shroud for three years is told in Book 2 of the *Odyssey*, establishing her loyalty to Odysseus. For women writers the significance of Penelope's weaving extends beyond her delaying tactics to a fascination with the theme of weaving, unweaving and reweaving as a metaphor for poetry and other types of artistic

¹ While the most obvious Modernist appropriations of the Victorian dramatic monologue are Pound's 'personae' and Eliot's monologues, often seen as a kind of apprentice poetry that the poets abandoned later in their careers, Carrie J. Preston points out that for women writers such as Charlotte Mew, Amy Lowell and H. D. the dramatic monologue continued to be an important form (2011: 102).

endeavour. Penelope's web is interpreted as an enigmatic archetype of women's writing, onto which the writer can project her own creative ambitions. Carolyn Heilbrun notes that 'we do not see Penelope between Books 4 and 16' of the *Odyssey*, suggesting that during that time Penelope 'is writing her own story, one that has never been written before ... trying out stories on her loom' (1990: 107). Carol Ann Duffy's Penelope looks for her husband's return for the first six months of his absence but then becomes engrossed by her sewing, in which she depicts first a girl playing with a ball and then a maiden embracing 'heroism's boy' before he sails away. The 'wild embroidery of love, lust, loss, lessons learnt' seems to be an autobiographical narrative. Penelope delays the suitors by embarking on the portrait of a smiling woman who is 'at the centre / of this world, self-contained, absorbed, content, / most certainly not waiting' (Duffy 1999: 70-71). By the time Odysseus' step is heard outside, the work of art has displaced him from the centre of Penelope's life.

The question of what Penelope was doing during Odysseus' lengthy absence from Ithaca is a perennial one for readers of the *Odyssey*, and the references to Clytemnestra and Agamemnon in the poem highlight the risk that Odysseus is taking if Penelope's reputation for fidelity is undeserved. Sheila Murnaghan and Deborah Roberts suggest that the untold stories that poets like Linda Pastan and Louise Glück draw attention to 'represent variant traditions that Homeric epic chooses not to tell or not to tell fully', and that these poets are retracing Homer's steps, but in reverse, unmaking ancient choices about what to highlight and what to obscure' (2002: 28). One variant tradition is dismissed as 'outrageous' by Margaret Atwood's Penelope – the claim that she might have 'slept with all the Suitors, one after another – and then gave birth to the Great God Pan' (2005: 144). Froma Zeitlin comments that the question of Penelope's sexual fidelity 'is the principal anxiety that hovers over' the *Odyssey* (1996: 25), and it is a conspicuous issue in women writers' interpretations of Penelope. They challenge what Atwood's Penelope calls the 'official version' of her

character: ‘An edifying legend. A stick to beat other women with’ (2005: 2). An idiosyncratically comic subversion of the legend appears in Linda Pastan’s ‘Argos’, when Odysseus’ dog claims for himself the reputation for faithfulness that other texts attribute to Penelope, since he knew Odysseus straight away and did not demand proof: ‘Shaggy and incontinent, / I have become the very legend / of fidelity’ (1989).

The modern Penelope often admits to some unfaithfulness. In *The Odysseus Poems* (1999), Judith Kazantzis retells episodes from the *Odyssey* in monologues spoken by Odysseus, with ‘Asides’ from characters such as Nausicaa, Calypso, Penelope and Telemachus giving their accounts, which often present Odysseus in an unflattering light. In ‘Aside: Penelope at night’, a monologue addressed to the absent Odysseus, she admits in passing that while she puts off marrying any of her suitors, she is ‘not necessarily’ so cautious about ‘the nights’. Her resentment of Odysseus’ infidelities is exacerbated by a sense of being compared not with other mortal women but with powerful and magical beings she imagines as unrestrained in their sexuality:

I’m bundled in, cheek by cheek
with impossible fairy women
masterful and all-giving beyond
anything I ever did for you in bed. (Kazantzis 1999: 29-30)

Prioritising home and family over his famous adventures, Odysseus’ wife and son react more strongly to the idea of Odysseus’ sexual exploits than to the heroic feats that Odysseus relates. Telemachus’ aside reveals that he feels scepticism about his father’s stories, which seem as fictional as the songs that the bards have composed about him:

Did he really, roped up,
say ‘not today’ to the Sirens?

As for the unstoppable

two goddesses –

and their sex slave?

Men cheer

When the poet sings

My father's great escapes.

Women are spellbound.

I hide a grin ... (Kazantzis 1999: 63-4)

Telemachus does not express any concern about his mother's fidelity in this aside, yet Penelope's wry awareness of Odysseus' dalliances with Circe and Calypso is not the only source of her disquiet. In 'Aside: Her message in the weaving', she seems also to be conscious of the warnings that the ghost of Agamemnon has issued about the danger of returning home, and what Telemachus may have heard from Menelaus. She fears that her reputation and her husband's trust may depend less on her own choices than on the misogynistic stories that conflate her with Clytemnestra and Helen:

To my dearest friend,

my husband,

don't listen to dead people, (dead
generals, such known lovers of women).

your Telemachos half thinks I'm ripe

to be another murderess. Menelaos

stoked cheap fears into his head on fire. (Kazantzis 1999: 33-4)

While Penelope may indulge her own desires in the absence of Odysseus, she is strongly associated with marriage; Circe is often represented as an alluring alternative but this positioning still reduces her to a role dependent on her relationship with a man. In Linda Pastan's 'Circe' (1989), the sorceress prides herself on being 'the other woman', a glamorous figure who does not concern herself with the mundane housewifery of Penelope. She disparages Nausicaa's admiration of the 'clean and oiled' Odysseus, while the sensual Circe prefers the 'briny / unkempt lion'. As Murnaghan and Roberts point out, the allusion to a lion recalls *Odyssey* 6. 130-6, in which Odysseus is compared with a marauding lion in terms suggesting 'sexuality and danger', while the hero makes strenuous attempts to present himself to Nausicaa as civilised and unthreatening (2002: 30). However, the role of the 'other woman' is not as gratifying as Circe would like to suggest: her apparent confidence is more fragile than she admits at first, and her continuing obsession with Odysseus is revealing. Odysseus left Circe's island years before his encounter with Nausicaa, yet Circe still seems familiar with the details of his life. She is self-conscious about her position as a deserted lover, with no intention of emulating the abandoned heroines whose passion leads to self-destruction, but the monologue makes it clear that she cannot let go of the past:

Let Dido and her kind

leap from cliffs

for love.

My men will moan and dream of me

for years ...

In the poem's final stanza, she exchanges her defiance for a wistful recognition that 'To be the other woman / is to be a season / that is always about to end'. Her lush description of her

island's flawless weather and air scented with flowers and fruit, ends with the anticipation of a hurricane that will end the charmed 'season', suggesting the end of her romantic fantasies.

Waiting for the ships that would bring men to her island is a thing of the past for Circe in the last stanza of Carol Ann Duffy's monologue. Jeffrey Wainwright proposes two possible readings of her reminiscences: 'a parody of girlish romanticism' or an evocation of 'a lost and lamented eroticism' (2003: 52). The poem's instability of tone makes it difficult to interpret Circe's emotions, which are quickly undermined by practical considerations: 'Now / let us baste that sizzling pig on the spit once again.' This final line returns to the provocative and grotesque parody of domesticity that dominates the monologue. Circe seems akin to the unexpectedly cruel figures that Browning explores, and her language, especially in the first stanza, recalls Browning's use of colloquial and extraordinary diction in his dramatic monologues. Circe addresses a group of nereids and nymphs, regaling them with her familiarity with the 'yobby, porky colognes' of the pigs, tuskers, boars and swine under her care before briskly instructing them with some 'tongue in cheek' recipes for pork dishes. The graceful insubstantiality of the nymphs contrasts with the fleshiness of the animals they chop into pieces of meat. It becomes increasingly clear that for Circe the pigs are still the men they were before her spells, and her description of 'the skills of the tongue' intensifies the sexual overtones of the poem. The juxtaposition of human characteristics and features with ingredients lends a sinister air to the proceedings: 'the cowardly face, the brave, the comical, noble, / sly or wise, the cruel, the kind, but all of them, / nymphs, with those piggy eyes. Season with mace.' The feast that Circe and her nymphs are preparing begins to resemble the cannibalism that is a marker of Odysseus' most brutal enemies, such as the Cyclopes and the Laestrygonians. The men's lack of attention to women's voices is the reason the sorceress gives for her ruthless enjoyment of the chopping and cooking, but her solution to the problem seems deranged:

Well-cleaned pig's ears should be blanched, singed, tossed
in a pot, boiled, kept hot, scraped, served, garnished
with thyme. Look at that simmering lug, at that ear,
did it listen, ever, to you, to your prayers and rhymes,
to the chimes of your voice, singing and clear? (Duffy 1999: 47-8)

Unlike the understandably self-absorbed Penelope, whose connection to her husband has become less important than her sewing, Circe has twisted the domestic art of cookery into disturbing vengeance against men. Susanna Braund comments that in 'Mrs Midas' (also in *The World's Wife*), Duffy extends the story beyond the point at which the reader can feel 'unconditional sympathy' for the speaker by introducing a double perspective: 'Duffy challenges us to decide whether or not we like her or approve of her' (2012: 201-2). The tension between sympathy and judgement is a familiar one for readers of the dramatic monologues and Circe, despite her companionable tone, is not a sympathetic figure.

When the voices of Penelope and Odysseus are placed alongside those of other characters, their relationship is vulnerable to hostile and partial readings. In *Meadowlands* (1996), a sequence of 46 poems, Louise Glück explores the prolonged ending of a long marriage. By juxtaposing the modern couple with Penelope and Odysseus, Glück prevents the reader from sympathising too readily with any one person. Glück has commented that she had 'no wish to write a lacerating book about divorce', but rather wanted to write a 'genial, forgiving, tolerant book of adult love. ... What the book ended up by being was a double narrative, in which the dissolution of a contemporary marriage, which is elaborated in a series of petulant, comic conversations and private bickerings, alternates with, is threaded through, with the story of Odysseus and Penelope' (Cavaliere 2000). Daniel Morris asserts that Glück is attempting to 'contain' painful circumstances by 'dressing herself up as Penelope': 'the

traumatic dissolution of the contemporary marriage, the confrontation with the fears of a poetic falling off and erotic decline, the fact of aging, and the contradictory and confusing impulses of a speaker who both cherishes her autonomy and yet is compelled to pursue a relationship with the disloyal beloved' (2006: 232). The contemporary speakers are anything but genial and forgiving, as they rehash old fights in poems such as 'Ceremony', 'The Dream' and 'Heart's Desire', each building up a separate narrative of unreasonable behaviour to justify their separation. The volume opens with 'Penelope's Song' and includes the perspectives of Odysseus, Telemachus and Circe. The speakers' conflict is sometimes expressed through literary allusion: in 'Ceremony', a fight about their contrasting levels of hospitality and sociability is conducted with reference to Flaubert's reclusive character and the counter-argument that Wallace Stevens is a more apt comparison.²

While classical models are often used to convey a sense of timelessness and universality, here the quarrels of the modern couple hint at compromises and dissatisfaction in the marriage of Odysseus and Penelope. From the beginning of the volume Penelope is not a circumspect and faithful wife. She reminds herself that she has not been 'completely perfect', that her 'troublesome body' has 'done things you shouldn't / discuss in poems' (Glück 1996: 3). Many of the poems reflect on the relationship after it is already over: 'instead of an Odysseus focused on his homecoming, we have an Odysseus who yearns to leave, and instead of a Penelope waiting we have a wife imagining her husband's departure' (Pache 2008: 10). There is an uneasiness even in moments of apparent harmony such as in 'Quiet Evening' (the first explicit comparison between the modern couple and Odysseus and Penelope):

So Penelope took the hand of Odysseus,

² Although the allusion in the poem is to biography rather than a text, Wallace Stevens' poem 'The World As Meditation' is relevant as it represents Penelope waiting for Odysseus and preparing herself for his return.

not to hold him back but to impress

this peace on his memory:

from this point on, the silence through which you move

is my voice pursuing you. (Glück 1996: 5)

The slight defensiveness of ‘not to hold him back’ suggests that the parallel evokes earlier disagreements between the modern couple. The speaker goes on to suggest that the silence between them is not mutual peace but a lack of communication imposed on her by the husband’s absence. For this Penelope figure, the monologue is a form she is compelled to adopt even as she realises that her intended audience is not listening.

The fractious dialogue between Odysseus and Penelope in *Meadowlands* is superseded by another voice commenting on their marriage. Poems such as ‘Penelope’s Song’, ‘Odysseus’ Decision’ and ‘Penelope’s Stubbornness’ are noticeably outnumbered by those named after their son – ‘Telemachus’ Detachment’, ‘Telemachus’ Guilt’, ‘Telemachus’ Kindness’, ‘Telemachus’ Dilemma’, ‘Telemachus’ Fantasy’, ‘Telemachus’ Confession’ and ‘Telemachus’ Burden’.³ These poems form a series of monologues interspersed throughout the volume, with the first presenting a terse and mordant observation that as a child he found his parents’ marriage ‘heartbreaking’ but as an adult he finds it ‘insane’ and ‘very funny’ (Glück 1996: 13). His cynical perspective continues in the following poem, as he describes a marriage between two incompatible personalities as having ‘infected’ his childhood, and makes amends for his childish resentment of his mother’s coldness by recognising the similarity of his own attempt to remain detached from her (Glück 1996: 19-20). He gradually

³ Telemachus is also an important figure in Pastan’s rereading of the *Odyssey*. Sheila Murnaghan has shown how, in ‘The Son’, Pastan imagines the poem as having been written for Telemachus, and both invents new episodes and retells episodes from the poem to evoke a text organised around Telemachus, with the addition of ‘an emotional register that is suggested by the *Odyssey* but absent from it’ (2002: 133-9).

abandons the self-pity that had informed his earlier narrative of his own life and comes ‘impartially’ to appreciate Penelope’s heroic qualities:

... nor had my father
any sense of her courage, subtly
expressed as inaction, being
himself prone to dramatizing,
to acting out ... (Glück 1996: 24)

Telemachus’ concern with how his parents should be represented to posterity is addressed in ‘Telemachus’ Dilemma’. He is preoccupied with the epitaph to be written on their tomb – he interprets Odysseus’ wish to be described as ‘*beloved*’ as a boastful allusion to ‘all / the women’ and thinks it ‘leaves my mother / out in the cold’. This sceptical interpretation of a conventional term for the deceased betrays Telemachus’ cynicism about his father. Penelope, however, wishes to be celebrated for ‘her own achievement’, a suggestion that Telemachus finds equally vain. His own preference for ‘accuracy without / garrulousness’, repeatedly exemplified in the clipped, terse lines of his monologues, suggests either ‘*husband and wife*’ or ‘*opposing forces*’, both options which convey that he wants to remember them as a pair rather than as individuals (Glück 1996: 33).

‘Telemachus’ Fantasy’ appears immediately after a voice new to the volume, that of Circe. She speaks three monologues – ‘Circe’s Power’, ‘Circe’s Torment’, ‘Circe’s Grief’. In ‘Circe’s Power’, she opens defiantly with the claim that her spells merely reveal hidden realities:

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.

The implied auditor for her speech is Odysseus: she tells him that his men 'sweetened right up' when they were pigs, but she reversed the spell to show him her own goodness as well as her power. This Circe is a 'pragmatist at heart', who foresaw that Odysseus would leave her and chooses to let him go (Glück 1996: 37-8). The poem is followed by 'Telemachus' Fantasy', in which Telemachus tries to understand his father's attractiveness to women despite his desperate circumstances. He quickly assumes that the women were attracted to his father's 'disintegration' because it reminded them of 'passion' and that Odysseus must have been 'dazzled' by their attention. His response becomes increasingly priggish as he considers that it must have been bad for Odysseus 'to live / so many years / unquestioned, unthwarted', and that he would not desire such a life for himself. After the maturity and reflectiveness of the earlier poems, Telemachus seems increasingly disturbed by his father's infidelities and eager to blame them on the women, yet also resentful of his father's apparently carefree life. The juxtaposition of this poem with 'Circe's Power' is a reminder that none of the speakers knows the whole story; the idea that Odysseus was 'unthwarted' throughout his long journey home does not accord with the Homeric account of Poseidon's vengeful interventions. Telemachus' version of his father's story is inflected by contradictory desires to justify his father's absences and to blame him; the 'younger' women he envisions as being 'wild' for his father were not as he has imagined them (Glück 1996: 39-40). In 'Telemachus' Confession' he is introspective, reframing his childhood experiences to suggest that the absence of one parent was beneficial, since it freed him from the necessity to play different roles for his mother and father. He represents this as a 'late' but essential stage in his development as a

person with ‘my own voice, my own perceptions’ (Glück 1996: 48). By his final monologue, ‘Telemachus’ Burden’, he has abandoned the detachment he cultivated and acknowledges his bitterness about Penelope’s martyred isolation and her rejection of her child. The ‘Confession’ seems to reveal the fractured sense of self that his childhood experiences have created: it is a reminder that the ‘obsessive, one-sided talk’ of the speaker of a dramatic monologue ‘anticipates the famous talking cure of psychoanalysis’ (Slinn 2002: 88). Yet it also suggests Telemachus’ self-conscious adoption of a disguise that will impress his audience, and therefore that he might have more in common with his father than he understands.

Apart from the modern couple in *Meadowlands*, whose conflicting voices appear in the same poem, these characters speak to auditors who are absent or indifferent, making the reader the silent interlocutor who is present in the world of the poem. Relationships between men and women are central concerns, but it is up to the reader to interpret the separate utterances and piece together dialogues between characters or between the poet and Homer. As Isobel Armstrong writes, the dramatic monologue is a democratic form which demands that readers ‘actively bring their own imagination and intelligence to a reading and *develop* it’ (1993: 144). The engaging form of the dramatic monologue and the adaptability of the *Odyssey* combine to welcome the reader into the perpetual renewal of the Homeric tradition.

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