

Tragic Realities: Fictional Women and the Writing of Ancient History¹

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Among the pioneering features of Sarah Pomeroy's *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves*, first published forty years ago in 1975, is Pomeroy's resourceful and undogmatic handling of the difficult methodological problem of how to use fictional female characters as sources for the history of women². Although she ends the book by asserting that she has "attempted to find out about the realities of women's existence... rather than concentrate on the images that men had of women" (229),

1 — This article is a lightly-revised version of a paper delivered at the 2015 meeting of the Society for Classical Studies as part of a panel commemorating the fortieth anniversary of Sarah Pomeroy's landmark book *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves*. Taking stock on that occasion, I sought to celebrate Pomeroy's flexible approach to the question of using fictional evidence for ancient women's history, to recall what a controversial question that had once been among feminist classicists, and to suggest a possible solution from the emerging field of reception. I am grateful to the editors of *Eugesta*, Jacqueline Fabre-Serris and Judith Hallett, for welcoming an article that retains the sense of occasion, the brevity, and the eclectic aims of that talk, and I thank the journal's anonymous readers for their trenchant comments, many of which point the way to a more sustained treatment of these issues than I am able to offer here. My thanks also to Sira Schulz for her help with the German text of *A Woman in Berlin*.

2 — Pomeroy's book was immediately recognized as a groundbreaking advance; for its reception at the time of its initial publication, see McManus 1997, 16-17.

Pomeroy does not turn her back on this abundant body of material, even though it is doubly compromised, being both fictional and authored by men; in fact, she devotes an entire chapter to “Images of Women in the Literature of Classical Athens” (Pomeroy 1975, 93-119). That chapter is shaped by a fundamental opposition, defined by the title of its opening section, “Women in Tragedy versus Real Women”, namely the discrepancy between the evident powerlessness and invisibility of women in actual society, as indicated by nonfictional sources, and the power and prominence of female characters in fictional sources, especially tragedy. Pomeroy makes an important advance by trying to integrate these two types of evidence rather than choosing between them, as previous scholars had generally done, arriving at an unproductive stalemate on the question of whether the women of Athens were “respected” or not – and so whether their status should be judged positively or negatively from a contemporary point of view³.

Pomeroy begins her discussion of the evidence provided by tragedy with a firm statement that it cannot be used in isolation: “It is not legitimate for scholars to make judgments about the lives of real women solely on the basis of information gleaned from tragedy” (Pomeroy 1975, 95). She then goes on to make use of that evidence in a variety of imaginative and somewhat contradictory ways. She sees the women of tragedy in part as reflections of men’s fantasies, as “nightmares of the victors” (Pomeroy 1975, 97): in this formulation, tragic women reflect real women’s lives indirectly, through men’s awareness of those lives as unfair and thus likely to inspire resistance and revenge. A paragraph later, the assertiveness of tragic women is aligned with values that real women presumably embraced as a result of their social roles, in particular family ties and primitive forms of religion: “This”, she writes, “is the point at which the image of the heroine on the stage coincides with the reality of Athenian women” (Pomeroy 1975, 97). While Pomeroy sometimes invokes the

3 — An important stimulus for this debate was an essay published in 1925 by A.W. Gomme, who argued that the impression of low status created by women’s legal position was countered by the fact that “there is... no literature, no art of any country, in which women are more prominent, more important, more carefully studied and with more interest, than in the tragedy, sculpture, and painting of fifth-century Athens” (4) and concluded that Greek literature would have died long ago “if Greek sentiments had been radically opposed to ours” (25). In her treatment of this problem, Pomeroy points out that “the issue of status is in itself misleading”, in part because the conclusions drawn are based on “treating women as an undifferentiated mass” (60). At around the same time, other thoughtful scholars were beginning to call for more sophisticated handling of the available evidence, including Roger Just in an influential article, also published in 1975, but with an exclusive focus (which Pomeroy has consistently resisted) on conceptions of women rather than the realities of their lives. Writing in a special issue of *Arethusa* on “Women in Antiquity” published in 1973, Marilyn Arthur set out to correlate the evidence so as to present “a picture that will not force us to choose whether women in ancient Greece were revered or despised, but will enable us to understand how they could seem to be both simultaneously” (Arthur 1984, 7).

separateness of women's lives to suggest that men's images of women were founded on limited observation, Euripides is granted particular authority because of his "intimacy with women's daily lives", and this is correlated with his creation of a background to his plots of "unremitting female misery" (Pomeroy 1975 110-11) designed to make audiences question existing arrangements.

If Pomeroy's approach to this material is contradictory, that is because it is an appropriately flexible and eclectic response to a set of complex, polyvocal texts that do not have a simple, monolithic relationship to the culture that produced them. She avoids the reductiveness of earlier discussions and is alert to the diverse ways in which literary works can be informative, both about their subjects and about their authors, along a spectrum that stretches from reportage to clear fantasy. She is appropriately skeptical of men as witnesses to women's lives but also, most emphatically in her treatment of Euripides, willing to entertain the idea that male authors, engaged in an enterprise that always involves imagining what it is like to be someone else, can capture something of women's experiences.

Pomeroy's practice in effect anticipates and implicitly answers the vigorous debate over the use of literary sources to recover ancient women that erupted a decade later, after an impressive wave of scholarship on women in antiquity and methodological discussion about how ancient women should be studied, which her work helped to inspire. This debate was shaped by two high-profile papers by Phyllis Culham: one, entitled "Ten Years After Pomeroy: Studies of the Image and Reality of Women in Antiquity", based on a paper delivered at Johns Hopkins in 1985, appeared in a special issue of *Helios, Rescuing Creusa: New Methodological Approaches to Women in Antiquity*, edited by Marilyn Skinner; the other was part of a panel on "Reappropriating Male Texts: The Case of Ovid", sponsored by the Women's Classical Caucus, which was presented at the 1985 meeting of the American Philological Association – even though it had been rejected by the APA's Program Committee.

In a bracing call for feminist critics to focus their efforts on recovering women's lived experience, especially through attention to material culture, Culham stresses the limitations of literary sources as evidence for ancient women's lives and even for general social attitudes towards women. Regretting that too little attention has been paid to Pomeroy's sensible "dictum", quoted above, about not using literary sources in isolation, Culham takes classicists to task for being particularly "liable to mistake the study of a unique, male-authored text for the study of a culture" (Culham 1986, 16-17). Fictional works like tragedies, she insists, do not convey "social information", and because they are by men they tell us nothing about women. The only way they can shed light on reality

is through their failure to represent it: "The study of women in ancient literature is the study of men's views of women and cannot become anything else. It can aid in the entirely laudable goal of eventually getting at the contradictions between the literary image and the reality" (Culham 1986, 15). Culham herself is purposefully explicit about the link between methodological issues concerning the use of evidence and broader ideological questions about the proper relationship between feminist scholarship concerning the past and feminist activism aimed at change in the present. She does not just reject literary sources as insufficiently informative; she also claims that engaging with such works makes feminist critics complicit with oppressive elite men and blunts their message: they become, as she put it, "less likely to articulate the truly dangerous knowledge that we all have: women and men do not share a common experience" (Culham 1990, 162).

Culham's provocative stance prompted vigorous rebuttals, some of which were published along with her conference paper in another special issue of *Helios* in 1990. There an array of feminist classicists push back with detailed arguments that in one way or another uphold Pomeroy's more open-minded approach. Most of the contributors point out that as classicists we have no choice but to work with the sources that we have, whatever their limitations. Confessing to an occasional longing "to be an American historian so I could read the minutes of the [Women's Christian Temperance Union] instead", Amy Richlin adds that even the most misogynistic literature tells us something about actual experience: "it doesn't tell you much about women directly, but it tells you a lot about what they had to put up with" (Richlin 1990, 181). Others note that texts by elite males are often counter-cultural and subversive; Judith Hallett unabashedly affirms that men and women *do* share characteristics and experiences and points out that some elite male authors, including Ovid, are especially concerned with experiences that transcend gender boundaries (Hallett 1990, 193-94). Some of the strongest answers to Culham's strictures, notably that of the panel's organizer Mary-Kay Gamel which was entitled "Reading 'Reality'", are grounded in a principle that was receiving particular emphasis in the post-structuralist, new-historicist climate of those years: that representation is just as much implicated in Culham's "social information" as in imaginative literature: what is called "lived experience" is always mediated through the kinds of narrative and symbolic structures that can be labeled "literary" or "textual". "To Phyllis Culham's insistence that feminist scholars focus their attention on women's 'lived' reality rather than on literary works" Gamel wrote, "I would respond that this 'reality' can only be constructed textually" (Gamel 1990, 171).

At a time when feminist classicists are looking back and taking stock, calmly marking the forty-year anniversary that has inevitably turned Pomeroy's adventurous, innovative project into a venerable classic, it is important to remember how much was at stake in that contested 1985 panel. For the APA Program Committee that rejected it without explanation (but may have objected to a double entendre in one of the titles – "How to Make A Woman" – that to us seems mild and, now that other vulgar terms for sexual possession are in common use, archaic), what was at stake was the proper boundaries of the discipline; for many of those who attended the panel when it went forward even though it was not officially on the program, acceptable ways of combining feminist opposition to misogyny and classical scholarship⁴.

In the thirty years since Culham, there have been multiple advances, both along the lines Culham herself advocated, through the astute analysis of material evidence and the recovery of women's voices in subliterate forms (such as the papyrus letters that Pomeroy drew on in her 1984 study *Women in Hellenistic Egypt*), and also along the lines Culham deprecated, through refined and sophisticated articulations of the forms of historical witness male-authored literary texts can offer. The last two decades of the twentieth century were a time of intense critical discussion concerned with the presentation of women in Athenian tragedy. Out of this came an impressive array of searching studies, which reach diverse conclusions about how actual women shaped – and were shaped by – the women portrayed in drama, but which all in one way or another take on Culham's challenge, and which are all informed by the conviction that tragic texts do have something to tell us about the gendered experiences of ancient Athenians.

A few briefly-sketched examples (standing in for the work of many scholars) indicate the ways in which Pomeroy's various lines of approach were adopted and expanded during this period, often with extensive reference to theoretical work in anthropology, gender studies, and psychology. Some critics build on the idea underlying Pomeroy's "nightmares of the victors" formulation, considering the portrayal of tragic women as fantasies through which men confronted the consequences of a sharply-divided, male-dominated society. Nancy Rabinowitz (1993) analyzes the women of Euripides as modeling contrary responses to women's circumstances: acquiescent, self-denying sacrifice and destructive revenge; Victoria Wohl (1998) argues that tragedy both recognizes and seeks to suppress the thoughts that women might have about their social position as objects of exchange among men; Kirk Ormand (1999) traces one

4 — On the history of the rejected panel, see Gamel 1990, 172-74. The flyer advertising the unofficial panel is reproduced at Richlin 2014, 20.

particular tragedian's projection of women's perspectives on marriage in the plays of Sophocles. All of these scholars take note in some way of tragedy's capacity, which Pomeroy locates especially in the works of Euripides, to expose the harm done to men and women alike by a social structure based on gender asymmetry, even as tragic plots also reinforce that structure; some speculate as well about the ways in which tragedy may have spoken to women about their own experiences. In a somewhat different vein, Froma Zeitlin (1996) shows how tragic women allow men to think through and enlarge their own self-definition in the context of a value system in which the idea of the female stands for common human traits construed as alien to men. In keeping with another of Pomeroy's approaches, Helene Foley (2002) offers an extensive examination of the ways in which actual women's social roles, especially in religion and family life, are reflected in and illuminated by the actions of fictional women in tragedy. And Laura McClure (1999) finds echoes of real women's speech genres in tragedy's extensive appropriation of women's words.

Since the turn of the last century, the urgency fueling that wave of attention to women in classical texts has, for better or worse, subsided. There are still plenty of feminist classicists who remain committed to this field of inquiry and determined not to allow the conjoined scholarly and political concerns that motivated it to be sidelined, whether by complacency, mainstreaming, or changes in scholarly fashion, and even some signs of awakening interest among newcomers to the field. But a lot of the energy in classical literary studies has gone in new directions. In the area of Greek tragedy, much recent work has turned away from the historicist approaches that dominated the last decades of the twentieth century, with a renewed emphasis on formal and aesthetic features of the genre, and on ethical questions that are less closely tied to a particular social context.

One of the most significant developments in this period has been the emergence of post-classical reception as a major focus of attention; the field of reception studies is now undergoing its own transition from a provocative new endeavor advanced through groundbreaking essay collections to a more established field captured in companions and handbooks. There are many reasons for the turn to reception beyond a basic quest for new material: an increasingly sophisticated appreciation of intertextuality as a defining feature of classical literature; the desire of a self-scrutinizing field to understand its own formative past; greater integration of the classical tradition into the teaching of classical civilization; the prospect of an overarching model for a discipline defined by the retrospective construction of the past; and, in the field of Greek tragedy, the recognition of performance as a vital component of drama. For feminist classicists, the study of modern reception offers a welcome escape from the difficulties

posed by male-authored and misogynistic texts from antiquity, which generated so much controversy in the 1980's. In the spirit of Amy Richlin longing for the archives of the WCTU, many have seized the opportunity to study women writers whose real life circumstance can actually be known and whose views of classical society are not shaped by the male bias found in almost all ancient texts.

In addition, feminist criticism as an enterprise gains valuable support from the rise of reception studies. The foregrounding of perspectives congenial to modern feminists, whether through the questions a scholar asks of ancient texts or through the choice of a modern work of reception to study, has often caused feminist classical scholarship to be viewed with suspicion and dismissed for a supposed lack of objectivity; it is easy to imagine that some such attitudes were behind the unexplained rejection of the 1985 WCC panel. But it is a guiding principle of reception studies that all reading is "from the present interest" (Martindale 1993, 6): feminist criticism is no more or less valid than any other kind simply because the people who write it are motivated by their "present interest" in the feminist movements of their own day (Martindale 1993, 13; Lively 2006, 64).

Where the goal of recovering the real women of antiquity is concerned, reception could, however, be seen as an actively disabling approach, as it locates reality even further from the lived experiences of actual people of the past than do theories (like those championed by Mary-Kay Gamel and others) which hold that texts themselves constitute a form of reality. With its foundational claim that "meaning is realized at the point of reception" (Martindale 1993, 3), which applies equally to scholarly and avowedly imaginative forms of reconstruction, reception theory appears to invalidate any modern attempt to recover what ancient women's lives felt like to them. This position is outlined by Genevieve Liveley in her essay on "Surfing the Third Wave: Postfeminism and the Hermeneutics of Reception" in the watershed collection *Classics and the Uses of Reception* published in 2006. Liveley revisits the controversy stirred up by Culham's interventions and contends that the attempt to recover ancient experience is fundamentally misguided:

Phyllis Culham's quest... to recover the truth about "women's lived reality" in ancient Greece and Rome misses the point then – that such "truth" is constituted always and only at the point of its reception. The "reality" of women's lives is "realized" – made real – retrospectively from the point of reception. And this is the case whether that "point" is located with cultural historians reading material artefacts from antiquity or literary critics reading classical literary texts produced by canonical male authors (Liveley 2006, 64).

By making the important point that material sources speak no more directly to their interpreters than texts do, Liveley effectively invalidates Culham's quest for a more direct route to lived reality. But she also reveals the limits of Culham's opponents, arguing that a modern feminist's attempt to get at ancient realities by rereading a canonical male author has no more intrinsic authority than the kind of late antique or medieval allegorizing that is now generally viewed as a form of creative misreading. Reaffirming a charge first formulated by Culham, she asserts that "feminist efforts to recover the reality of women's lived experience, or to reappropriate the texts of canonical male authors do not ultimately differ from the sort of rereadings that produced Ovidius Christianus, Ovide Moralisé, or Ovid the Neoplatonist" (Liveley 2006, 64).

But if feminist readings of ancient texts are limited because they are tied to a particular historical moment and will inevitably come to seem dated, that does not mean that they provide no insight into the past. It is a further tenet of reception studies, rooted in the foundational theoretical work of Hans Robert Jauss, that the meanings realized at any moment of reception, however far removed in time, can unlock previously unacknowledged features of a text: "the very history of effects and the interpretation of an event or work of the past enables us to understand it as a plurality of meanings that was not yet perceivable to its contemporaries" (Jauss 2000, 7). This idea is also especially supportive of feminist critics, given that they are often looking for traces of ancient women, or of informed and sympathetic portrayals of women's circumstances, in texts where those elements may have been suppressed or obscured and may have gone unnoticed both in antiquity and afterwards. As Liveley goes on to point out, Culham is blind to the possibility that new critical perspectives can release unacknowledged meaning when she assumes that feminist critics who find something other than dismissive misogyny in a male-authored text are wishfully misreading (Liveley 64).

This capacity to reveal previously unseen truths is shared by works of scholarship and criticism, like that cluster of late twentieth century studies relating tragic heroines to real Athenian women, and by works of the imagination that respond to ancient texts. While dramatic genres have been illuminated by the study of modern performance, insights into the narrative genre of epic have come especially from modern poetry. In the case of the *Odyssey*, an especially rich body of work by modern women poets reimagining the story of Penelope (including H.D., Eleanor Wilner, Katha Pollitt, Linda Pastan, Louise Glück, Margaret Atwood, and many others) has opened up perspectives on a figure whose depiction in the text is notoriously opaque, and their reconstructions often intersect with

interpretations offered by critics⁵. Modern writing about Penelope, both academic and creative, makes its clearest contribution by interpreting an enigmatic text, reading between the lines to answer such questions as how Penelope feels about her Suitors, how willingly she accepts her role as patiently waiting wife, how and when she recognizes Odysseus, and how much control she exercises over the direction of the plot⁶. The further goal of reconstructing historical realities is even more elusive in the case of the *Odyssey* than of tragedy since we cannot identify with certainty the particular context in which the Homeric epics arose⁷. Even so, the portrayal of women in the epics, and in particular the degree of agency and scope for action attributed to Penelope, tells us something about the possible roles of women and the prevailing assumptions about women in the society that produced them. So, for example, Lillian Doherty has suggested that the *Odyssey*'s general attentiveness to women and its depiction of women as important auditors of poetry may point to the presence of women in the poem's original audience (Doherty 1995, 87-126).

While critics like Doherty and the students of tragedy discussed above base their findings on modern understandings of how reality and representation might relate to each other, the work of creative writers is more directly rooted in modern personal experience, often reflecting the author's sense of what she herself might think and feel if she were in a situation like that of Penelope or some other figure from classical mythology. In this way, reception is a form of comparative study, in which analogous modern experiences are implicitly brought to bear on ancient texts⁸.

A brief look at two memoirs by twentieth century women can further illustrate how witnesses to modern experience might illuminate the connections between ancient texts and lived realities, and will also reinforce two important points: first, echoing the response made by Gamel and others to Culham, that lived experience cannot be extricated from the ordering patterns we associate with fiction or myth-making; and

5 — Vanda Zajko (Zajko 2008) takes Penelope's reworking by Margaret Atwood as her starting point for an analysis of debates among feminist classicists as a form of reception. On modern women writers' versions of Penelope, see Clayton 2004; Doherty 2009; Hurst 2009; Murnaghan and Roberts 2002, especially 25-33 for the convergence between poetic reimagining and scholarly discovery.

6 — For the critical controversies surrounding Penelope, which go back to Harsh 1950 and Amory 1966, see Doherty 1995, 31-63, Heitman 2008. The stakes of this debate can be seen in the opposing positions taken in Murnaghan 1987 and Winkler 1990.

7 — Pomeroy characterizes the epics as "ahistorical oral tradition" (1975, 16) but uses them, cautiously and along with other available evidence, to reconstruct the roles of women in the Bronze Age.

8 — Another way of using comparative material to analyze Penelope is found in Winkler 1990, where comparative evidence from modern Greece is combined with insights from a modern reception of the *Odyssey*, in the form of a now dated and generally unpersuasive scholarly argument, Samuel Butler's theory that the *Odyssey* was written by a woman.

second, following Pomeroy's open-minded example, that the stories told by male authors are also sometimes stories that women might tell. These are eye-witness accounts of two of the most definitive and cataclysmic events of twentieth century history – the First World War and the Second World War – told by brave, clear-eyed, articulate women and filled with resonant details of their private and domestic lives. As reminiscences composed after the fact, they are subject to the inevitable transformations of memory, but they are based on diaries that were written closer in time to the reported events. In other words, they are exactly the kinds of documents we would be thrilled to have from antiquity, but surely never will.

Each of these writers voices profound skepticism about the values associated with the classical tradition, and especially about the adequacy of the texts that survive from antiquity to capture the true nature of war as she has come to know it. Yet each tells a story that echoes in significant ways, and so confirms, formulations found in male-authored texts from classical antiquity. Here too the texts in question are not Athenian tragedies but the Homeric epics with their less certain cultural context, but the lesson to be drawn pertains to the capacity of fictional and male authored texts to reflect women's real experiences in general rather than to any specific historical moment. And the stories in question certainly merit the label "tragic" in the extended sense in which it is commonly used.

The first example is the first and most famous of a series of autobiographical works by the British writer and activist Vera Brittain (1893-1970). *Testament of Youth*, first published in 1933 and further publicized through adaptation as a TV mini-series (1979), a radio series (1998) and a feature film (2014), looks back at Brittain's experiences as a young woman during the First World War. Writing the book during the period 1929-1933, Brittain was highly conscious of describing retrospectively a period of her life that was decisively over, expressing the hope that she could "rescue something that might be of value, some element of truth and hope and usefulness, from the smashing up of my own youth by the War" (Brittain 1978, 11); the form she chose was an extended personal testimony that could constitute the unwritten "epic of the women who went to the war" (Brittain 1980, 77; Hurst 2006, 218-19). In composing it, she made a point of drawing on surviving evidence from that earlier time:

I have also made as much use as possible of old letters and diaries, because it seemed to me that the contemporary opinions, however crude and ingenuous, of youth in the period under review were at least as important a part of its testament as retrospective reflections heavy with knowledge (Brittain 1978, 13).

Born in 1893, Brittain emerged from a sheltered provincial girlhood just as the war broke out⁹. Caught up in the patriotic fervor of the moment, she cheered on her beloved brother Edward and his friends as they joined up. One of those friends, Roland Leighton, a stellar classical scholar, became her adored fiancé. But Brittain soon came to see the war as senseless, ruthless slaughter; before it was over, she had endured the deaths of Roland in 1915 and of her brother in 1918, as well as countless others, and had become a committed pacifist.

During the first year of the war, Brittain was a student at Oxford, studying English and required to learn Greek and Latin and to work her way through numerous classical texts. Her account of that year chronicles her disenchantment with the field of classics, both for its connection to mindless war-mongering and for its irrelevance. She reports that "...I joined the Pass Mods. class and studied the *Cyropedia* and Livy's *Wars* with a resentful feeling that there was quite enough war in the world without having to read about it in Latin" (Brittain 1978, 124) and tells how "Latin and Greek became even more irksome than before, and I came to feel that some kind of vigorous, practical toil would be better adapted to a chaotic wartime world" (Brittain 1978, 137). In the last term of that year, before leaving Oxford to work as a nurse, Brittain slogged through Pliny and Plato and Homer with a sympathetic tutor who was herself "beginning to desire some occupation less detached from the War than the coaching of immature females":

The trial and death of Socrates, the lovely lines from the Iliad which describe Andromache holding out the child Astyanax to Hector before Troy and "smiling through her tears", will be forever associated for me with those poignant early days of the war" (Brittain 1978, 151).

Brittain's singling out of Andromache in this context captures her trajectory from the more enchanted perspective of a few months earlier when, during Roland's leave, "Incongruously we talked, that dinner-time, about the way we would like to be buried. I thought I should prefer to be burnt on a pyre, like Achilles..." (Brittain 1978, 116). Now we see her moving away from this embrace of Homeric heroism as a model, which was a widespread attitude at the time, especially among classically educated soldiers such as Roland Leighton and Edward Brittain, promoted by the coincidence that some of the fighting was taking place in the same terrain as the Trojan War (Vandiver 2010, 228-80). Brittain became increasingly suspicious of the role of Classics in promoting senseless military

⁹ — For accounts of Brittain's life, see (in addition to her autobiographies) Berry and Bostridge 1995, Gorham 1996.

values; yet, in part through the encouragement of that tutor, who “faced the realities of the War in terms of the Siege of Troy” (Brittain 142), she also developed a different understanding of Homer, focusing instead on his capacity to tell the story of women’s trials and women’s endurance in wartime. Negotiating Jaus’s “plurality of meanings” located in the *Iliad*, she arrived at “not... a complete rejection of Homer, but a new feminist reading which emphasizes the women whose lives are obscured in the epic tradition” (Hurst 2006, 219).

For all the pathos of Brittain’s evocative recollected reading of *Iliad* 6, she is even more compellingly linked to Homer’s Andromache through an echo that is certainly not marked as such and is apparently not intentional. After her heartbreaking account of how she learned that Roland had died (from a phone call that she thought would be news of his return home for Christmas leave), she describes her struggle to process his death and her frantic quest for information about his last minutes of life:

Hardest of all to bear, perhaps, was the silence... The growing certainty that he had left no message for us to remember seemed so cruel, so baffling... All through the first months of 1916, my letters and diaries emphasise again and again, the grief of having no word to cherish through the empty years. (Brittain 1978, 243-44).

After a barrage of inquisitive letters, she has to settle for perennial silence:

But when I had heard from his colonel and his company commander, and his servant, and the Catholic padre, and a sympathetic officer who, in order to satisfy me, made a special journey to Louvencourt and chatechised the doctors, I knew I had learned all there was to know, and that in his last hour I had been quite forgotten (Brittain 1978, 244).

In this reported detail, primary documents of a modern woman’s lived experience – letters and diaries – resonate with the male-authored words of an ancient fictional woman. In her lament for Hector at the end of the *Iliad*, which expresses a similar mixture of grief and grievance, Andromache complains that Hector, dying away from home on the battlefield, has left her *no word*:

...ἔμοι δὲ μάλιστα λελείπεται ἄλγεα λυγρὰ.
οὐ γάρ μοι θνήσκων λεχέων ἐκ χεῖρας ὄρεξας,
οὐδέ τί μοι εἶπες πυκινὸν ἔπος, οὐ τέ κεν αἰεὶ
μεμνήμην νύκτας τε καὶ ἡμέρας δάκρυ χέουσα.

...I especially am left with most terrible grief:
You were not reaching out to me from your bed when you died,

and you did not tell me some intimate word which, for all time,
I could remember through the nights and days of weeping
(*Il.* 24.742-745).

While “remember” is the most obvious and straightforward translation of *memnêmên* in the last line (uniformly adopted, for example, in the otherwise quite differing translations of Lattimore, Fagles, and Lombardo), Brittain’s “cherish” might bring us closer to Andromache’s meaning.

Whether or not Brittain’s experience was mediated – consciously or unconsciously – through her identification with Andromache in the *Iliad*, she goes out of her way to stress that this lack of a word was paramount in her experience of Roland’s death (although she also expresses retrospectively a greater understanding of the “self-absorption” of the dying). That is as close to a real woman’s true lived experience as we can hope to get, and it provides the closest thing to authentication of Homer’s text as we can hope to have. Given the historical role of women as composers and singers of lament, we might choose to take this, not only as confirmation of a male poet’s capacity to communicate a woman’s experience, but as an indication that real women’s voices have been effectively integrated into the *Iliad* through episodes of lamentation¹⁰.

The second example is the diary kept by a female journalist in her early thirties during the Russian occupation of Berlin in the spring of 1945, transcribed on a typewriter by the author in the following summer, and published anonymously, first in 1954 in an English translation with the title *A Woman in Berlin: Eight Weeks in the Captured City*¹¹. This is an account of survival under conditions of extreme scarcity, grueling enforced labor, and mass rape. Along with harrowing accounts of sexual violence, the author documents the solidarity and pragmatism of the conquered women, and their various strategies of avoidance and accommodation. She herself chooses to become the regular sexual partner of an officer, and this affords her some privileges and protection from the attentions of other men. As the diary concludes in mid-June, the situation has stabilized, most of the Russians have moved on, and the author is beginning to put together her postwar existence. She works her way through the books left behind in the abandoned apartment that she has moved into:

10 — For the *Iliad* as integrating female-authored lament traditions, see Alexiou 2002, 11-14, Holst-Warhaft 1992, 108-14.

11 — The story of the woman widely believed to be the author, since a controversial disclosure in 2003, is told in Schnabel 2015.

Then I plowed through a collection of plays by Aeschylus and came across *The Persians*, which, with its lamentations of the vanquished, seems on the surface well suited to our defeat. But in reality, it's not. Our German calamity has a bitter taste – of repulsion, sickness, insanity, unlike anything in history. The radio just broadcast another concentration camp report. The most horrific thing is the order and the thrift: millions of human beings as fertilizer, mattress stuffing, soft soap, felt mats – Aeschylus never saw anything like that (Anonymous 2005, 247).

Here we have an unquestionably cogent statement about irreducible historical specificity, about the distinctive forms of evil realized in the twentieth century, and about the limits to any attempt to map one era's testimony onto the circumstances of another. And yet there are striking classical echoes – not in the reports of concentration camps that the author hears on the radio – but in the stories the author tells of herself as a vulnerable woman in a defeated city, and as a woman left behind by a man who has gone to war. The *Trojan Women* certainly suggests that Euripides knew something about the kinds of experiences she relates. But a particularly telling parallel emerges at the end of the book, as the narrative becomes in effect an anti-*Odyssey*.

Immediately after this passage about the irrelevance of Aeschylus, the author records the return from the war of her fiancé Gerd, who appears unexpectedly at her door. As their reunion progresses, fervent joy soon gives way to growing estrangement. Gerd is put off by the earthy humor of a widow whom the author has befriended through their shared ordeals. The couple cannot return, as Odysseus and Penelope do to the λέκτροιο παλαιοῦ θεσμόν, “the ritual of their familiar bed” (*Od.* 23. 296). “But in the night I found myself cold as ice in Gerd's arms and was glad when he left off. For him I've been spoiled once and for all” (Anonymous 2005, 258-59)¹². Gerd is repelled by her tales of resourceful survival: “You've all turned into a bunch of shameless bitches... It's horrible being around you. You've lost all sense of measure” (Anonymous 2005, 259). She gives him her diaries to read (so that here too, as in the case of Brittain, even more immediate diaries figure within a personal memoir), but he finds these witnesses to her experience incomprehensible:

I gave Gerd my diaries. (There are three notebooks full). He sat down with them for a while and then returned them to me, saying he couldn't find his way through my scribbling and the notes stuck inside with all the shorthand and abbreviations.

12 — The sense of distance here is even stronger in the original German, in which Gerd is referred to impersonally as “the man”: “Bin erst mal für den Mann verdorben”. But the phrase is ambiguous, as “den Mann” might also be taken to mean “men in general”, in which case it would signal the author's own estrangement from men in general.

“For example, what’s that supposed to mean?” he asked, pointing to “Schdg”.

I had to laugh: “*Schändung*”, of course-rape. He looked at me as if I were out of my mind but said nothing more (Anonymous 2005, 260).

Gerd goes off again, in search of food, and she is relieved. The book concludes with her wondering if he will even come back and, in its final words, speculating uncertainly about the future: “Maybe we’ll find our way back to each other yet” (Anonymous 2005, 261).

This grim narrative can certainly be paralleled in modern women’s revisions of the *Odyssey*, but it also echoes and affirms the dark alternative scenario against which the *Odyssey* itself sets its own happy ending, evoking the specter of mutual incomprehension that haunts the *Odyssey*’s triumphant account of recovered *homophrosynê* between husband and wife. We might use this text to read between the lines of the *Odyssey*’s portrayal of Penelope, but we can also see in Gerd’s repudiation of the author’s survival strategies an echo of the male-oriented value system that shapes the *Odyssey*’s treatment of Penelope, and especially its presentation of the possibility that she might come to terms with the Suitors, even in her increasingly desperate circumstances, as unacceptable¹³. This perspective is variously reflected in the poem. The plot is constructed in such a way as to neutralize the step Penelope does, finally and reluctantly, take towards accommodating the Suitors when she sets the contest of the bow: no matter whether she knows it or not, Odysseus is present to assure the only acceptable outcome. The maidservants who make the kinds of alliances with the interlopers that Penelope avoids, but that “Anonymous” and the other women around her make with the Russian occupiers of Berlin, receive extremely harsh punishment. And the narrative includes judgmental comments from Ithacan passers-by when sounds of celebration from the house of Odysseus give the false impression that a marriage with one of the Suitors has taken place:

ὦδε δέ τις εἶπεσκε δόμων ἔκτοσθεν ἀκούων·
 “ἦ μάλα δὴ τις ἔγημε πολυμνήστην βασιλείαν·
 σχετλίη, οὐδ’ ἔτλη πόσιος οὗ κουριδίοιο
 εἴρυσθαι μέγα δῶμα διαμπερές, ἦος ἵκοιτο”.

And whoever passed by and heard would say:
 So, someone has married the sought-after queen!
 The wretch, she couldn’t bear to wait,
 guarding the house until her true husband came home
 (*Od.* 23.148-51).

13 — Here I am summarizing the interpretation of the *Odyssey* that I developed in my own contribution to the *Rescuing Creusa* collection (Murnaghan 1987).

Here the *Odyssey* projects a response to the story it might well be telling (even if it manages triumphantly to present that story as merely a plausible fiction), which is recalled not only in Gerd's reaction to those first hand-written records but also in the hostile attitudes of the diary's readers and critics, one of whom complained of the author's "shameless immorality", when the transcribed version was finally published in German in 1959¹⁴. Anonymous' lived experience here gives us a glimpse into the circumstances of real women and also into the inability of real men to view those circumstances sympathetically, which might generate Pomeroy's "nightmares of the victors" or constitute Richlin's "what [women] had to put up with".

To the extent that these two modern parallels point to transhistorical continuities in women's experience under conditions of war, the picture they paint is, to borrow a term from Pomeroy's preface to the 1995 reissue of her book, "bleak". They do not offer much hope that women's circumstances have improved since the past, or that women's circumstances were better in the past and so could be better in the future. They help to reinforce one of the strongest lessons of ancient gender studies by detailing the ways in which war drives men and women further apart, not only separating them physically but diminishing their capacities for mutual understanding. But the uncanny resonances between these texts do also offer us something positive, in the form of a congruence between the most privileged documents of lived experience, the diaries of real women, and the often-suspect testimony of ancient male-authored fictions. They give us further warrant and further encouragement to keep doing what Sarah Pomeroy recognized in 1975 that we have to do, which is to make judicious use of ancient male-authored literary texts in our efforts to write the richest history of ancient women that we can.

14 — This is reported in a "Foreword" by Hans Magnus Enzensberger, the publisher of the most recent edition, which appeared only after the death of the author who, after this reaction to the earlier edition, did not wish to see the diary reprinted while she was alive (Anonymous 2005, xi).

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