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Abstract

Reading of Ursula K. Le Guin's not-exactly-historical novel *Lavinia*, which combines her thematic interest in the feminine voice and experience with postmodern and existential concerns about authorship, textuality, and the collaboration between author and reader (and author and character)—resulting, as always with Le Guin, in something rich, deep, and difficult to classify. Explores how Le Guin adapted the original sources to create a novel from the female character's point of view.

Additional Keywords

Vergil. Aeneid; Authorship, Theories of; Le Guin, Ursula K. *Lavinia*

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MYTH-REMAKING IN THE SHADOW OF VERGIL: THE CAPTIVE(-ATED) VOICE OF URSULA K. LE GUIN'S *LAVINIA*

T.S. MILLER

When the title character of Ursula K. Le Guin's retelling of the *Aeneid* meets the poet who gave her life, she finds that she has much to say to him; conversely, Vergil's own demure Lavinia never speaks a word in his poem of nearly ten thousand lines. In *Lavinia*, then, Le Guin makes use of confessional first-person narration in order to recuperate a lost female voice from a classic text, a narrative strategy by now almost over-familiar in the recent rash of revisionist retellings. For a high-profile example of this strain of revisionism, one could point to Margaret Atwood's backbiting epic *The Penelopiad* (2005), which aims not only to give voice to the long-suffering Homeric heroine, but also to indict the summary justice executed on her twelve maidservants.¹ Unlike Atwood's contrarian Penelope, however, Lavinia very much sings in the same key as Vergil, even if she chooses to take for her primary subjects, in place of arms and the man, her own domestic life and indeed the poet himself. In a sense, for all her tinkering with Vergil's mythology and narrative arc, Le Guin delivers a fairly orthodox reading of the great Latin epic;² for example, especially in her analysis of the death of Turnus, one can hear an echo of Adam Parry's pioneering conception of the poem's two voices: "We hear two distinct voices in the *Aeneid*, a

¹ Were we to limit ourselves to retellings of Greco-Roman stories, we could still list many more examples of this popular genre, including Christa Wolf's revisionist accounts *Cassandra* and *Medea*, as well as Marion Zimmer Bradley's novel *The Firebrand*, which also takes up the Matter of Rome. For further examples of the use of classical mythology in fantasy, see Gary K. Wolfe's very positive review of *Lavinia*, in which he admits that Le Guin's "approach is one [he hasn't] quite seen before" (15). Coming from the prodigiously well-read Wolfe, this is surely saying something.

² By "orthodox" reading, I of course mean "orthodox for the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries." Indeed, few other authors in history have been subjected to quite so many re-readings as Vergil has been, whether at the hands of medieval allegorists re-appropriating the pagan poet as a Christian prophet, or when re-inscribed in English as *Paradise Lost* or a mock epic in the Age of Pope. For the reception of Vergil from the Romans on down, see Ziolkowski and Putnam, *The Virgilian Tradition*, and Williams, *Changing Attitudes to Virgil*.

public voice of triumph, and a private voice of regret" (121).³ At times Lavinia—or perhaps her co-creator Le Guin—appears to possess two distinct voices of her own, the one deeply in love with the world Vergil has created for her, and the other equally desirous of traveling beyond its limitations. In the end, *Lavinia* does not so much constitute a *new* myth as offer a humble extension of Vergil's epic mythmaking, which takes for its setting the transactional space that exists between writer and reader; in fact, even when Lavinia's story proceeds past the *ne plus ultra* of Turnus' death, her poet's weighty presence continues to guide or possibly even limit her newfound voice. Yet, when we realize that Lavinia herself can stand in metonymically for either the *Aeneid* or the poem's more conscientious readers, her reliance on Vergil for being and meaning becomes much less surprising.

Although I would not accuse Atwood of sheer antagonism towards her literary predecessors, the difference between Le Guin's attitude towards Vergil and Atwood's towards Homer becomes immediately obvious, for all the superficial similarity of their projects and indeed of their protagonists' narratorial voices. For example, we meet Atwood's omniscient, self-conscious narrator in the underworld—"Now that I'm dead I know everything" (1)—and Lavinia likewise speculates that she may be telling her tale from beyond the grave, from some "deceiving place where we think we're alive" (4). Whether or not Le Guin intended to issue a direct challenge to Atwood, Lavinia in fact distinguishes herself from Penelope on precisely this count: "But then I think no, it has nothing to do with being dead, it's not death that allows us to understand one another, but poetry" (5). In an even more striking parallel, Atwood ends her retelling with a final *exeunt* in which Homer's hanged maids "*sprout feathers, and fly away as owls*" (196), while *Lavinia* similarly concludes with the narrator's transformation into an owl, Le Guin's multipurpose numinous animal of choice. Again, we need not interpret Le Guin's novel as a riposte,⁴ but Lavinia also self-consciously addresses this trend of righteously indignant feminist re-readings: "I

³ Although Le Guin has assured me that she had not read Parry's essay itself before I brought it to her attention, she has described her project in language that uncannily recalls his own: "This is inevitably an interpretation, also, of the hero's story, in which Vergil shows the price of public triumph as personal tragedy" ("*Lavinia*," Kirkus 6).

⁴ Le Guin has held forth on Atwood's novel on several occasions, always setting herself against it: "[Vergil is] different than most of the classic writers, in whom women's voices are suppressed. He simply doesn't seem to have much of that prejudice against women. This is not like Atwood's thing with Penelope, where she's kind of telling Homer off: 'you didn't really let Penelope tell her side of the story!' That's not what I was doing" (interview with Grossman). In this same interview, Le Guin goes on to praise Atwood's writing in general, and, for another mixture of commendation and polite disagreement, see also Le Guin's recent review of Atwood's *The Year of the Flood*.

am not the feminine voice you may have expected. Resentment is not what drives me to write my story. Anger, in part, perhaps. But not an easy anger. I long for justice, but I do not know what justice is" (68). In effect, whereas Atwood seems troubled by Homer's entire world—"The story as told in *The Odyssey* doesn't hold water: there are too many inconsistencies" (xv)—Le Guin takes Vergil to task more for a sin of omission, and a venial one at that.

I stress the difference between these two novels at such length simply because *Lavinia* is, in many ways, a rather unusual book, even an unexpected one. To be sure, what Coral Ann Howells says of *The Penelopiad* we might easily expect to be true of *Lavinia*:

So Atwood challenges *The Odyssey* by deliberately flouting epic conventions: instead of war she deals with domestic relations, shifting the action indoors, and dismantling the epic model by transforming it into a double-voiced female confessional narrative [...]. Atwood is highlighting the malleability of myths and their openness to revision as she offers her gendered reading designed to focus on some of the gaps and silences relating to woman's [sic] lives in *The Odyssey*. ("We Can't Help" 61)⁵

Just so, Le Guin's classical rereading focuses on these gaps and silences in the lives of women, but words like "challenges," "flouting" and "dismantling" are telling here: Lavinia's measured piety remains many Roman miles away from Atwood's penchant for the "subversive," for lack of a better term. Yet we can observe similar statements to Howells's in Le Guin criticism; Warren G. Rochelle, for one, opens his 2001 study of the author's use of myth with an analysis of her overriding revisionism: "Le Guin, through her revisioning and reshaping of myth in the stories she is telling, subverts myth—in particular the Myth of Hero and the Quest, and the myth of utopia—as a way of making her argument" (xi). While Rochelle approaches Le Guin's work with admirable insight and a long view, I do not think it a small quibble to question whether "subverts" is the ideal word choice here. In *Lavinia*, at least, Le Guin seems up to something else.⁶

⁵ Howells provides an excellent introduction to Atwood's own views on myth and retelling, and a more sustained comparative analysis of these two contemporaneous retellings of classical epics, though beyond the scope of this essay, would surely yield fascinating results. See also Howells, "Five Ways of Looking at *The Penelopiad*," which covers much of the same ground. And, for another view on how female retellers like Le Guin can work with tradition, see Attebery, "Gender," 52 ff.

⁶ I should note that some of Le Guin's poems do feature illustrious literary women challenging received patriarchal authority. Poems like "Ariadne Dreams" (*Going Out With Peacocks*), "The Crown of Laurel" (*Buffalo Gals*), and "Danaë 46" (*Hard Words*) all derive from classical mythology, and "Ariadne Dreams" I find particularly noteworthy here, since its speaker appears to anticipate several of Lavinia's meta-fictional quandaries: "The beat of

If we can say with confidence that *Lavinia* is not revisionist in the same sense as a tell-all secret history, we nevertheless face other challenges when we attempt to identify the genre(s) to which this parallel novel does belong. Of course, throughout her long career Le Guin has proven herself an inveterate transgressor of traditional genre boundaries: she has published poetry and prose, science fiction and mainstream literary realism, works with only the slightest whiff of the fantastic and heroic tales in the highest of fantasy traditions. Her Earthsea novels fall into this latter category, set as they are in a full-fledged subcreated world, and indeed one of the first items to arrest the reader's attention upon opening *Lavinia* is a florid topographical sketch not unlike the hand-drawn maps that welcome us into Tolkien's Middle-Earth. Closer inspection, however, reveals the map as a cartographic reconstruction of Bronze Age Italy, and the recognizable outline of the Lavinian shores reminds us that our heroes dwell much closer to home, namely, in a world in which the Italian peninsula still resembles nothing so much as a boot. Then again, although *Lavinia* has earned laudatory comparisons with Robert Graves's historical novel *I, Claudius* (*Publishers Weekly*), in truth the book seems even less wholly historical than wholly fantastical. Not only does *Lavinia*, as James Schellenberg puts it, "[read] like a dream," but Le Guin admits in her afterword that she has taken certain liberties with history. For her own private Italy, Le Guin has created living conditions somewhat less glamorous than those in Vergil, but more luxurious than fidelity to historical conjecture would permit: she claims, for one, that she simply "couldn't imagine Italians without wine and olive oil" (278). We can perhaps best understand *Lavinia*, in terms of its genre, to follow just this pattern, hovering somewhere in-between the historical novel and the full-blown mythical epic.⁷

Le Guin has worn the mantle of mythmaker for decades, and there can be no doubt that *Lavinia*'s world is a world of myth; as Adam Roberts assesses it,

sleep is all my mind. / I am my rhyme" (1-2). Moreover, the poem contains what I understand to be a reference to a future woman looking back upon the speaker: "What woman weeps / on the far seacoast of my sleep?" (15-6). For a cogent discussion of the fantastic in Le Guin's poetry generally, see Murphy, "The Left Hand of Fabulation."

⁷ The quasi-mythic, quasi-historical landscape of *Lavinia*, in conjunction with its regal female narrator, could invite comparison with C.S. Lewis's novel *Till We Have Faces*. Yet, while C.N. Manlove has linked an earlier work of Le Guin's to Lewis's own "myth retold" — "the society and beliefs described in *The Tombs of Atuan* almost certainly look back to C.S. Lewis' *Till We Have Faces*" (292)—Le Guin has again reported to me that she has never read the book. Moreover, she tends to distance herself from this particular Inkling generally: "I have a great deal of trouble with C.S. Lewis, with the way his mind works" (Broughton 54). For a comparative analysis of the Earthsea and Narnia series, see Bailey, "Counter-Landscapes."

"there is a *pervasively* numinous quality to Le Guin's imagined world." Even so, one of the most palpable differences between the setting of *Lavinia* and that of the *Aeneid* is the absence in the former of Vergil's anthropomorphized deities: Le Guin has replaced the cosmic game of chess with this "numinous quality," comprising a loose set of forces that Lavinia describes as "gods, numina, great powers and presences" that "aren't people" and definitely "don't love and hate" (65). Accordingly, in the world of Le Guin's pre-Hellenized Italian religion, a fire-breathing monster slain by Hercules becomes euhemerized as a grubby local chieftain, and no spectacular underworld serpent winds its way between Queen Amata's breasts. Supernatural omens, of course, still abound, but Le Guin's treatment of the portentous crown of flame around Lavinia's head remains representative of the new world the author has created: when her head appears to catch fire, what does Lavinia do but rush to douse her hair in the nearest fountain? Only when everyone discovers that Lavinia has not suffered any burns do they perceive the fire as an omen and begin to discuss its import in proper epic fashion.

Le Guin explains that she chose to excise the gods as a matter of narrative expedience: "The Homeric use of quarrelsome deities to motivate, illuminate, and interfere with human choices and emotions doesn't work well in a novel, so the Greco-Roman gods, an intrinsic element of the poem, are no part of my story" (275). While this rationale seems common to many modern retellings of the Greek and Roman epics, notably the 2004 blockbuster *Troy*, the decision is of much more consequence to *Lavinia* than this explanation might suggest; Le Guin in fact relentlessly tracks the moments where the gods have dropped out of the original narrative. For example, when Lavinia balks at the concept of petty emotions among the gods—"A sacred power jealous of another?" (66)—we see that Le Guin has turned one of Vergil's most famous lines on its head: "tantaene animis caelestibus irae?" ["Can heavenly spirits cherish resentment so dire?"] (I.11).⁸ For Vergil, the question is rhetorical, and Juno's vendetta against the Trojans starkly precludes a negative answer, while Lavinia simply replies, "Nonsense!" Moreover, Le Guin slyly flags as "uncanny" the story of Aeneas's escape from Diomedes during the Trojan War by throwing dust in his face (200);⁹ in Homer, of course, Aeneas's divine mother Aphrodite

⁸ For convenience, I have used the Loeb translations rather than offering my own, and Le Guin has also acknowledged her use of the Loeb facing text during her reading of the poem in Latin ("Sing Muse").

⁹ Le Guin knows her Todorov: "Todorov said many interesting things in *The Fantastic* (1975), but few of them have anything to do with fantasy" ("The Critics" 85). For a discussion of "the uncanny" and "the fantastic-uncanny," see Todorov, *The Fantastic*, 41-57. In *Lavinia*, the tongue-in-cheek marker "uncanny" first appears in Le Guin's account of the final battle with Turnus, which also removes Vergil's supernatural coloration (174).

intervenes to rescue him. In a similar move, Le Guin also playfully transforms Aeneas' epithet of *nate dea* [goddess-born] into "the son of the evening star" (90). In short, Le Guin's continual play with Vergil's absent pantheon signals that she seeks more than conformity with contemporary novelistic expectations: the missing gods have become more diffuse, interpenetrating the narrative even though they no longer direct it.

Again, I do not feel that Le Guin does justice to the complexity of her own created world in her cursory comment that *Lavinia* is "set in Vergil's semi-mythological, nonhistorical landscape, defined by a poet, not by the patient uncertainties of archaeologists" (276). I quarrel primarily with that qualifier "Vergil's": no matter how often *Lavinia* might remind us that she owes her entire being to the poet, we must keep in mind that, oddly, the world in which she lives is decidedly *not* Vergil's—not quite. When we press on the issue, we arrive at the central paradox of the novel: even though Vergil has created *Lavinia*, literally serving as "the author of all [her] being" (68), his vision errs in some key details. For example, *Lavinia* seems especially chagrined at having been mistaken for a blonde: "[M]y hair has always been dark" (262). If, then, we take *Lavinia* as living within *Vergil's* world, whence comes such "corrected" information? Although obvious, the answer is not *simple*: yes, another writer named Ursula K. Le Guin gives *Lavinia* the voice that Vergil does not, but, as a result of the two authors' joint efforts to create the character and her world, the setting of the novel becomes a fundamentally transactional landscape. In effect, the very fabric of *Lavinia's* curiously meta-fictive reality serves as a record of Le Guin's reading of the *Aeneid*, with its foundation in Vergil but its particular rendering in later readers like herself.

The complexity of this setting demands further narratological interrogation, in particular because of the way in which it generates *Lavinia's* extraordinarily positioned voice. From the outset, *Lavinia* suffers from a persistent "future creep," by which I mean that the novel more and more persistently forces us to recognize it as first a work of 21st century fiction, rather than a timeless gateway into some pre-modern world radically distinct from and unconnected to our present. While modern English idioms like "the bread of life" (107) and "the promised land" (53) do not render impossible some "suspension of disbelief" in *Lavinia's* world, they obtrude on the textual illusion nonetheless, carrying with them as they do resonances with Judeo-Christian concepts alien to the ancient Romans. Le Guin is not by any means one of Vergil's Christianizers,¹⁰ but the presence of the present in the novel serves as another reminder that *Lavinia* dwells somewhere else. One could dismiss these turns of phrase as

¹⁰ Indeed, Le Guin has described herself as "an inconsistent Taoist and a consistent unChristian" ("Ketterer" 139).

unintentional or even unfortunate, if Le Guin did not allow the present to slip into her novel in quite so many other ways. For example, we see that in his delirium the dying Vergil gains access to literary history far beyond his own lifetime: at one point he hazily alludes to his future role as guide in Dante's *Commedia* (61). Yet more salient are Le Guin's modifications of Aeneas's divine shield, which under Lavinia's gaze prophesies not only the future history of Rome, but also the terrors and wars of the 20th century, culminating in the last great atrocity of the Second World War: "[A]n immense round cloud of destruction rises up over the sea at the end of the world" (25).

All of these intrusions from the future emphasize that Lavinia's world exists as much in our present as in her quasi-mythic past or in Vergil's original textual universe. In this same way, the specter of Le Guin's specifically 21st-century authorship not only flits about the text's edges, but becomes one of its major objects of attention. For instance, Le Guin has not cast her text as a "pseudotranslation" from a supposed Latin source, and indeed the "'found-manuscript' convention" so popular in historical fiction has no place in *Lavinia* (Du Pont 338).¹¹ On the contrary, Lavinia confronts the paradox of her own (probable) illiteracy early on in the novel: "I speak Latin, of course, but did I ever learn to write it?" (3). When she later asks her audience in puzzlement, "Do you know Latin?" (5), she also demonstrates her awareness of some distant readership; in other words, Lavinia recognizes, even if only semi-consciously at times, that she speaks in a language not her own, and a language of the future, at that. Not surprisingly, Lavinia suffers more than one existential crisis concerning the origin of her own words: "Where is my voice from, I wonder? [...] the voice that speaks with no tongue a language not its own?" (263). In this rather curious case of dramatic irony, the reader knows very well the name and middle initial of Lavinia's inscrutable creatrix, while she can only dimly imagine her voice as originating with one of Vergil's future readers.

This reader-writer from the future offers us her "meditative interpretation" (274) of the *Aeneid*, and so it necessarily remains a rereading that could not exist without Vergil, that other spectral poet from Lavinia's future. To speak, then, of some kind of anxiety of influence would be absurd; we might more properly describe the operant force in the novel as an anxiety of *creation*: Lavinia recognizes that she owes her entire being to Vergil, not simply her

¹¹ Du Pont chiefly discusses Robert Graves's use of pseudotranslation in the Claudius novels, but he speaks to larger issues for the genre in which Le Guin is writing: "When authors use pseudotranslation to write a fictitious text that is attributed to a historical figure, they have to account for the difference in style between their text and existing texts of that historical figure" (343). Freed from the restrictions of history, Le Guin accounts for peculiarities in Lavinia's voice by defining the character's entire being as the meta-fictive offspring of Vergil and a contemporary American novelist.

book.¹² Indeed, in her affectionate moniker for Vergil, “my poet,” the word “poet” begins to regain its original Greek sense of “maker.” Although Lavinia often witnesses events from Vergil’s poem through strategic voyeurism—as we would expect of a narrator on the periphery of the main narrative—she acquires her knowledge of the epic’s first six books from the mouth of her poet, who visits her in the sacred grove of Albunea. The shadowy presence of Vergil as an actual character in the novel recapitulates his sometimes subtle but ubiquitous influence over the entire course of the narrative, yet we must remember that Vergil and Lavinia belong to different worlds, even different realities: in fact, the Vergil of Le Guin’s imagination almost seems to be living more in Hermann Broch’s *The Death of Virgil* (*Der Tod des Vergil*), sailing to Brundisium to die.¹³ In other words, Lavinia does not live in this Vergil’s past, since he has, after all, created at least the preconditions of her existence; what’s more, Le Guin has herself written this particular incarnation of Vergil into being. Just as Lavinia feels “as if [the two of them] were both shadows” (43), Vergil too senses his own contingent existence: “So maybe I am a bat that has flown here from Hades. A dream that has flown into a dream. Into my poem” (38).¹⁴ The “contingent” or “transactional” reality of the novel then represents a nexus of several realities, or rather consists of a series of realities mutually dependent on and mediated by one another: that of the original textual world of the *Aeneid* where Lavinia’s hair is dark; Lavinia’s transactional (and blonde) existence in the novel; the actual historical Rome from which Vergil wrote; Le Guin’s family home in Portland; and even Vergil’s role as a more fantastic character in the novel who will, among other things, “literally” guide Dante through the afterlife.

I would not ascribe the contingency of Lavinia’s existence exclusively to Vergil and Le Guin, but also to that larger literary tradition, the tradition which yokes together the realities that constitute Lavinia’s world; of course, Le Guin does not offer *Lavinia* as *telos*, but simply another link in the chain. To be sure, Lavinia cheekily calls our attention to a few “Vergilian nods”—why did this happen in that funny way?—and, in some cases, she even overwrites the reality of the events related in Vergil’s epic: “Though all my poet sang was true and is true, yet there are small mistakes in the truth of it, and I have tried to mend those

¹² For some of Le Guin’s own ideas on literary influence generally, see “The Wilderness Within,” and also *Earthsea Revisioned*, 10.

¹³ Interestingly, Le Guin has told me that she has, in fact, read Broch’s novel, although she “[t]hought it pretty awful.”

¹⁴ Although the “bat out of hell” image unfortunately evokes Meat Loaf’s best-selling rock album, the figuration of underworld shades as bats dates back to Homer’s *Odyssey*: “[Hermes] waved them on, all squeaking / as bats will in a cavern’s underworld, / all flitting, flitting criss-cross in the dark / if one falls and the rock-hung chain is broken. / So with faint cries the shades trailed after Hermes, / pure Deliverer” (Fitzgerald 410, Book 24).

tiny rents in the great fabric as I tell my part in it" (144). This "great fabric," the chain of readers and writers following Vergil, has become far greater than the *Aeneid* itself as a single discrete text; at the vertiginous moment in the novel where Vergil's original narrative comes to an end, Lavinia finds her way forward by humbly situating herself in relation to both past and future as a new writer, a new maker: "What is left after death? Everything else. The sun a man saw rise goes down though he does not see it set. A woman sits down to the weaving another woman left in the loom" (173).¹⁵

Truth be told, Lavinia at first seems an unlikely bearer of this authorial burden—"I'm not sure of the nature of my existence, and wonder to find myself writing" (3)—but she quickly ascertains that writing is in fact synonymous with her existence: "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" (3). Although we could describe Lavinia as an "unreliable narrator"—at one point she explains to us that she comes to believe a childhood lie and later repeats the falsified story to her husband (9)—the issue runs much deeper, since her entire life seems cut from the whole cloth of her textual creation: "I feel strongly as I write, perhaps because the events I remember only come to exist as I write them, or as [Vergil] wrote them" (3). With her existence perhaps "contingent" (68) on the level of her own solipsistic "self-fashioning," Lavinia is *made* of words, and she knows it: "I remember every word because they are the fabric of my life, the warp I am woven on" (140-41). In short, Lavinia is a book. That novel and character share a name is neither coincidence nor convention, and at times it requires some effort to differentiate the two, and each from the epic poem in which we find them entangled. The metonymic operators linking Lavinia and the *Aeneid* are manifold: she becomes both audience and teller of the poem as she listens to Vergil narrate it and then repeats his words to us, but the poet also addresses her as if she *were* his unfinished masterwork, "My unfinished, my incomplete, my unfulfilled" (68). In her channeling of Vergil and her (auto-)po(i)etic self-creation, Lavinia becomes a synecdoche for the epic and its legacy: on one figurative level, the true heroine of the novel becomes Vergil's *Carmen*. No great wonder, then, that Lavinia's voice

¹⁵ Le Guin has previously outlined her understanding of the reading process as an act of new creation: "The author's work is done, complete; the ongoing work, the present act of creation, is a collaboration by the words that stand on the page and the eyes that read them" (*Language of the Night* 127). This vaguely "reader-response" concept of collaboration would seem to apply equally to the writing of texts like *Lavinia*, which function as written *rereadings*. I am obviously not suggesting that Le Guin is the first to advance this view of the literary tradition, but it preoccupies the author throughout the novel and arguably her career. Indeed, among many earlier precedents, this image of eternally collaborative weaving/writing echoes Kenneth Burke's famous metaphor of "the unending conversation" from *The Philosophy of Literary form* (110-1).

can seem bound to Vergil! Lavinia/*Lavinia* stands in for the enduring literary tradition stretching from Vergil to Le Guin and beyond, but simultaneously serves as a link in that chain, a particular reimagining in which the daughter of Latinus is more than a blushing maiden and Ascanius is a bit of a brat. Consequently, Lavinia's transformation into an immortal being at the end of the poem will no longer seem an incongruously fantastic event in an otherwise mundane world, if we understand it more properly as a *textual* immortality as part of the *Aeneid* tradition. Paradoxically, Lavinia predicts that she will live on outside Le Guin's text, even as she insists that—to borrow another idiom that should be foreign to her—"that's all she wrote."

Indeed, everything in Lavinia's world is textual. One could read *Lavinia* as a thoroughly "postmodern" novel, since, for example, the main character not only makes clear her awareness of her own textuality, but further insists on the lack of any kind of "real" referent apart from the words that constitute her text.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the reader can in fact easily forget the meta-fictional dimension of the novel, as does Lavinia herself: far from dreamy Albunea, the uncomfortable realities encroaching on her existence seem but phantasms: "But here, now, in the courtyard of my house, all that seemed distant, blurred and obscure, a false dream that had nothing to do with waking life" (79).¹⁷ We lose sight of Lavinia's textual nature because Le Guin shades the plot with all the bustle of quotidian living, fully realizes the setting with exquisite sensory detail, develops characters with depth and moral complexity, and all of those other things they say in glowing book reviews. In other words, *Lavinia* is a far cry from a playful meta-

¹⁶ While Le Guin, as a critic, does not strike me as a postmodernist and certainly not as a poststructuralist, she has stressed that the author only has words with which to work, in what one could likely only playfully call a weak form of a Derridean *Il n'y pas hors-texte*: "And, of course, the tricky thing about imaginative fiction, both science fiction and fantasy, is the coherence of the imagination, because you are making a whole world out of words only" (interview by Escudié 126). The context of this quotation makes it clear, however, that Le Guin is referring more to Tolkien's distinctly pre-Derridean concept of subcreation.

¹⁷ The distinction or indeed slippage between true and false dreams recurs as a major motif in the novel, but space does not permit me to trace it here: just so, one of the major cruxes of interpretation in Vergil scholarship remains that thorny issue of Aeneas's departure from the underworld via the gate of *false* dreams. Perhaps for now it would be most useful to point to M. Teresa Tavormina's suggestion that, for Le Guin, "'true' dreams and 'false' dreams may also be inseparable" (341). Tavormina also discusses the Vergilian resonance of the wizards' school on Roke and its "gate of horn and ivory" (340), extending the interpretation advanced by Tom Shippey that, in the Earthsea Trilogy, Ged's "descent into the Shadowland" may derive from Book VI of the *Aeneid* (863). Conversely, Le Guin herself would downplay the classical influence on Earthsea: "I myself see the Earthsea deathworld as vaguely, generically greco-roman, but specifically Rilkean, in origin" (e-mail to the author).

fictional romp—this is no *Lost in Vergil's Funhouse*—and likewise Le Guin's bulldozing of the fourth wall engenders something different from a Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*: Lavinia *does* ask us to identify with her. I would suggest, then, that the one great external referent to which Lavinia's words tend to point lies somewhere in its fundamental openness to a process of history that, as I have traced, looks back to Vergil, forward (for Lavinia) to Le Guin, and yet farther forward to Le Guin's future readers. Moreover, while Le Guin does offer us several self-reflexive meditations on reading, writing, poetry, and poetics, the details of Lavinia's waking life demonstrate the author's considerable interest in the *Aeneid* for its content, or the moral and political problems and questions it raises, among others.

Now that I have established a firmer narratological foundation for my reading of the novel, I feel confident enough to discuss some of that content: for one, Le Guin's choice of Lavinia as the single mouthpiece through which to present her reading of Vergil deserves examination, since a host of female characters were available to her. In fact, one of the novel's many conceptual ironies involves the way in which Le Guin, in order to allow Lavinia to find her voice, must silence Vergil's more vocal females. In a sense, though, the infamously forsaken Dido has already had her turn and spoken her part: writers across the centuries have taken her side, and Vergil gives her a pretty fair shake himself.¹⁸ Not only does the Carthaginian queen manage to squeeze in a particularly cutting denigration of Aeneas's parentage—"[te] Hyrcanaeque admorunt ubera tigres" ["and Hyrcanian tigresses suckled you"] (IV.367)—but she even flings back in his face the hero's much-lauded *pietas*, or loyalty and faithfulness: "en dextra fidesque, / quem secum patrios aiunt portare Penates, / quem subiisse umeris confectum aetate parentem!" ["Behold the pledge and promise of him who, so they say, carries with him his ancestral gods and bore his worn-out father on his shoulders!"] (IV.597-9). Here Dido undermines that iconic image of Aeneas's arduous struggle to preserve both past and future during his flight from fallen Troy: she hardly seems to require a Margaret Atwood to furnish her with ammunition and vitriol!

We might then be tempted to account for Le Guin's suppression of Dido's voice as nothing more than a preservation of narrative economy; after all, as Le Guin has Vergil explain in Albunea, there is simply not room for Dido and Lavinia in the same text: "But you can't have two love stories in an epic. Where would the battles fit?" (58). Still, Le Guin's further erasure of Camilla from her

¹⁸ Ovid admired Dido's character enough to select her as one of the speakers for his *Heroides*, a series of confessional epistles in which several famously jilted women "talk back." Subsequent retellings of Dido's story include, for a few examples, rhetorical exercises for schoolboys in St. Augustine's day and beyond; Christopher Marlowe's tragedy *Dido, Queen of Carthage*; and a host of Baroque operas.

story should give us pause, since this character surely could have played her bit part without stealing Lavinia's thunder. In fact, the Amazonian warrior remains conspicuously absent throughout the novel: in the description of the scenes in which Camilla triumphs and then falls in battle, Le Guin fails to include her part in the proceedings, instead stressing her *absence* from Lavinia's field of vision: "I looked for the woman warrior my poet had said would ride with the Volscians, but I did not see her" (131). Furthermore, Camilla's name appears in the novel only when Vergil compares her to Lavinia unfavorably: "O Lavinia [...] you are worth ten Camillas. And I never saw it" (44). In a sense, Lavinia even appropriates the missing name for herself, as it becomes one of her own epithets, what she describes as her "childish title Camilla, altar girl" (129); we could then read this literal overwriting of Camilla as another indication of Lavinia's replacement of her as "strong female character." I would suggest, however, another possible interpretation of Le Guin's privileging of Lavinia over these two women, based upon the understanding that Camilla and Dido, in Vergil's epic, are united in their defiance of the quality of *pietas* that drives Vergil's heroic narrative. By contrast, Le Guin's version of Lavinia represents the epitome of (female) *pietas*; thus, her acceptance of the fact that Aeneas must move on after three short years of connubial joy contrasts diametrically with what Dido could not do, that is, accept her lover's destiny. Similarly, Vergil's Camilla, for all her self-possession and fleetness of foot, remains deficient in Le Guin's version of *pietas*: the battlefield, we will see, is not the place to obey order.

Pius, the most prominent Vergilian epithet for Aeneas, along with its concrete form *pietas*, are notoriously untranslatable Latin words; a superb amateur classicist, Le Guin takes pains to preserve the Roman sense of *pietas*, stressing both its significance and its subtle differences from our modern word "piety": "My father had taught me the meaning of the word and the value of it" (22).¹⁹ Of course, the idea that Lavinia's docile propriety functions in counterpoint to Dido's disruptive passion has a long history in Vergil criticism,²⁰

¹⁹ Le Guin also preserves the Roman valences of the related word *religio* as "the fear we call religion, an accepting awe" (250). The similarly sticky words *fas* and *nefas* number among the few to appear untranslated in the text, and, mindful of such careful attention to such linguistic issues, one could productively conceive of *Lavinia* as in some ways a "translation" of the *Aeneid*. In her afterword, Le Guin describes the undertaking as a translation of the epic "into a different *form*," namely, a novel (273). In any event, Le Guin's adaptive inclusions of particular Vergilian words, phrases, scenes, epic similes, etc., warrant much closer examination than space permits me here.

²⁰ For summary of how early commentaries tended to treat Lavinia—when they treated her at all—see Wilson-Okamura, "Lavinia and Beatrice," 110 ff. To single out one of these exegetes, John of Salisbury argues that "Dido is the fallen type of desire, and Lavinia, with her 'sweet embraces,' is the corrected antitype" (111). I should note that Wilson-Okamura's

but Le Guin does not go out of her way to defame Dido, simply leaving her story for others to tell. To the extent that Le Guin's reading of Vergil centers on this concept of *pietas*, I would instead argue that, as the symbol of *female* piety, Le Guin's Lavinia in fact contains within herself a measure of both Dido's righteous indignation and Aeneas's problematic but uncontested heroism. I see Le Guin's intervention in Lavinia's character as a translation of *pudor* to *pietas*, or a blushing modesty to a more discerning submission to polity and probity. Such a reading helps us better answer the question of why the novel almost slavishly follows Vergil's lead; while the utter "contingency" of a character created by a dead white male helps explain Le Guin's faithfulness to the poet, we need not cite *The Penelopiad* to observe that such respect for one's creator is not strictly *necessary*. Why not, after all, rage like Milton's Adam, "Did I request thee, Maker, from my Clay / To mould me Man, did I sollicite thee / From darkness to promote me?" (X.743-5)?²¹ The answer must simply be that Le Guin sometimes agrees with Vergil; in submitting to fate like Aeneas rather than railing against it to the point of death like Dido, Lavinia proves herself a worthy queen mother for the Roman people, the type of the she-wolf who will later suckle Romulus and Remus: "[S]ome people called me Mother Wolf" (258).

All of this is not to say that Le Guin lacks any feminist program in the novel, since the emphasis on Lavinia's commensurate *pietas* elevates her from the position of inferior female counterpart to equal status with Aeneas. One must admit, however, that Le Guin expresses a fairly generous view of a woman's role in pre-Roman marriage, perhaps misapplying an excessively contemporary outlook: "If I owed duty to my husband, it was very easy to pay. [...] [T]here were no restraints on me at all but those of religion and my duty to the people. I had grown up with those, they were part of me, not external, not enslaving; rather, in enlarging the scope of my soul and mind, they liberated me from the narrowness of the single self" (184-85). Furthermore, Lavinia's father grants her an agency absent from the poem, as we see in her mother's explanation of her marriage options: "[I]t will truly be your choice. He would never go against your heart" (70). In a way, Lavinia's new agency also "causes" the omen that prevents her marriage with Turnus: she suggests to her father that they defer her choice to the

main point is that, unlike these traditional examples, "Dante does not oppose the good Lavinia to the bad Dido" (117).

²¹ It is possible to imagine a species of feminist critic who would see *Lavinia* as a missed opportunity, or at least disappointing as a feminist text. Amy J. Ransom elegantly summarizes the mixed reception of Le Guin's politics and feminist commitment: "Ursula K. Le Guin has been labeled a man-hating feminist and not feminist enough, a utopian thinker and an anti-utopian critic, a radical anarchist and a conservative realist" (144). For an early reading of a possible "conservative" current in Le Guin's oeuvre, see Manlove, "Conservatism."

powers of Albunea at the eleventh hour (83). So, if Le Guin appears to have felt the need to recalibrate Vergil's world to allow Lavinia a little more freedom, the fantasy eschews the truly extravagant, and the author finds other ways to frame a feminist reading of Vergil. For example, Lavinia anticipates our condemnation of the potential for her marriage to prevent violence—"To hear myself promised as part of a treaty, exchanged like a cup or a piece of clothing, might seem as deep an insult as could be offered to a human soul" (102)—but she eventually contends that as a king's daughter she has no other choice, keeping the ultimate end in view, just as Aeneas does. Lavinia's submission to the realities of political marriage does not diminish her as a pro-feminist character: as the conflict with Turnus turns uglier, Latinus succumbs to "dull puzzlement" (116), and, instead of seeing Aeneas take charge as in Vergil, we follow Lavinia inside the palace as she becomes the discerning one: "Father, I know what I have to do" (128).

As I have suggested earlier, in spite of her dutiful obedience to fate, father, and country, sparks of Dido occasionally flare up in Lavinia: she does question Aeneas's heroism, and sometimes resists the inflexibility of fate. Le Guin and Lavinia, like many readers of the *Aeneid*, seem most bothered by the violent, abrupt ending of the poem.²² Even Le Guin's Vergil agrees that the poem "ends with a murder" (62) and at one point equivocates about concluding the poem with Turnus' death: "It's not the right ending" (63). In response to her final question about whether Vergil has finished his poem, Lavinia receives an ambiguous nod while the poet recedes into the shadows (90), and so Le Guin again takes just the position that most critical readers would take today, that Vergil probably did intend to end the poem with the death of Turnus: Lavinia

²² The abruptness of the ending has inspired several authors to "finish" the *Aeneid*, including the 15th century Italian poet Maffeo Vegio, composer of the Latin *Supplementum*. In this "Book XIII," Aeneas's marriage to the same old silent "Lavinia uirgo" occupies a handful of lines, and Lavinia's defining characteristic remains that pair of prettily downcast eyes, or "[s]ludereos deicta oculos" (468), a line that repeats almost verbatim Vergil's "oculos deicta decoros" (XI.480). Vegio's contemporary Pier Candido Decembrio also penned an abortive 89 lines of a 13th book, but not one mentions Lavinia. More recently, American Claudio Salvucci has written a poem with epic aspirations called *The Laviniaid* (1994), a misleading title in the wake of Atwood's *Penelopiad*: Lavinia is not the subject, but the town of Lavinium. While Salvucci's distinctly martial narrative proves more generous to the queen, for sustained interest in recuperating Lavinia's character predating Le Guin, we would probably have to go back to the Old French *Roman d'Enéas*. Joseph S. Witting discusses the *Enéas* as a backdrop to his reading of Chrétien de Troyes's Arthurian romance *Erec and Enide*, suggesting that Erec's titular love interest owes a debt to this positive representation of Lavinia: "[T]he *Eneas* makes the romance between Aeneas and Lavinia the center of interest in the latter half of the poem, and contrasts that romance with the earlier Dido affair" (242). Interestingly but perhaps unsurprisingly, most criticism on the *Enéas* seems to slant towards the poet's treatment of Dido.

simply wishes things could have worked out differently. We should remember that Le Guin insists her story “is in no way an attempt to change or complete the story of Aeneas” (274), but at times Lavinia does long to alter the arc of the narrative. For example, she reacts very negatively to the marsh of dead infants in Vergil’s underworld, urging him to remove it from the poem, and in effect from her reality; what’s more, Le Guin’s feminist Vergil appears perfectly willing to listen to a woman’s advice: “‘If it is wrong, I will take it out of the poem, child,’ he said. ‘If I am permitted to’” (62). For whatever reason, however, the marsh persists at least into *our* version of the *Aeneid*, and Lavinia continues to struggle in vain against the text of her life: when Vergil’s shadow has passed on and she can no longer hope to change his fated words, she instead attempts to find ways to read them differently. Most often, Lavinia tries to reread the prophecy of Aeneas’s three-year reign such that it permits her husband to live beyond his allotted time: “So my mind ran from possibility to possibility like a hare dodging hounds, while the three old women, the Fates, spun out the measured thread of what was to be” (212).

But in the end, Lavinia must work with Vergil. The fatalism implicit in the fact that Lavinia’s destiny is literally “written” does not prevent her from examining the foundation of *pietas* and the *fas*, or right: “If that order held his killing Turnus to be a righteous act, was it, itself, righteous?” (190). Even before she marries Aeneas, she questions Vergil about the Trojan’s role as warrior-hero: “‘He kills like a butcher. Why is he a hero?’ ‘Because he does what he has to do.’ ‘Why does he have to kill a helpless man?’ ‘Because that is how empires are founded. Or so I hope Augustus will understand it. But I do not think he will’” (89). Careful readers of the *Aeneid* have long noticed that *condit*, the word Vergil uses for the plunge of Aeneas’s sword into Turnus’s chest (XII.950), repeats the same verb used at the beginning of the poem to describe the founding of Rome: “*tantae molis erat Romanam condere gentem*” [“So vast was the effort to found the Roman race” (I.33)].²³ Following Parry’s “two voices” reading, Lavinia ultimately concludes that “in [Aeneas’s] piety lay his tragedy” (257). At the same time, the death Le Guin chooses for Aeneas emphasizes the inevitability of this tragedy, since he earns himself a spear in the back from a young Rutulian precisely for showing the kind of mercy he did not show Turnus (223). Dialogues between Lavinia and Aeneas frequently replicate the “two voices” model, as they argue about fate, morality, and necessity, often without clear resolution; as Richard D. Erlich remarks, “One of the major virtues of the writings of Ursula K.

²³ Cf. “*dum conderet urbem*” (I.5). For a discussion of this parallelism, see James, “Establishing Rome with the Sword.”

Le Guin is the richness of Le Guin debating Le Guin" (342). In this give-and-take between Lavinia and Aeneas, we see reflected that between Le Guin and Vergil.²⁴

Le Guin has not selected Lavinia for her narrator simply because the virgin's deferential gaze suited her own respect for Vergil: for Le Guin, Lavinia's silence represents a perspective or a sphere that the poet could not take the time to include, namely, *life*, both before and after the wars. Although I hesitate to apply the word "domestic" here, Le Guin seems to use the term without undesirable connotations when she refers to "all [the male Trojans'] battles, adventures, storms, and voyages sunk in the daily domesticity at the fireside of a small house in a small city in a foreign land" (191). And, while Lavinia must later assert herself against Ascanius, for the most part her story after the death of Turnus consists of quiet domestic joys and fruitful, forward-looking domestic labors. Lavinia's role in the foundation of Rome contrasts with the martial culture her stepson cultivates: when Ascanius tells the Latin youths about the storied military history of Rome, she walks past "carrying little Silvius on [her] shoulder, as Aeneas had carried the shield" (195). "Arms and the man" has given way to "infant and the woman": both pairs contribute equally to the founding of Rome, since from Silvius will come the line of Alban kings. Even earlier, we see Lavinia's "domestication" of the traditionally martial ekphrasis as she first describes Aeneas's shield: "The picture I like best is high on the left, a wolf who turns her sleek neck back to lick her suckling cubs, but the cubs are man babies, boys, greedy at her teats" (24).

Endowed with the gift of reading the future, Lavinia notices what Aeneas cannot, first, that a great nation requires the womb and the hearth as much as the thrusting and plunging of swords into bodies. Whereas Aeneas cannot read his fate, only follow it—we see an "ignarus" Aeneas shouldering his new shield (VIII.730)—Lavinia again proves herself more discerning: "'You know how to read it,' he said thoughtfully. 'I never have'" (199). But Lavinia sees both the plowshares that follow the swords and the bitter iron tang that must remain: "He did not see the deaths that lay before him, all along the river, all the way to Rome" (95). Again, Lavinia craves release from this apparently senseless fate: "Without war there are no heroes. What harm would that be? Oh, Lavinia, what a woman's question that is" (132). Particularly during moments like this one,

²⁴ Michael Cadden quotes Harold Bloom's estimation of Le Guin's "dialectical style," but instead emphasizes the "many different unreconciled ideas in Le Guin's work" (1). Accordingly, Cadden traces the "dialogism" of Le Guin's earlier works in a study strongly informed by Bakhtinian analysis; whether we ultimately agree more with Bloom or with Cadden—or decide that they don't really disagree themselves—Le Guin's propensity for the dialogic persists in *Lavinia*. Moreover, we needn't necessarily invoke Bakhtinian heteroglossia to open ourselves to the possibility of more than two voices in either *Lavinia* or the *Aeneid*: see, for example, Lyne, *Further Voices in Vergil's Aeneid*.

Lavinia seems to echo some of the ideas outlined in Le Guin's essay "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction": compared to the man's "heroic" narrative, the woman's story may seem dull, but nevertheless remains equally foundational.²⁵ Although Le Guin includes much "carrier bag fiction" in *Lavinia*, the scope of the novel is such that it "contains" both kinds of story. In other words, Lavinia's domestic life does not simply serve as the counterpart to Aeneas' warfare in some binary of female and male: Aeneas, consumed with guilt for the slaying of Turnus, almost seems more disturbed than Lavinia about the cost of his heroism, seeing himself "as a murderer" (187) and his battle-fury as "his worst failing" (121).²⁶ So too does Vergil himself emphasize the horrors of war when he (p)recaps the last six books of his poem for Lavinia, stringing together all the grisliest bits in one long litany of gore; by contrast, Lavinia's own narration of the battle scenes comes across as almost appallingly expository, for she describes them only because she has to, because they are fated, because they happen.

And Vergil's battles run their predetermined course, the narrative of the poem terminating with roughly a third of the novel left to go: "Turnus was dead. The poem was finished" (173). This last line becomes one of the most ironic in the novel, since Le Guin goes on to illustrate the unfinished nature of all literary creation. As I have hinted at previously, Lavinia experiences another moment of existential panic when the *Aeneid* comes to a close: "But what am I to do now? I have lost my guide, my Vergil. I must go on by myself through all that is left after the end, all the rest of the immense, pathless, unreadable world" (173). Only when Lavinia can remember that Vergil has left her a set of footsteps in which to follow does she begin to regain a sense of purpose: "All my life since Aeneas' death might seem a weaving torn out of the loom unfinished, a shapeless tangle of threads making nothing, but it is not so; for my mind returns as the shuttle returns always to the starting place, finding the pattern, going on with it" (141). Likewise, when Le Guin explains that her desire was "to follow Vergil, not to improve or reprove him" (275), she not only abjures Atwood's recriminatory style, but emphasizes this act of forging ahead while following the great authors, perhaps in much in the same way that Chaucer bids his *Troilus and Criseyde*, the "litel book" that he sends out into the world, to "kis the steppes where as thow

²⁵ See especially the distinction Le Guin makes between Boob "crushed to jelly when the mammoth fell on him" and "Baby Oo Oo" in her sling (166). Jeanette Winterson expresses a comparable idea in "Orion," a mythic retelling of her own: "Our story is the old clash between history and home. Or, to put it another way, the immeasurable impossible space that seems to divide the hearth from the quest" (56).

²⁶ That the author of *The Left Hand of Darkness* should not establish such a binary comes as no surprise, and I have surely dealt with the complex issues of gender in *Lavinia* inadequately. For a selection of foundational essays on Le Guin and gender, see Bloom.

seest pace / Virgile, Ovide, Omer, Lucan, and Stace" (V.1791-2); Chaucer's *House of Fame*, not so incidentally, also contains a memorable mini-*Aeneid*.

When despair and desperation overwhelm Lavinia, the world becomes trackless again; in one such moment, Lavinia addresses a kind of prayer to her lost poet—"Dear poet, all you told me came to be" (253)—only to hear answer a voice in the person of Aeneas's father Anchises, of all possibilities: back to the beginning indeed, just as Lavinia had said. Once Lavinia finally accepts that she can become a joint author of her own destiny, she decides not to attribute those words of encouragement—"Speak me! [...] I say your being" (253)—to Anchises, but to some confluence of her poet and herself: "It was all the words of the poet, the words of the maker, the foreteller, the truth teller: nothing more, nothing less. But was I myself any more, or less, than that?" (257). The cry that concludes Le Guin's penultimate paragraph—"i, i, I cry: Go on, go" (272)—Lavinia had earlier explained as both the cry of the owl and the Latin imperative singular: "Go on, go. In our tongue it is a single sound, i" (224).²⁷ While the word does not sound the same as our first person pronoun in its probable Latin pronunciation, the visual pun remains obvious, the connection of *ego* and going on. We see that "I say your being" means "I say my being," and "You say your being," and "We say my being," and "We say your being," and finally "We say our being."

Le Guin has several reasons for wanting to go on, one of which is that, to adapt Auden's line, Vergil's poems may only be kept from the death of poet for so long, an anxiety she expresses at the beginning of her afterword: "So, with the true death of his language, Vergil's voice will be silenced at last" (273). Hints of this dedication to poetic memory appear frequently in *Lavinia*: "So long as Achates told me the story, Aeneas was not dead" (227). So, too, "[Silvius] loved to hear the stories of his land and people here as well as he loved to hear the old Trojans tell over their war with the Greeks" (242), and the idea of "telling over" remains central in the novel. Jeanette Winterson's *Weight*, another entry alongside *The Penelopiad* in the Canongate Myths Series, strikes me as much closer in spirit to Le Guin's retelling, since, for one, Winterson introduces her adaptation of the myth of Atlas and Hercules with an appeal to this same concept of "telling over": "The recurring language motif of *Weight* is 'I want to tell the story again'" (xiv).

²⁷ Even without the more explicit hint here, Harold Bloom observes that the surname of Genly Ai from *The Left Hand of Darkness* suggests "at once the ego, the eye, and an outcry of pain" (7). *Lavinia* has simply added one more association: go! Especially in light of Bloom's provocative reading of the syllable as a cry of pain, I find it surprising that Le Guin and Lavinia never invoke the myths attached to the Cumaean Sibyl, Aeneas's Sibyl, who similarly becomes a voice that endures even after the body passes, and famously reveals her death wish in T.S. Eliot's haunting quotation of Petronius at the beginning of *The Wasteland*. Lavinia sets herself in perfect opposition to that voice, wishing not to die, but to fly, fly on.

Of course, when Lavinia says that “[o]ne must be changed, to be immortal” (271), she is speaking as much of Lavinia the character as of the Vergil tradition, and change Vergil Le Guin does—how else could she stay faithful to him? In fact, Darko Suvin has prefaced a recent article on Le Guin with an especially apt epigraph from Heiner Müller: “To accept a classical writer without changing him/her means to betray her/him” (488). In Le Guin’s view, Vergil has left his poem open to such changes and such re-readings; and, based on my understanding of Lavinia as often interchangeable with the poem, Vergil did not sing the *Aeneid* to death because of its complexity and its “incompleteness,” its refusal to yield easy answers, wrap up loose ends, resolve niggling questions: “[Dido and Creusa] lived and died as women do and as the poet sang them. But he did not sing me enough life to die. He only gave me immortality” (271). “If you never finish it,” Lavinia flippantly reassures her troubled poet, “it will never end” (59), but the remainder of the novel bears out her words, since the quest to “finish” textual meaning requires readers, or, more broadly, the unending series of transactions among rewriters and rereaders.

Lavinia is, in sum, a pro-feminist parallel novel that avoids thinly-veiled feminist polemic, more of a love letter to Vergil than an indictment of his culture; as Le Guin puts it in her afterword, “More than anything else, my story is an act of gratitude to the poet, a love offering” (273). This gratitude undergirds Le Guin’s entire approach: willing to forgive the poet a few anti-feminist peccadilloes, Le Guin writes in the shadow of Vergil, but also in collaboration with his literary ghost. Not so much held captive but captivated by Vergil, Le Guin and her avatar in Lavinia seem too much in awe of the poet’s accomplishment to assault the foundations of his epic, yet they recognize its limitations, gaps, silences: “[M]y poet always speaks the truth, if not always the whole truth. Not even a poet can speak the whole truth” (10). These very silences have called out to Le Guin, who submits her meditative retelling as part of a process of working towards that whole truth; thus, the landscape of *Lavinia* exists on a plane distinct from both “the real world” and the *Aeneid*, instead mapping the transcendent mythic world that Vergil and his readers have generated together.²⁸ Insofar as Le Guin succeeds in stripping the *Aeneid* of divine machinations without sapping the vitality of its supernatural atmosphere, the

²⁸ In his introduction to Marek Oziewicz’s study of mythopoeic fantasy, Brian Attebery suggests that we can in fact only apply the term “transcendence” to Le Guin’s work “if we locate transcendence not in an afterlife or in communion with a divine Being outside the material universe but rather *in the experience of the text itself* and in the realm of spiritual significance to which her fantasy beckons us” (2; emphasis mine). I have elected not to spend much time comparing *Lavinia* with Le Guin’s earlier work, but, as such parallel analyses indicate, the novel represents a culmination of several of Le Guin’s favored themes and ideas.

numinous quality of Lavinia's world reinforces her recognition that every aspect of her reality, from her belief system to her husband to her destiny, derive from a complex negotiation between a poet and certain other presences which she perceives darkly through the glass of literary history: the writer and reader of the text of her life.



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