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‘Back from the silence with something to say’: Ursula Le Guin’s *Lavinia* and silence as classical reception

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This article explores the power of silence in the feminist recovery of classical texts to open up engaged spaces for women’s creative reworkings, taking as a case study Lavinia and her reception in Ursula Le Guin’s (2008) novel of the same name. By re-evaluating silence in dialogue with feminist and classical reception scholarship, I argue that Le Guin is able to bring a different angle to the reception of classical literary women, focusing on the gaps and spaces in Lavinia’s character that provide a medium for engagement with the incomplete text of the Aeneid. Silence thus becomes a locus in which Le Guin can transform Vergil’s silencing of Lavinia into a generative vision of the open space of interpretation available in classical literature and its reception.

Silence can be a plan
rigorously executed

the blueprint to a life

It is a presence
it has a history a form

Do not confuse it
with any kind of absence

—Adrienne Rich, ‘Cartographies of Silence’[1]

Lavinia is notoriously silent in the *Aeneid*.[2] Although her importance to the poem’s theme is suggested by the allusion to her name in the proem, *Italiam fato profugus Laviniaque venit/ litora* (‘he came by fate in exile to Italy and the Lavinian shores’, *Aen.* 1.2–3), she appears

[1] Rich (1978: 17). For a reading of this poem, see Diehl (1980). I would like to express my sincere thanks to the anonymous readers of *Classical Receptions Journal*, as well as the editors, for their very helpful suggestions and feedback.

[2] Woodworth (1930: 176), Williams (1973 ad *Aen.* 7.52), Cairns (1989: 151), Horsfall (2000: 93), Fratantuono (2008: 40), Felici (2010: 267), Fratantuono (2014: 735), and McAuley (2020: 37).

only five times in the entire poem and — significantly — never speaks.[3] Yet if Lavinia is silent, it does not necessarily follow that she is silenced — nor that we should automatically read Lavinia's silence as indicative of her passivity or lack of interest as a character, as so many have.[4] (We might ask why Dido's refusal to speak in the Underworld at *Aen.* 6.469–71 is so often read differently, as a resistant silence: why not Lavinia's?)[5] The general, and dismissive, position towards Lavinia is neatly summarized by Crescenzo Formicula: 'Lavinia's role in the poem is simply to provide the reader with information'.[6] But what kind of information, one might ask? What models of communication and reception are being used to understand information 'provided' by a character who is entirely silent — or, indeed, silenced?

In this article, I push past blanket assumptions of Lavinia's passivity and silence, to insist that there are productive ways in which we can make that silence speak. Through Ursula Le Guin's *Lavinia* (2008), I explore a way of reading and receiving through silence that enables a new, engaged vision of Lavinia — demonstrating the power of contemporary women's receptions to read new narratives, and new literary women, into the past. I suggest that Le Guin actively engages with Lavinia's silence, and re-orientates the male appropriation of women as personifications of literature, to push for and open up the generative qualities of silence; she thus empowers Lavinia to embrace and engage not only with the poetry but with the incompleteness of the *Aeneid*, and to point towards a new way of reading women's silence in antiquity as an invitation to openness of interpretation. By having Lavinia meet with the shade of the poet Vergil in the forests of Albunea and showcasing how she comes to terms with her own fictionality, Le Guin raises the issue of whose existence is more 'true': the dead male poet, or the female character who is open for reception, and who — here — relays the narrative. Ultimately, I suggest, Lavinia's active appreciation of her existence as a poetic construct gradually opens up the engaged space provided by her silence, as a response to the unfinished, boundless text of the *Aeneid*.

[3] All translations are my own. In spite of her silence and the infrequency of her appearances, Lavinia is often placed at the centre of the plot of the *Aeneid*, as the motivation for Aeneas' settlement in Italy. At 2.783 Creusa predicts a *regia coniunx* ('royal wife') as the culmination of his fated travels. In the Underworld, both the Sibyl and Anchises prophesy Aeneas' marriage to Lavinia (6.93–4, 763–5), whilst Lavinia's marriage as vouchsafed by Faunus lies at the centre of the peace treaty between the Trojans and Latins (7.269–73). And it is Turnus' final words, *tua est Lavinia coniunx* ('Lavinia is your wife', 12.937), which bring the epic to a close. Lavinia's first appearance is in the much-commented-upon scene at *Aen.* 7.71–80, where a harmless flame blazes in her hair and spreads to the entire palace during a sacrifice held by her father Latinus; her second and third appearances are brief cameos, hiding with Amata in the woods (7.385–405) and among a procession of Latin women visiting the temple of Pallas (11.479–80), leading to her fourth and most extensive appearance at 12.64–71 with her famous blush, and the ensuing simile on the staining of Indian ivory and the colouring of lilies beside red roses. Her fifth and final appearance at 12.604–7 follows her reaction to Amata's death.

[4] Woodworth (1930), in one of the few articles devoted entirely to Lavinia, argues that she serves as an entirely cultural figure, created to model Augustan standards of femininity and to legitimate Augustus' marriage to Livia. Francis Cairns has suggested that Lavinia is described in the terminology of the lyric *partheneia* in order to 'designate Lavinia, like the girls in the partheneia, as a young eligible virgin destined for marriage' (1989: 173). Most scholars, however, have tended to bypass her characterization and focus primarily on the religious or literary symbolism of the omens in which she is involved, or the artistry of the similes in Book 12 (particularly her blush): see, for example, Putnam (1965: 158–60), Todd (1980: 29), Lyne (1983), Cairns (1989: 153 n.10), Tschiedel (1995), Oliensis (1997: 307–8), Formicula (2006), Fratantuono (2008: 48), Tarrant (2012: 105), Van Nortwick (2013: 148), Oliensis (2019), and Reid (2020).

[5] See, e.g., Skinner (1983).

[6] Formicula (2006: 84). Cf. Heinze (1999: 362): 'Lavinia is not supposed to interest the reader as a person but only as the daughter of Latinus, whose hand in marriage goes with the gift of the kingdom'; see also Van Nortwick (2013: 148) on Lavinia's 'blank persona'. It is interesting to note that Lavinia does not even appear listed as a character in Robert Williams' (1987) monograph on the *Aeneid*.

Silence as a way of reading

The prevailing mode of reading women's classical receptions — and particularly receptions of ancient women, like the women of Troy, Circe, Ariadne, or Sappho — is as a way of filling gaps in the narrative of women's experiences in antiquity, a reclamation of agency in the recovery of the female voice, a refusal to allow for the silencing of women in the ancient world.[7] Amy Richlin, for instance, laying out a ten-step guide to searching for ancient women in *Arguments with Silence*, exhorts: 'Don't take no for an answer. Argue with silence' (2014: 12). And indeed, there are plenty of examples of recent novels replete with explicit refusals to work with or condone women's silence: 'Now that all the others have run out of air', Margaret Atwood's Penelope proclaims in the opening pages of *The Penelopiad*, 'it's my turn to do a little story-making' (2005: 3).[8] Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* (2018), meanwhile, writes silence into the novel's title as a programmatic nod to the rewriting of Briseis' silence into her own 'story' (324); and towards the end of the novel, when Briseis and Tecmessa contemplate the ancient maxim '*Silence becomes a woman*' (a quote from Sophocles' *Ajax*), they burst into loud and raucous laughter — explicitly replacing the silencing of the male-authored adage with the sound of their own voices (294). These contemporary women writers are working with and against ancient women's silence, in order both to refuse its oppression and to fill its gaps.[9]

It is, of course, the case that on the surface of things Le Guin is also doing exactly this in *Lavinia*: raising her voice, telling the woman's side of the story, intervening in the male heroic epic, and unsilencing Lavinia.[10] But I want to suggest that Le Guin is also, at the same time, complicating the notion of silence and its relationship to the history of female silencing, particularly in the context of women's writing and classical receptions. Building on recent advances in feminist and gender studies scholarship, I want to argue that — in contrast to traditional models whereby silencing is seen as an enforcement of passivity (both in antiquity and today) — Le Guin may be asking us to re-read silence as a powerful interpolation of the complex association of women and literature (where women, like the Muses, are both valuable as personifications and images of the literary project, and subordinated as non-poets) into the traditional male domain of texts.[11] It therefore becomes possible to re-read Lavinia's silence in the *Aeneid*, positing that it does not have to be seen only as a dramatization of her passivity or as a gap that needs to be filled, but that it is through understanding and analysing the many and powerful qualities of her silence that receiving writers like Le Guin can explore and interpret Lavinia's silencing by men, and transform it into a fertile, productive silence instead that is able to engage with speech and text in new and different ways.

There has been a rise in the complication of silence as a field of inquiry in recent years. Sheena Malhotra and Aimee Carillo Rowe give an excellent survey in their 2013 volume, *Silence, Feminism, Power: Reflections at the Edges of Sound*, and I highlight only the most significant aspects of the scholarly re-visioning of silence here.[12] One of the most important

[7] See, by way of examples, Hoberman (1997), Doherty (2003), Zajko (2008), Cox (2011), Zajko (2011), Theodorakopoulos (2012), MacDonald (2019), and Hauser (2020a).

[8] On which see S. Collins (2006), Howells (2006), Suzuki (2007), Braund (2012), and Hauser (2018).

[9] For differences in the ways in which Le Guin constructs her female protagonist, in comparison to other contemporary historical fiction, see Haydock (2018: 390).

[10] Le Guin is more than aware of and on board with this way of reading and responding: see, for example, Le Guin (2023: 124), 'Well, when feminism got reborn, it urged literary women to raise their voices, to yell unladylikely, to shoot for parity. So ever since, we have been grabbing the mike and letting loose'. The talk from which this quote is transcribed ends with a performance piece titled 'Loud Cows', which Le Guin says she is performing 'in the hope of sending you away from this great conference with the memory of seeing an old woman mooing loudly in public' (125). For an example of a reading of Lavinia as an empowered heroine, see Brown (2012: 210–1).

[11] On the associations between women and literature in the ancient world, and its manipulation in the gendering of literary production, see Hauser (2023).

[12] Malhotra and Rowe (2013: 3–16); see also Sim (2007).

advances is in the acknowledgement of the ambivalence of silence, 'as both a form of violence that must be rigorously rejected *and* a form of resistance in and of itself'.[13] This tension, Malhotra and Rowe argue, arises out of the dissonance between the fundamental relationship between silence and passivity/absence/oppression (a very real phenomenon, highlighted globally in the silence-breaking of the #MeToo movement),[14] and the growing awareness that there can, at the same time, be productive and/or resistant silences: silences that are active and generative,[15] or silences that might, in the context of political resistance, be seen as a form of engaged social commentary.[16]

Silence, in this incarnation, can be read as a potentially generative and fertile mode of communication, within which agency is possible and which can enable strategies of both deliberation and resistance. The first interpretative move towards this reading was made by the writer and feminist Tillie Olsen in her 1978 book, *Silences*. Olsen acknowledged the polyvalency of silences in the plural, emphasizing their manifold nature and the importance in particular of recognizing the distinction between what she called 'natural' and 'unnatural silences'.[17] (In the same year, Adrienne Rich published a poem called 'Cartographies of Silence', from which the epigraph to this article is taken.) Christine Keating, responding to Olsen, refined her opposition between natural/unnatural silences in the context of social and feminist theory, to suggest a dichotomy instead between 'enforced' and 'engaged and oppositional' silences (2013: 25). The language of agency versus passivity adopted by Keating speaks to the underlying assumption of the interrelatedness of passivity and silence, and the possibility of its being overturned to intimate a different relationship where silence can be active and participatory. Applying this re-reading of silence to the figure of Lavinia in the *Aeneid*, we are able to replace a vision of her silencing as enforced or oppressive, with a reading of her silence as engaged, meditative commentary, opening up a gap within the text where alternative readings may be made.

The implicit relationality of silence, implied in Keating's visualization of silence as an engaged commentator on speech, is a second aspect of the re-visioning of silence. Kris Acheson, for instance, has argued for an understanding of the qualities of silence that define it 'as like speech as it is different' (2008: 538); as opposed to being a mere absence, unconnected to and uninformed by speech, Cheryl Glenn suggests that we should instead see silence as reflecting back on and uncovering speech (2004: 3). Silence, by this reading, is not only not passive or absent: it also calls attention to the complexities of speech and what is said, thus underlining and outlining words and texts from the inside out. This has clear and pertinent applications for classical reception studies, and contemporary feminist receptions and scholarship of the women of the ancient world in particular.[18] Stephe Harrop (2013), for instance, has shown persuasively how the interaction between speech and silence in Alice Oswald's 2011 poem *Memorial* (a reworking of Homer's *Iliad*) becomes a motif that both engages with the original (male) performance history of the text and allows for its reperformance in Oswald's speaking voice, as well as in her silence. In terms of Lavinia and her relationship to the speaking, acting characters of the text of the *Aeneid*, these readings of silence as a productive, intertextual player in feminist classical reception and the interpretation of meaning transforms her into a powerful counterpoint to and commentary on

[13] Malhotra and Rowe (2013: 11).

[14] See Starkey, Koerber, Sternadori and Pitchford (2019) and Chandra and Erlingsdóttir (2021: 3).

[15] Malhotra and Rowe (2013: 17–18).

[16] Keating (2013: 25), cf. Ferguson (2003), and compare this passage from Max Picard's *The World of Silence* (1948): 'Silence is not merely negative; it is not the mere absence of speech. It is a positive, a complete world in itself. Silence has greatness simply because it is. It *is*, and that is its greatness, its pure existence' (17, original emphasis).

[17] Olsen (2003: 6). For an evaluation and re-appraisal of Olsen's work, see Hedges and Fishkin (1994).

[18] For a discussion in connection to ancient material culture, see Emmerson (2021).

the male text, allowing her — and, critically, writers receiving her — to comment upon and gesture towards meaning.[19]

Ursula Le Guin on silence

These new ways of reading silence in modern scholarship, as both potentially engaged and embodied rather than necessarily enforced, and as explicitly relational and intertextual, open up a space for Ursula Le Guin's reception and interpretation of Lavinia as something more than her silence, in her 2008 novel, *Lavinia*. Silence and the re-negotiation of silence is, in fact, a conspicuous theme in Le Guin's corpus of scientific/fantasy/speculative fiction, where she has earned herself a reputation as a groundbreaking presence in the genre.[20] In a lesser-known short story titled 'The Silence of the Asonu' (1998, reprinted 2012), Le Guin explores the complexities of silence and undermines the assumption that silence is either always enforced (the Asonu, an alien people who keep silence, were initially believed to be mute, but it is later revealed that they are silent by choice) or that it is always meaningless ('they cease to speak because they are listening to something we do not hear, a secret which their silence hides', 471). The translatable nature of this fable, in which silence is opened up and revealed to be both engaged and full of meaning, is made clear by its opening sentence, 'The silence of the Asonu is proverbial' (468); while its classical resonances, intimated by the Latinate etymology of *a-sonu(s)* (without sound), suggest an implication with a broader tradition of literature around silencing.

In the fourth book of her popular *Earthsea* cycle, meanwhile, *Tehanu* (1990), the theme of silence is explored in the figure of the young girl Therru who has been beaten and raped by her father, then thrown on a campfire and disfigured.[21] She barely speaks throughout the novel and is unable even to articulate her own name, pointing to the trauma behind her silence and the abuse she has suffered. And yet silence is also shown to be a powerful healer. Ged, the mage of *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968), whose power derives from his ability to name correctly in the true language (the Old Speech or 'words of the Making', *Tehanu* 217), spends much of *Tehanu* in silence, recovering from the exhaustion that has drained his powers and removed his ability to find proper names; while Ged's master and great mage, Ogion the Silent, earns his moniker from his reticence for speech, from which he draws his ability to find true names (including Ged's). And at the end of *Tehanu*, it is Therru's revelation of the true language — not, significantly, aloud, but in 'the other voice' (213) — which summons the dragon Kalessin and reveals her own real name, Tehanu. Silence, in other words, is thus not only a recurrent theme for Le Guin; it is capable of transforming from an absence born of oppression and abuse into a sacred space for healing, a conduit of magical power and creativity, and a pathway towards the true understanding of speech.[22]

But silence is not simply a narrative motif — it is also an integral aspect of Le Guin's process of writing. In a review of Sara Maitland's *A Book of Silence*, published in *The Literary Review* in 2009, Le Guin comments tellingly that 'my own experience [has been that] to write a poem I need at least some while in a room of my own. And if I am granted

[19] The term 'gesture' here is borrowed from Acheson (2008), who formulates a reading of silence as embodied gesture.

[20] Le Guin's fame as an author of fantasy fiction (she is perhaps best known for *The Left Hand of Darkness* and the *Earthsea* series) has spawned a vast number of scholarly articles and books studying her life and writing. For critical introductions to Le Guin's works, see Bucknall (1981), Bittner (1984), Spivack (1984), Bloom (1986), Cummins (1990), and Bernardo and Murphy (2006); for interviews with Le Guin, see Freedman (2008); for collections of essays on Le Guin, see De Bolt (1979) and Olander and Greenberg (1979); for thematic studies of Le Guin's works, see, *inter alia*, Selinger (1988), Rochelle (2001), Davis and Stillman (2005), Oziewicz (2008), and Hanson (2013); for Le Guin's corpus and its relationship to (feminist) science fiction, see Lefanu (1988) and Barr (1993).

[21] On feminism in *Tehanu*, which is typically seen as taking a different and more overt approach to gender than the earlier *Earthsea* books, see Littlefield (1995), Mclean (1997), and Newcomb (2014).

[22] See Bhanu (2007).

some real solitude and silence, then a poem will grow out of it, sooner or later, always'. Not only is it important here to understand Le Guin's nuanced vision of silence as generative of the spoken word (that same relational position which we saw articulated above, both in theory and in Le Guin's written work)[23]; it is also critical to observe how the vision of generative, narrative-forming silence is deeply linked for Le Guin to the long theoretical discourse on women's writing. The title of Le Guin's review, 'A Moor of One's Own', as well as the phrase cited above ('I need at least some while in a room of my own') demonstrate a clear intertextuality with Virginia Woolf's 1929 essay, *A Room of One's Own* ('Moor' is a reverse anagram of 'Room'), and its passionate advocation for women's writing.[24] Indeed, in an interview conducted in 1994, Le Guin, discussing women's silencing in previous centuries and the trend in fiction towards 'finding words for' the 'silent crescent of [women's] experience', cites Woolf's famous quote, 'We think back through our mothers'.[25] She goes on to articulate the role of silence in the craft of writing more broadly, beyond the arena of women's voices: 'one of the functions of art is to give people the words to know their own experience. There are always areas of vast silence in any culture, and part of an artist's job is to go into those areas and come back from the silence with something to say'.[26] These meditations on silence find further inspiration and nourishment through Le Guin's interest in Taoist philosophy. Le Guin was both personally influenced by Taoism and herself translated Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching*, which again and again teaches the importance of silence and stillness as the root of the way: 'Who knows', Le Guin translates succinctly, 'doesn't talk' (1997: 67).[27]

This brief survey serves to demonstrate the extraordinary generativity of silence in Le Guin's life and works, and the many different themes it brings together. First and foremost, we find an explicit re-visioning of the passivity of silence, both in 'The Silence of the Asonu' and in the *Earthsea* cycle, and its replacement with a vision of silence as a different kind of speech, one which contains and generates its own meaning. Secondly, there is the explicit thematic link between silence and women's writing in Le Guin's awareness of writing against the backdrop of the 'silent crescent of [women's] experience' — a connection which will be explored at greater length below. And finally, there is the overarching theorization of silence as a precondition for narrative or for speech: in the fictional world of Earthsea, where the Old Speech arises out of silence; in Le Guin's own experience of forming poetry out of silence; in the *Tao Te Ching*'s meditations on the wisdom of silent being; and in narrative's primary task of finding silence and making a subject matter out of that silence — 'com[ing] back from the silence with something to say'. It is, in other words, out of, through and within silence that narrative, for Le Guin, is created: through a re-reading of the power of silence to formulate its own meaning, and as the foundation for the generation of words.

'My unfinished, my incomplete, my unfulfilled': Lavinia becomes literature

It is in this context that we turn to one of Le Guin's most unusual works, *Lavinia*, a rare foray into historical fiction for the author, in which she retells the narrative of the *Aeneid*

[23] For another example, see Le Guin (2023: 129) on 'the sounds and silences' that make up language.

[24] On 'A Room of One's Own' and its importance for the discussion around women's writing and the connection between women and fiction, see Rosenbaum (1992: i–xlv), Alexander (2000), and Bogen (2010). Le Guin again references 'A Room of One's Own' and its importance in the history of women's writing (here, connected to Harriet Beecher Stowe) in her essay, 'The Hand That Rocks the Cradle Writes the Book' (1993), where she credits Woolf as 'the greatest enabler for me' (810).

[25] Freedman (2008: 100–1).

[26] Freedman (2008: 101).

[27] For the influence of Taoism on Le Guin, see Peterson (2004) and Thrall (2010).

from Lavinia's perspective.[28] This is a paradigmatic example of 'com[ing] back from the silence with something to say', in the literal process of giving 'something to say' to the silent character of Lavinia from the *Aeneid*. On this level, Le Guin's re-interpretation of Lavinia's story works as a reclamation of the female voice, along the lines of other contemporary retellings of women from the classical world — most notably, Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005), which (published three years before Le Guin's *Lavinia*) had reworked the *Odyssey* to put Penelope front and centre. Philip Hardie, surveying the *Aeneid*'s reception and influence, suggests that 'the *Aeneid*'s reticence on the character and thoughts of Aeneas' future wife allow a space in which Le Guin's Lavinia, engaging in a "nowhen" dialogue with the ghost of her creator Vergil, is able to develop her own female perspective on the coming of the Trojans to a pastoral and georgic early Italy' (2014: 65). Fiona Cox points out along similar lines: '[Lavinia] finds a voice, not only with which to address readers of the twenty-first century, but also with which she can converse with the spirit of Virgil and challenge him over his presentation of the *Aeneid* from so imperial and male a point of view' (2011: 247). Just as with Atwood's *Penelopiad*, the silenced female character has been extracted from the epic, placed at the forefront as its titular heroine, and given a voice through which the male-orientated viewpoint of the ancient text can be corrected and retold.

Lavinia's role in this retelling is made explicit from the off: in the title of the novel, where Lavinia's character and name are made synonymous with Le Guin's project of reworking the *Aeneid*. This is in analogue to the *Aeneid*, which, like the novel, is formed from a proper name (Aeneas). Unlike *Lavinia*, however, the *Aeneid* is an adjectival form, distinguishing it from its main character. (Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, similarly, takes the formation of the *Odyssey* from Odysseus' name and overlays it onto Penelope's name, in an explicit statement of its agonistic relationship with the source text). Le Guin, by contrast, does not differentiate her text from her character by creating an analogous noun for Lavinia's tale (e.g. the *Laviniad*): instead, she exports Lavinia's name wholesale into the work. (We might note the similarity to the eponymous *Tehanu*, whose true naming forms both the culmination and the title of the book.) This is not Lavinia's story, in other words (as the *Aeneid* is the story of Aeneas, or *The Penelopiad* is the story of Penelope), but Lavinia *as* story. Lavinia becomes nothing less than the story itself of Vergil's *Aeneid*, retold through a character whose speaking silence enables Le Guin to transmit and embody the narrative, in what Le Guin calls (in the afterword to the novel) 'an act of gratitude to the poet, a love offering' (2008: 273).

There is, of course, a complex history to female silence and personification, particularly in literature, where silent women have often presided over song: the Muses above all.[29] As Marina Warner makes clear, 'often the recognition of a difference between the symbolic order, inhabited by ideal, allegorical figures, and the actual order … depends on the unlikelihood of women practising the concepts they represent' (1985: xx). In other words, women are easily appropriated into the sphere of the abstract precisely because they present no threat to the actual. And yet, at the same time, in the realm of poetry, it is precisely the aptness of women's creativity, women's generativity, and metaphors from the world of women — weaving, giving birth — which have made female symbols so relevant, and so enduring.[30] The 'central paradox' of female personification, then, as Warner observes, is that women

[28] Although Le Guin's mythopoiesis in her creation of mythical worlds can be fruitfully compared to her adaptation of Roman myth; see Cauville and Zupančič (1997) and Rochelle (2001: 1–32).

[29] On the female-gendering of personifications in the ancient world, see Stafford (1998) and Paxson (1998), and see further Ferrante (1975: 37), Warner (1985: 63–87), and Quilligan (1991). On the appropriation of the Muses in particular, see Laird (2002: 118), Murray (2005: 156), and Spentzou and Fowler (2002: 4–5) on the Muses' essential 'haziness'; on the Muses' voice as both an emblem of power and as a mechanism of their subordination, see D. Collins (1999).

[30] Warner (1985: xx), citing the *Oxford English Dictionary*. On weaving as an archetypal activity of women in the ancient world, see Pantelia (1993) and Karanika (2014); on its literary resonances, see Snyder (1981) and Mueller (2010). In connection to *Lavinia*, note the mention of Lavinia's weaving in response to the incomplete narrative presented by Aeneas' shield at Le Guin (2008: 140–1), discussed at Cox (2011: 258–9).

have been appropriated to symbolize institutions from which, on the one hand, they have largely been marginalized and silenced — and yet to which, at the same time, they have a particular claim and proximity.

It is this paradox which Le Guin approaches in her re-negotiation of Lavinia's silence in the *Aeneid*. Her 'love offering' to Vergil is noticeably and self-avowedly 'faithful' (2008: 273) to the *Aeneid*. The narrative of *Lavinia* follows the sequence of the *Aeneid*'s last six books. The prologue describes the arrival of the Trojan ships in Latium, mirroring the opening description of *Aeneid* 7.25–36 and matching it closely in its details. Aeneas gazing over the Tiber from the stern (*atque hic Aeneas ingentem ex aequore lucum/prospicit*, *Aen.* 29–30) becomes, in Le Guin, 'a man stood gazing up against the sky on the high stern of the ship, gazing ahead' (2). The dawn setting (*Aen.* 25–6), the focus on the movement of the oars in the water (28), the location at the mouth of the Tiber (30–2), the chorus of birds (32–4) — all are carefully described. The impression is less of a revocalization of the *Aeneid* in the female voice than of a transcription of the epic into the format of a novel — as Le Guin herself says, 'a translation into a different *form*' (273, original emphasis).

In the forests of Albunea, the *Aeneid* is most explicitly evoked when Le Guin's Lavinia meets the shade of the poet Vergil himself. At one particularly vivid point for the blurring between the boundaries of the *Aeneid* and *Lavinia*, Le Guin's Lavinia recounts how Vergil told her the story of the sack of Troy (45–6). In the *Aeneid*, this had been related by Aeneas (the internal narrator) to an internal audience; in *Lavinia*, the same tale — originally told by Aeneas, narrated (in Le Guin's fiction) by the poet Vergil in ghost form — is passed on to us by Lavinia, who is, in turn, being narrated by Le Guin.[31] The nesting of internal narrators is made explicit by Le Guin's Vergil: 'I will tell you the story of the fall of Troy, as Aeneas told it to the queen of Carthage' (44). Interestingly, Lavinia is described as learning about these events as they were represented in the *Aeneid*, not as historical facts that have already happened and are therefore 'true'. They are, in other words, literary events. As Le Guin's Vergil points out:

> I think it has not happened yet. Faunus has not yet spoken to Latinus. Perhaps it never did – never will happen. You should not be concerned about it. I made it up. I imagined it. A dream within a dream … within the dream that has been my life … (44)

Lavinia, then, is learning about herself and her literary construction as portrayed in the *Aeneid*, as Vergil 'imagined it' — and not her identity as a character in Latin history.

Whilst the novel's opening serves, on one level, to situate *Lavinia* as a close intertext with the *Aeneid*, its other function is to establish the novel's metaliterary premise, and the generation of Lavinia as poetic construct:

> I know who I was, I can tell you who I may have been, but I am, now, only in this line of words I write. I'm not sure of the nature of my existence, and wonder to find myself writing. I speak Latin, of course, but did I ever learn to write it? That seems unlikely. No doubt someone with my name, Lavinia, did exist, but she may have been so different from my own idea of myself, or my poet's idea of me, that it only confuses me to think about her. As far as I know, it was my poet who gave me any reality at all. Before he wrote, I was the mistiest of figures, scarcely more than a name in a genealogy. It was he who brought me to life, to myself, and so made me able to remember my life and myself, which I do, vividly, with all kind of emotions, emotions I feel strongly as I write, perhaps because the events I remember only come to exist as I write them, or as he wrote them. (3)

The main thrust of the passage is to contrast Lavinia as a personality of history with Lavinia as poetic construct: 'no doubt someone with my name, Lavinia, did exist, but she may have

[31] On internal narrators/audiences, see de Jong (2004: 29–40).

been so different from my own idea of myself, or my poet's idea of me…' Four times this literary Lavinia emphasizes that she exists only in literature: 'I am, now, only in this line of words I write'; 'it was my poet who gave me any reality at all'; 'it was he who brought me to life'; 'perhaps because the events I remember only come to exist as I write them, or as he wrote them'. At the same time, Lavinia's words explore the (apparent) passivity of the representation of her voice and her continual self-subordination to 'my poet'.[32] She nods to female illiteracy — 'I speak Latin, of course, but did I ever learn to write it? That seems unlikely' — but, instead of trying to correct it by emphasizing the fact that she is now, at last, writing her story (as Atwood's Penelope does), she transfers her literary power to the poet, who 'gave me reality'.[33] The self-corrections that typify Le Guin's Lavinia's style — where she replaces a statement that allows her agency with one which turns her into a literary construct — appear as staged acts of self-subordination: 'my own idea of myself, or my poet's idea of me', and, even more emphatically, 'the events I remember only come to exist as I write them, or as he wrote them'.

There are many instances throughout the novel where Lavinia reflects on her existence as occurring only in and through Vergil's poem. She calls him 'the author of all my being' (68), and predicts that she 'will eventually fade away and be lost in oblivion, as I would have done long ago if the poet hadn't summoned me into existence' (4). Elsewhere, she even describes herself to the poet by quoting him in his own words: 'I am "ripe now for a man, of full age now for marriage." As you said…' (53), suggesting both that she defines her identity through Vergil's portrayal of her, and that she is able to speak only through him.[34] At one point she describes in striking terms her 'contingency' upon Vergil — as well as the contingency of Vergil's authorship:

> And I remember, always, that I am contingent.
>
> So, of course, were they. It is only too likely that little Publius Vergilius Maro might have died at six or seven, ashes under a small gravestone in Mantua, before he was ever a poet; and with him would have died the hero's glory, leaving a mere name among a thousand names of warriors, not even a myth on the Italian shore. We are all contingent … If I never lived at all, yet I am a silent wing on the wind, a bodiless voice in the forest of Albunea. (68)

Yet, in spite of the poet's appearance through the first half of the novel as an ever-diminishing shade, it is often Lavinia who describes herself in terms of insubstantiality and disembodiment: 'if I never lived at all, yet I am a silent wing on the wind, a bodiless voice in the forest of Albunea' (68). Compare a few pages earlier, where Lavinia offers Vergil a fleece: 'I could do nothing for him, and could touch him only with my voice' (62); while Vergil addresses her as the insubstantial character of his poem: 'You're almost nothing in my poem, almost nobody' (63) (aligning with Lavinia's earlier statement: 'the life he gave me in his poem is so dull, except for the one moment when my hair catches fire – so colorless, except when my maiden cheeks blush like ivory stained with crimson dye – so conventional … He didn't let me say a word', 4). Although Vergil is the shadow, Lavinia becomes only a 'voice', insubstantial, 'bodiless', until, at the very end, she is translated into only a single syllable: Latin *i*, or (in English) 'go on' (272), hinting at Le Guin's own reception and Lavinia's continuation in the words of literature. As she points out in one of the clearest instances of her poetic self-definition,

> Aeneas had not been there with me as a man in the flesh, nor had Anchises spoken. It was the poet who spoke. It was all the words of the poet, the words of the maker, the foreteller,

[32] The phrase occurs throughout the text; first at page 3, only eight lines into the start of the novel.

[33] Compare the opening of Atwood's *The Penelopiad*: 'Now that all the others have run out of air, it's my turn to do a little story-making' (2005: 3). On female illiteracy in the ancient world, see Cole (1981), Morgan (1998), and Chrystal (2013: 66–81).

[34] Quoting Le Guin (2008: 39), which is, in turn, a translation of *Aen.* 7.53, *iam matura viro, iam plenis nubilis annis*.

> the truth teller: nothing more, nothing less. But was I myself any more, or less, than that? (257)

This form of existence is, paradoxically, presented as somehow truer than a physical existence:

> [Being subject to death and rebirth] isn't true being, not even half as true as my being is as I write and you read it, and nowhere near as true as in his words, the splendid, vivid words I've lived in for centuries. (4)

By this point, it may seem as if Lavinia's passivity and silence have rendered her as nearly non-existent as she is in Vergil's poem — as if her silence were, indeed, absence. But at a crucial moment where the dying poet wonders about the nature of his poem, Le Guin has Lavinia push back against Vergil — and in so doing, begins to invite a new understanding of silence. Vergil — reflecting on the well-known unfinished lines and inconsistencies of the *Aeneid* — laments to the character he created that she is not the way he would have left her: 'It's not the right ending', he says (63), and 'They'll publish it unfinished' (62).[35] But Lavinia has an interesting answer. As he questions his ending and predicts his impending death, he gives her a command that is also a plea: 'Tell me I can finish my work!' To which she replies:

> If you never finish it, it will never end. (59)

In other words, it is the *Aeneid*'s incompleteness — the gaps, the silences, the words not written — which allows for its recreation in reception.[36]

It is this which allows us, like a pivot that turns Lavinia's apparent silence and passivity upon itself, to re-read and re-orientate the discourse around Lavinia's silence and her contingency on poetry in the novel: because Lavinia's words here show — and perform — the fact that it is not only the incompleteness of the *Aeneid* that enable its reception. It is also, by the same token, precisely her silence in the *Aeneid* that enables her to speak again in Le Guin's novel. It is her very silence and her contingency on poetry which means she can point to the silent gaps, the incompleteness, in the very poem that made her — and so to re-envision it as a locus for continuing interpretation and reception for Le Guin.[37] Le Guin makes it clear, in her Afterword, that it is precisely this sense of incompleteness, both in Lavinia and in the *Aeneid*, that makes Lavinia such a good candidate for Le Guin's own 'interpretation' (274): explaining that the *Aeneid* was never finished, she goes on to write, 'This story is in no way an attempt to change or complete the story of Aeneas. It is a meditative interpretation suggested by a minor character in his story — the unfolding of a hint' (274). For Le Guin, then, it is Lavinia's silent ('minor') invitation to the open-endedness of the *Aeneid* which enables the text to live on. It is this which enables a twenty-first-century novel to be written out of an ancient Roman epic: the reception hermeneutics, derived from silence and incompleteness, of 'the unfolding of a hint' (274).

This interdependent link between Lavinia's silence and the *Aeneid*'s incompleteness permeates the novel around Lavinia's adumbrated form. In their penultimate meeting, only a few pages after their discussion of endings and the poem's incompleteness, Vergil bids Lavinia farewell with an unusual trio of epithets: '"Oh my dear," he said, still very softly. "My unfinished, my incomplete, my unfulfilled"' (68). The conflation of Lavinia's

[35] For a discussion of the history of the text of the *Aeneid*, see O'Hara (2007: 77–103) and (2010), where perceived 'inconsistencies' in the *Aeneid* are treated as openings for interpretation rather than as 'mistakes'; cf. Thomas (2001: 1–24).

[36] Here I pick up on Fiona Cox's point that it is Vergil's lack of closure which enables Lavinia to find 'a modern, female voice' (2011: 262). For a similar reading of Penelope's lack of closure in the *Odyssey*, see Hauser (2020b).

[37] For Lavinia's contingency similarly re-read as agency, see Byrne (2012).

incompleteness — described by Vergil himself five pages earlier, 'you're almost nothing in my poem, almost nobody' (63) — with the incompleteness of the poem is realized in the voice of the poet, who addresses her with the same possessives as she has used throughout the novel of the poet who constructs her. And later in the novel, one of the inconsistencies of the *Aeneid* that centres around Lavinia burrows its way into the thematic arc of Le Guin's text. In the *Aeneid*, two different and incongruent lines of descent are given for the kings of Alba Longa: either from Aeneas and Creusa (via Ascanius/Iulus, *Aen.* 1.267–74), or from Aeneas and Lavinia (via their son, Silvius, 6.760–6).[38] In Le Guin's *Lavinia*, this inconsistency between two heirs — Ascanius' sense of entitlement to Alba Longa, Silvius' claim to the throne through his joint Trojan and Italian blood — fuels the conflict towards the end of the novel, as the half-brothers vie for power and Lavinia goes into hiding with her son, to return in the final pages to Lavinium when Silvius is crowned. The *Aeneid*'s inconsistency, in other words, generates the closing act of *Lavinia*'s plot.

In writing *Lavinia*, then, Le Guin takes the link between unfinished *Aeneid* and silent Lavinia one step further than mere correspondence. It is not just that both are incomplete or silent in places; it is that there is a generative invitation to interpretative openness within that silence — an invitation which is taken up and mediated by Le Guin's narrative. And it is this that provides Le Guin's answer to both the apparent passivity of Lavinia's silence and the paradox of personification. Le Guin's Lavinia doesn't simply become text: she points towards the fruitful gaps in which texts can be interpreted as well as continue to be received and rewritten. Le Guin's Lavinia does not argue with silence: she celebrates incompleteness as a strategy of reception. A kind of reverse construction thus takes place around Lavinia's silence and her connection to literature as a woman. It is precisely because men are given a part to play, and a voice to speak, within the story that they cannot move beyond the end of the text. Women, on the other hand, who are so little characterized and who are often silenced (like Lavinia), can be refigured and received in the continuing feminist project through a re-evaluation of their silence's engaged, generative capacities.[39] As Le Guin's Lavinia comments, 'the poet made [Aeneas] live, live greatly, so he must die. I, whom the poet gave so little life to, I can go on' (25–6). Or, even more poetically: 'he did not sing me enough life to die. He only gave me immortality' (271).

Lavinia and her silence are therefore inextricably linked to Le Guin's project in receiving the *Aeneid*. Although at first Lavinia's emphasis on her contingency might appear to enact her subordination to the text and the silencing of her voice, Le Guin's exploration of the generative nature of her silence and the emphasis on her ability to 'live' in narrative transforms her silence into an engaged, resonant, fertile space for interpretation. The silencing of Lavinia, begun in the *Aeneid*, is transformed by Le Guin into an inquiry into the requirements and realities of fiction, through the self-conscious fictionality of the character of Lavinia. It is, in the end, precisely Lavinia's liminality and her silence in the *Aeneid* that, in Le Guin's hands, makes her the only figure capable of responding and speaking for the continuity of the poem, of bridging the gap between past and present. She is the only one who can embody a form of feminist classical reception envisioned not merely as a rewriting or an overwriting, a plugging of gaps, but as a search for knowledge and interpretation in the spaces of not-knowing — as a permanent reminder of the incompleteness not only of the *Aeneid*, but of the historical record, of knowledge. As Le Guin translates in the *Tao te Ching*, in a verse that might just as well be talking about Lavinia: 'That's why the wise soul … teaches without talking' (1997: 5).

Women's silence, then, often seen as an act of suppression or subordination in the ancient world, is translated through Le Guin's Lavinia into a new space for classical reception itself — a place where women's engaged and oppositional silences can be celebrated and given space, where silence as a model for reworking the incomplete, fragmentary past can provide

[38] See Horsfall (2016: 86).

[39] Cf. Don Fowler's points on open-endedness as a feminist narratology versus male closure (1997: 10–1).

novel avenues to engage with the silent female figures of the male classical canon, and from which ever-new narratives can be born.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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