Modern Myths: Feminism and Literary Predecessors in the Poetics of Gig Ryan and Cassandra Atherton

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Abstract: Australian poets Gig Ryan and Cassandra Atherton engage with a range of Western mythological figures in their explorations of contemporary feminist issues. In selecting these mythological women as key figures in several poems, Ryan and Atherton both engage with historicised issues of voice, agency and control. Central to their explorations is the question of autonomy: who may speak, and what may she say? In this discussion, close readings of poems in the recent *Contemporary Australian Feminist Poetry* anthology are compared with poems from these poets' other collections, to establish on-going use of mythologised and canonical women as grounds for concern, critique, and construction of new ideas.

Keywords: poetry, mythology, Gig Ryan, Cassandra Atherton, feminism, female voices, canonical texts, Australian literature

The 2016 collection, *Contemporary Australian Feminist Poetry,* is a snapshot not only of what "feminism" means for a selection of twenty-first century Australian poets, but also highlights on-going areas of anxiety within Australian poetics, including over bodily autonomy and freedom of expression. However, this is revealed to be neither purely homogenous, nor reconciled with on-going issues of restriction to female voices. Editors Bonny Cassidy and Jessica Wilkinson reflect that within the collection:

> There is, evidently, no one kind of feminist voice. One thing that could be said to unite these poems is that they represent 'responsible writing' in addressing diverse subject matter: family, fear, abuse, love, relationships, literary inheritance, the body, power, inequality, fun, pain, metaphors of self. Another noticeable quality apparent in each of these poems is that their feminist politics is inextricably tied to the present moment; that is, the writing and reading of these poems cannot deny the effects of the temporal. (xii)

The editors lament the absence of Indigenous Australian voices in the collection, as well as the lack of migrant poets. This is an area clearly to be addressed in the collection's successor, as both editors assert. In both its selection of women poets and the works contained within the collection, the anthology reveals on-going preoccupations with restrictions on voice and agency, more broadly indicative of concerns within Australian feminist poetics.

Two poets anthologised within *Contemporary Australian Feminist Poetry*—Gig Ryan and Cassandra Atherton—showcase pieces that demonstrate a particular focus on the impacts and influences of referencing literary and mythological female predecessors. The poets articulate a keen self-awareness of their situatedness within a broader poetic canon, and use these predecessors as a means to destabilise these positions, raise questions of assumption, and flag on-going issues. In amongst this self-professed contemporary collection, these two poets' selected works are "looking back" to ancient mythological European figures, more recent historical literary figures, and other "canonical" women. However, this focus is not anachronistic. Rather, the selected poems from Ryan and Atherton are illustrative of a

broader, sensitive discussion within both poets' works, beyond *Contemporary Australian Feminist Poetry,* to more broadly problematize the literary legacies of women's bodies. By continuing to engage and problematize canons such as these, new relationships can be created. By crossing the boundaries between contemporary concerns and lingering literary legacies, myths and canonical writers, both Ryan and Atherton create new spaces in which to air on-going concerns about female agency.

Ryan and Atherton negotiate delicately critical engagements with mythological Greek women, such as Niobe and Ismene, English-language literary figures such as Wilkie Collins' contentious *The Woman in White*, and women linked with Western literary canon, including Vivienne Haigh-Wood Eliot. Their selected women are all associated with various issues of control—over their own lives and deaths, over their personal agency, and over their achievements when faced with the agendas of others, particularly men—offering grounds for on-going critique. Likewise, these mythological and canonical women are chosen for their links with violence. By engaging with ancient and canonical figures, both poets are able to still wage a "contemporary" war on on-going struggles for women.

Ryan and Atherton

Both Ryan and Atherton are remarkable feminist poets. Gig Ryan's first collection of poems, *The Division of Anger* (1981), won the 1999 C.J. Dennis Prize for Poetry. The text unflinchingly depicts violence perpetrated upon women and echoes an oeuvre that has been enhanced throughout Ryan's later works. There is a "sharpness" to the poet's work; Ryan maintains a characteristic focus, unexpected imagery, stark terms, and focus on self-determination for her female personae. "Niobe of the Pillar" and "Parable of the Shackles," showcased in *Contemporary Australian Feminist Poetry,* both feature an omnipotent speaker who focuses on the activities of central female figures, with male presences relegated to marginal or purely reactive positions. Niobe is a figure taken from Greek mythology; a popular intertextual play in Ryan's work. Ryan's liberal engagement with Niobe, as well as other ancient figures, is a complex intersection between historicism and contemporary issues of gender and agency, in which peaceful reconciliation is not an option.

In her review of Ryan's *New and Selected Poems,* Ann Vickery observes that Ryan's *The Division of Anger* contains some of her best-known and provocative poems, noting that "the emotional punch of a number of her poems comes from a slippage of ontological boundaries, sometimes surrealistically but often sharply apt, so that our modes of perception are challenged" (1). It is this traversal of temporal boundaries that this discussion with examine, in relation to these engagements with historical and mythic figures. In particular, in both *The Division of Anger* and her contributions to *Contemporary Australian Feminist Poetry,* Gig Ryan links feminine silence with masculine violence. There are recurring issues with communication between male and female speakers, and Ryan frequently turns to mythological female figures to create a sense of narrative support. Vickery observes that in *New and Selected Poems,* as with Ryan's later collection *Pure and Applied* (1998), mythic figures such as Ismene, Antigone, Iphigenia, Aeneas, Daphnis and Chloe also appear in contemporary guises (3). Ryan's mythical women are recurring reminders of a legacy of contest to women's autonomy.

Similarly, Cassandra Atherton grapples with notions of literary legacy, but with more of a focus on canonical Western literatures and their authors, than mythologies. Atherton's speakers in both *Contemporary Australian Feminist Poetry* and her recent collection *Exhumed* negotiate speaking spaces between prominent literary figures. There is a sharpness

to Atherton's work that echoes Ryan, paired with a more overt first-person speaker's interests. Throughout *Exhumed* there are interweavings of "Intertexts," cited fully at the end of the collection, and firmly establishing the key role of engagements with spaces beyond the poet's own time in creating a firmer legacy of criticism. In her review of the text, Ivy Ireland asserts that

> *Exhumed* contains a romantic, Romantic quest: to 'write the space between / my heart and my pen' ('A Room of One's Own' 28) or perhaps to uncover what was lost (often before it becomes lost): 'I worry every day that you will go to 'Empty Trash' and / I will disappear.' ('Rubbish' 49). The quest of the reader, then, is to follow along, to become lost deep inside the narrative (and then of course endeavour to dig themselves back out).

To be "exhumed" is to be resurrected, but the intention beyond this act can be less clear. Atherton's linguistic playfulness and the depth of her prose style belie anxieties of self-expression, risking becoming engulfed by the legacy of other voices that crowd the text. Atherton's engagements with a myriad of literary predecessors, including Gwen Harwood, Emily Dickinson, Shakespeare, Sylvia Plath and numerous others, are sophisticated reflections on the thin lines between reference and deference. Though Atherton and Ryan are similar in their invocation of famous female figures to illustrate on-going issues with female agency, their approaches differ in terms of tone.

Legacies of Engagement

The decision to engage with ancient literary characters, or more recent literary predecessors, in poetry creates a series of possibilities for slippage. By selecting female figures as grounds for creating new poems and new discussions of on-going issues, there is an on-going risk of commodification and fragmentation of these women's bodies, voices, and histories. In addition, in her discussion of long poetic forms, Susan Standford Friedman highlighted some potential ideological dangers involved in engaging with mythical texts and literary predecessors:

> Re-vision of patriarchal myths and texts concentrates specifically on phallic discourse in the fourth strategy that women have used to feminize the genre: the creation of a linguistically experimental gynopoetic. Feeling exiled from language itself, some women writers of the long poem have tunnelled deep inside male discourse—inside the words, syntax, punctuation, rhythm, lineation, and spacing of poetic language—to deconstruct and erase its phallogocentricism. (30)

Friedman cites Emily Dickinson and Gertrude Stein as examples of this approach, despite her chapter's focus on longer poems. Rather than a sense of exile, I would argue that the prevailing tone for Atherton is one of wry playfulness. Friedman's "tunnelling" is an apt comparison for *Exhumed*, but the aim is not to be become lost, as in Ireland's review, but rather to unearth, destabilise, and reuse. Atherton's unearthing of canonical figures and texts to be broken up and built into new forms, create a base for her speaker's individual voice. For Atherton, as close readings of her poems will demonstrate, the contemporary cannot be divorced from the canonical, but this does not mean that it cannot be reshaped. Conversely, for Ryan, her poetic invocations of mythological figures are as individuals to be maintained in their problematic entirety. Ryan's speakers direct and critique these figures as much as the issues that they represent, showcasing on-going issues of agency and loss of control.

Ryan and Atherton illustrate challenges to women's agency via the bodies of women that are both key features of, and subjected to, other canonical works. In the poems to be examined in this discussion, both poets highlight not only a legacy of silence, but also the implications of this imposition. Patricia Yaeger in her examination of French feminist theories also comments on the impacts of such silences:

> … we have grown accustomed to noticing how socially imposed silences are figured in women's texts, and we have begun to read these "unnatural silences" as an essential part of women's plots, to emphasise the vulnerabilities, fragilities, interruptions, the absences in women's writing, and to valorise these absences as the most characteristic aspect of women's scripts… Writing, as physical act, gives the woman writer a space in which she can expropriate men's texts and treat these texts as bodies. These embodied texts are mortal, penetrable, excitable; they become imperfect sites of that sometime thing we call "patriarchal discourse." Thus male bodies and texts can be made to circulate through women's texts—breaking that circuit of meaning in which women have been the objects of circulation. (154, 161)

Atherton engages as readily with masculine figures as she does feminine. Ryan's poems too do not shy from these bodies. Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva do not strictly serve these poets' intentions or techniques; there is a more balanced exchange of power taking place. The female figures that form the subjects of these poets' works may be silenced, but there are other female voices at work. This is not a strict reflection of Irigaray's notion, summarised by Lucy Bolton, that

> …a woman can usually find self-expression only when her lips are touching together and when her whole body is in movement. A woman is more at a loss when she is still than when she is moving, because when fixed in one position she is a prisoner, open to attack in her own territory. (59)

This idea of female self-reflection, formulated strictly via a female body and perceived as a latent state of vulnerability, is dismissed by the sharpness or playfulness of both Atherton and Ryan's tones. However, Irigaray's preoccupation with ideas of movement remain relevant. The positions of mythology and perceived canonical texts can create stillness - that is, possessing set, key attributes (or, conversely, well-known ambiguities)—which can provide fertile grounds in which to formulate broader criticisms. Arguably, mythological and canonical female figures risk "subsuming" less well-known female figures, therefore Atherton and Ryan choose to engage with these historical bodies in order to better illuminate more contemporary issues.

Mythical Women: Ryan's Niobe

The title of Gig Ryan's "Niobe of the Pillar" refers to a legendary Theban queen, whose story was captured in Homeric myth. Deborah Coulter-Harris describes Niobe, "a demigod whose mother was a goddess," as being a story of revenge:

> Arrogant Niobe crowed about having 14 children, and wanted to be worshipped as a god, so she instigated a feud with another goddess, Leto or Latona, wife of Zeus. Leto was considered the goddess of motherhood and mother of only the twins Apollo and Artemis. She gave birth to the twins on Delos, the 'floating

> island' because Hera, Zeus's other wife, would not allow her to give birth on land or on an island at sea. Leto's sons later killed Niobe's children and she was left vanquished and humbled by the gods. (64-65)

Niobe's position within feminist poetics is therefore particularly complex: she is a mother who challenged another mother; a demigod who challenged a goddess; and a woman who equated her value with her fertility. She is not a supportive, communal female figure, but rather a competitive, defiant fifth column. In Homer's *Iliad* Niobe's ending is uncertain, as Coulter-Harris quotes: "They say that somewhere among the rocks on the mountain pastures of Siphylus … she lives in stone and still nurses the sorrows sent upon her by the hand of heaven" (65). Her life is characterised with pride and competiveness, while her death is liminal and lacking clarity. Bernstein claims "she is turned into a pillar of stone and is destined to grieve and weep eternally… Niobe's guilt results indirectly from her arrogance—her challenge to fate" (55). However, it is not purely fate whom Niobe has challenged, but a divine figure of maternity. Arguably this is not purely a myth that cautions against challenging the gods, but also a reflection of the destructive potential of celebrating an ideal version of femininity. Arrogance is an unwelcome feature in an otherwise "productive" woman, in the sense of patriarchal expectations of motherhood.

In Ryan's "Niobe of the Pillar," the focal figure is a silenced and still woman, yet the poet acknowledges a subversive undercurrent of lingering emotion:

> She seethes zest for jurisdiction, paid to a man,
> days he rorts the yard, a lonely trellis, a pudding of roses.
> Fable claps her in its font
> to thought's gaoled hour
> as a monarch sleeps off assassination's scud,
>
> but turn to rock, bent.
> Each life took a pith.
> Children spread across the field vaunt summer.
> The city bows to gloss,
> the sky gift-wrapped in phone lines.
> The plane drips like an easel,
>
> and the day thumbs
> and time grieves out.
> Cartoon swell at the drone controls.
> Bright city passes the skittish restaurant. (62)

The ancient Greek Niobe's grief is externalised in the landscape, rather presented through the body of the figureless "she" in the first stanza. The "gaoled" stillness of Niobe is an involuntary state, rather than a self-imposed exile in the Homeric myth. The "lonely trellis" and "pudding of roses" are almost scornfully domestic, aligned with "a man" who is similarly featureless and silent. For Ryan, both male and female figures are disadvantaged by Niobe's loss of agency, but the plight is particularly acute for the disgraced mother. Notably however, it is time who "grieves out" rather than Niobe. The silent mythical figure is left waiting, almost forgotten by the final stanza.

The modern urbanity of Niobe's environment is a jarring contrast to the title, as displaced as the mythical woman's pride and grief. Lord Byron also engaged with Niobe as a land-based figure, in this case representative of Rome:

> Oh Rome! my country! city of the soul!
> The orphans of the heart must turn to thee,
> Lone mother of dead Empires!...
> The Niobe of nations! there she stands
> Childless and crownless, in her voiceless woe (Byron 4.694-96, 4.703-4)

Jonah Siegal describes Byron's linkage of Rome and Niobe in the long narrative poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* as one that creates a "Home of orphans, fruitful mother of dead children, voiceless mourner: the city offers a manifold intertwining of maternity and death along with a silence that may well be read as a troubling inspiration for the poet" (68). When Niobe and the pillars of Rome are linked, they "become emblems of an unquenchable grief and the destruction of apparent fertility" (68-9). However, Ryan's Niobe is a more suburban artefact, distanced from her mythical guilt—"Each life took a pith. / Children spread across the field vaunt summer"—here it is the children who boast, while Niobe's "gaoled" form is "turn[ed] to rock, bent." But this does not necessarily imply vulnerability. Rather than being emblematic of a crumbling empire, Ryan's Niobe is an anachronistic artefact in an unsettled urban landscape, symbolic perhaps of an on-going tension between the idealism and actualities of maternity. An emblem of successful maternity undercut by a perceived excess of pride; Ryan's Niobe is less a figure for pity than one of lingering intent, with potential for anxiety within this contemporary setting, flagged in the more ominous tone of the final stanza.

Agency and Anxiety: Atherton

The legacies of famous literary men and women are also often fraught with ideological issues. Cassandra Atherton's "Viv," included in *Contemporary Australian Feminist Poetry* grapples with the relationship between gender and ambition, encoded in a prose poetic exploration of T.S. Eliot's relationship with his first wife, Vivienne Haigh-Wood Eliot. The poem is tense balancing act between domestic and literary spheres, dualistic and fraught with concern that the speaker is becoming subsumed by the voiceless partner:

> You like to eat the Fisherman's Basket on Mondays. You squirt
> the lemon and it lands in bitter droplets on my collarbone. You
> call me your Ariel and buy me snowglobes from Disneyland. My
> favourite one has a blue ship inside with a mermaid rising above
> the water on the prow. She guides the ship into dangerous waters.
> I have heard the mermaids singing. And I have memorised Eliot's
> oeuvre. So that I don't become Prufrock. So that I can traverse
> my Personal Waste Land. I am no fisher king but I cling to
> rhapsodies on windy nights. We sleep until human voices wake us.
> You are too young to already be gambling with your future. What
> if I become Tom's Viv? What if I compose my greatest work in a
> sanatorium? What if I just weave baskets and accomplish nothing? (25)

Questions and parallels abound, with unexpected detours of thought. The speaker is constantly in movement, tone shifting between frustration, concern, whimsy, and self-control. Tongue-in-cheek humour balances the poem, but the speaker's concerns are not downplayed.

"You call me your Ariel and buy me snowglobes from Disneyland" reveals the speaker's desire not to be underestimated; Sylvia Plath's and Shakespeare's Ariel is switched for Disney's mermaid (not even the Grimm version). However, the speaker is quick to seize control each role for her own benefit. "She guides the ship into dangerous water. / I have heard the mermaids singing;" the mermaid becomes an agent of change, leading to a pluralised chorus of feminine voices.

Atherton's speaker twists each role that she is handed: Disney's Ariel becomes an icon of disaster for the one who gave her the role. Similarly, Eliot's Waste Land is repossessed and the passive Prufrock dismissed. The speaker's rhetorical questions dominate the conclusion, offering no space for the voiceless source of the noted oppression to speak. The "you" of the poem becomes slowly less distinct, finally collapsing into the assessment the speaker gives of herself: "You are too young to already be gambling with your future." The question then becomes: is the female speaker now pushed to activity and agency? The result is unclear, but each line is steeped with activity, pushing towards an implied legacy of stronger control. Atherton's prose poetics is also a conscious push against the canonical forms of the literary predecessors alluded to not only in this poem, but also in her collection *Exhumed*. In another layer of humour to the poem, T. S. Eliot apparently held prose poetry and other forms of free verse with great disdain, evident in his 1917 essay "Reflections on *Vers Libre*": "*Vers libre* does not exist, and it is time that this preposterous fiction followed the *élan vital* and the eighty thousand Russians into oblivion" (Eliot). Atherton's speaker insists not only on existing within this unfavoured form, but also in articulating her ambitions, questions, and manipulations of all roles pushed upon her by the silent masculine figure.

Against the Canon: Ryan and Atherton

For both Ryan and Atherton, the texts, favoured symbols and themes of famous literary predecessors offer spaces in which to air new demands for agency. In "Old Masters" in her *New and Selected Poems* (2011), Ryan wilfully explores other avenues of interpretation rather than the masculine predecessors that the title implies. The tongue-in-cheek tone and transgressions of gendered boundaries belie a warning:

> We favour the master bedroom
> The galleries' masterpieces, masterfully flourishing
> Through the walkman, virtuosi plead
> a magna carta of choked respect
> Vibrating traffic shillies through night
> having mastered its instruments
> She slides her mastercard through the scanner, paternally
> Patrons show your chair
> as master craftsmen wend their way
> and the pilot, praying, leaves the cockpit
> the manned ship's jilted radar's
> one small step… (143)

The concept of "mastery" is demoted to quotidian, almost domestic with the speaker's use of "master bedroom" and "mastercard," wielded by an unnamed woman. The famous phrase "one small step…" loses its male figure at the end. Economic power is not transferred, but actively wielded by the female presence: "She slides her mastercard through the scanner, paternally." Patriarchal roles of financial management and activity are reversed. The "magna carta of choked respect" paid to generations of male "greats" in art, literature and music, is

now outweighed by the silent female figure's ability to traverse these forms unchallenged. Though she does not speak, she is not without agency. The wry humour of this piece stems from its cynical reflection that financial freedom for women can result in empowerment in literary and artistic spheres, however there is a threatening note in the final lines. The loss of control inherent as "the pilot, praying, leaves the cockpit" does not necessarily foreshadow disaster, but the opening of space for another to take control.

In Atherton's *Exhumed,* the poet likewise examines the idea of a constantly evolving identity as the speaker fights for agency, addressing a litany of literary traditions, authors and characters. Unlike Ryan however, Atherton adopts a prose poetry style, in keeping with the literary tradition to be critiqued. Atherton's prose is a conscious press against the canonical structures of the poets with whom she engages. Within the prose form, there is more room for Atherton's speakers to debate, question and give more detailed individual expression. The result of this can be a consumptive process when dealing with such an extensive wealth of literary predecessors. For example, the speaker in "Wilkie Collins" literally imbibes the names of texts and remakes them into part of her body:

> I like to be written on with biro. Tracks of blue running down my
> nakedness like veins. Mainlining sticky ink. I wrote a story about it once.
> A story about the way I liked my lovers to write their favourite book titles
> on me. Like I am a pillow book. So that even when the letters are washed
> away, they are still detectable for a while under a black light. Indelible
> secrets in my plasma. The first one writes *To Kill a Mockingbird*. China
> white tattooing me blue. The second scrawls, *Tender is the Night*. The long
> tail of the 'g' looping around my elbow. The third presses *Macbeth* into my
> spine and I think of him unseaming his enemy from nave to chaps! But
> the name on my lips has always been *The Woman in White:* 'Silence is safe.'
> (Atherton 26)

The speaker's lovers are not given genders. The imposition of canonical texts is rendered pleasurable, even defining, and not strictly the result of a male-orientated canon. Male and female authors alike are cited, but more women are represented. However, the names of these writers are not given. Similarly, there are women "hidden" in the poem, such as in the subtle reference to Sei Shōnagon's *Pillow Book.* The "Indelible / secrets" inherent to the speaker's body are mirrored in these nameless attributions.

However, this complex relationship between possession and naming does not result in a loss of agency for Atheron's speaker. Nakedness is a means of attaining meaning, yet the meaning is selectively filtered and presented. Those bestowing these meanings are nameless, voiceless figures, identified only by their actions which the speaker selectively identifies. Wilkie Collins' Victorian detective novel, *The Woman in White* frames the piece with the final line "Silence is safe." The speaker's tactical silence is not safe; rather, it is a structural means of imposing control over texts and judgements that would otherwise define her. *The Woman in White* is not only a detective story, inviting a sense of duty and justice on the reader to solve the mystery, but is also a text preoccupied with the inherently unequal standing of married women to men in 1800s Britain, and their vulnerability to unscrupulous abuses of these related powers. The physical similarities of Anne and Laura in *The Woman in White* provided opportunities for exploitation and entrapment by Glyde. Duality, vulnerability and mistaken identity plague women in Wilkie Collins' text. Atheron's poem therefore addresses these

concerns with a form of selective silence, to better secure her speaker's sense of self in the face of others' agendas.

Voices and Violence: Atherton and Ryan

Masculine presences for both Atherton and Ryan are frequently accompanied by overarching concerns over bodily autonomy, highlighted by engagements with famous literary figures. For both Ryan and Atherton, female bodies can be subjected to intense pressures due to external, masculine politics and policies. However, the poets make the decision to address other women, rather than men specifically, in their poetic engagements with these preoccupations, signalling an intention not purely to critique these oppressive states, but other women's strategies for rebellion. In her review of Ryan's *Heroic Money* (2001), Lisa Gorton comments that Ryan's poems "… take up the stuff of suburban city life: traffic; the supermarket; television; news; advertisements. But Ryan forces all this stuff into fragmented sequences of allusion and abstraction—so the city in her poems seems less like a place, and more like a realm of consciousness" (Gorton). Within this collection, Ryan includes several pieces which directly invoke ancient, legendary women, such as the short poem "Ismene to Antigone." In this piece, Ryan gives voice to the lesser-known sister of Antigone and her strategies for passive resistance to injustice:

> You should talk some sense into his head
> and not stick by, constant samovar
> Do you also look for the one love
> Good deeds, selfless and arcane
> and soulful breakfast. Your crisp assault
> to flout and ally the tampered roof that kept us,
> a glacier of blood, if you catafalque progresses and the
> keeners ring
> past the sunbleached shops' archived ads and forked clothes
> and each branded corner and cloud
> The mountain shone with neon
> above the stacked electric wires toning your street
> but I grind into the work
> that words might peel his heart
> Remember how they fell who went before (*New and Selected Poems* 165)

Ryan's Ismene challenges her sister's motivations for destructive political activity, warning her that, like the rest of their family, she will become a tragic figure if she does not rethink her strategies. Antigone is linked with "your" more than the speaker is connected with "my;" Antigone is the more possessive, active presence.

William Robert considers that much of Antigone's historical appeal, garnering admiration from writers such as Virginia Woolf and Luce Irigaray, comes from the fact that "She resists. She resists domination or incorporation, categorisation or explanation. She resists, for example, civil law by disregarding Creon's edict forbidding Polyneices' burial. She also resists traditional lines of genealogy as a child of incest" (413). Ismene, conversely, is a more passive figure in Sophocles' play, in which she encourages her sister not to act contrary to Creon's orders. Jennet Kirkpatrick notes that

> Often staged as the pale, hollow counterpart to the dark and intense figure of Antigone, Ismene has been eclipsed, even forgotten …. Even when attention has

> been paid to her, Ismene typically comes up short in comparison to her intrepid and valiant sister …. Concentrating on Ismene affirms the long-standing depiction of her as a guarded young woman who, in sharp contrast to Antigone, sees herself—and the women of Thebes—as disempowered and assailable. (402)

Ryan's decision to give Ismene a voice echoes Kirkpatrick's interpretation that rather than only serving as a foil to Antigone, Ismene openly acknowledges the disadvantaged position of women in her society. Ryan's Ismene is cautious and instructive in the face of Antigone's indifference and the voiceless, nameless oppressive masculine presence: Antigone's "crisp assault" on Kreon's decree will become "a glacier of blood" if she goes ahead with her funerary plans.

For both Ismene and Antigone from Sophocles' play *Antigone*, male presences have long been problematic: their father was the ill-fated Oedipus; and their brothers died as traitors to the king, resulting in Antigone's illegal resolution to bury them, even though Creon had decreed that they be left to rot. Both women's bodies are subject to violence and uncertainty. Antigone kills herself in prison after she is arrested by Creon, while Ismene's fate is unknown. However, Ryan's Ismene is not simply a frightened figure of passivity, but an exemplar of what Kirkpatrick terms "resistance by the unheroic weak" (404). In the quoted poem above, Ismene demands that Antigone "Remember how they fell who went before" and instead proposes a more gradual method of creating change: "talk some sense into his head" and "grind into the work" so that she may gradually "peel his heart." Ismene is a quieter, more subtly subversive figure than the overtly tragic and determined Antigone. Rather than wholly being a foil to her more passionate sister, Ismene is yet another victim of the decisions made by powerful men in their lives. Ryan's Ismene is a vindication of the generally dismissed ancient figure, acknowledging the alternative means for self-expression in the face of an insurmountable threat of violence.

Atherton's "Sleeping Beauty" similarly explores a well-known story from a less conventional approached angle, but in this instance, Atherton takes on the voice and views of a male persona. In this shorter prose poem, a male artist fretfully works on a drawing over the unaware body of a sleeping woman:

> Jade green spiral in and out of her ribcage as she sleeps, the worries of the day playing out on the inside of her eyelids like a twin cinema. He pulls on his bottle-green cords, reaching for the tiny notepad in his back pocket and the pencil on the beside table. He sketches her pillow with long strokes, emphasising the soft indentation where his head had been resting. His heat bound to the memory foam. Tearing off the sheet of paper, it floats down to rest on her stomach. He watches it rise and fall like the minutes between them. There are no words. She'll have to piece them together in the chartreuse hours of morning. (*Exhumed* 36)

Rather than engaging with the popular fairy tale of a woman cursed by a witch, Atherton wryly depicts a man who is obsessed with his own impacts on a woman. "Sleeping Beauty" is not strictly a victim, but she is certainly not the focus of the poem; the self-orientation of the male presence and activity dominates the piece. For Atherton, the unexpected focus of the poem serves as a clear reminder of the vulnerability of the female form to the imposition of another's gaze. The automatic assumption is that the man is drawing the unaware woman, rendering her from an unconscious subject to a series of voiceless, beautiful objects in his

drawing. The unexpected twist is a sardonic reflection on the self-centred nature of many historical depictions of women's bodies; the artist is wholly preoccupied with his own signs of being: "the soft indentation where his head had been / resting. His heat bound to the memory foam."

Atherton's "Sleeping Beauty," though unaware of the activities going on around her, is not afforded a comfortable rest, but rather is subjected to "the worries" of her day playing out behind her eyes. Importantly, the nature of these worries remains private, as does the woman's appearance. Atherton inverts the expectation of female victimisation and passivity by instead turning the reader's attention on the voiceless male—"There are no words"—leaving it up to the female figure to "piece / them together in the chartreuse hours of morning." The task of meaning-making is left to the "Sleeping Beauty," while the artist remains silent. Atherton's denial of voice to the male presence undercuts the latent potential for symbolic violence in this poem, in an unexpected twist on the title's famous fairy tale legacy. In a similarly unexpected move, in Atherton's poem "Bonds" the first-person speaker dismantles her romantic relationship, engaging in layers of word play and bodily fragmentation. However, rather than addressing her masculine lover, the poem is dedicated to Gwen Harwood:

> You wore a white Bonds t-shirt to bed last night. A plain, white, no-
> nonsense Bonds t-shirt and I knew it was over. I heard the death knell.
> And when you asked me if I was Emily Dickinson's ear I nodded. Solitary.
> Solitaire. Solipsist. 'For whom does the bell toll?' you asked that afternoon.
> Campanologists? Two in Campagna? Campaniles? 'It tolls for thee.' R.I.P.
> my lover. R.I.P. my Van Winkle. Rip out my heart. Wrap it in your white
> t-shirt and bury it beneath your floorboards. Still beating. My little
> drummer boy. You can beat me but I won't be your fiendish queen, my
> butcher. My blood on your t-shirt will form a scarlet letter. Spot. Out
> damn spot! You wore a white t-shirt to bed last night when all I wanted
> was to be stuck to your back. When all I asked was to peel myself off
> you in the morning and mount your erect compass needle. But now we
> are done. Donne. And you peel me like a grape. I slither out of my skin.
> Skinner. Skin me alive. I thought we were conjoined. Destined to travel in
> Circles until we met again, in the middle. Until we found our core. But like
> Nabokov's apples, all you manage to achieve is to tempt me with repetition.
> When I am only your dystopian Eve. There can be no valedictions here.
> So now our lives are cotton. And although cotton breathes, it is also the
> sarcophagus of our relationship. Embalmed memories. But I promise to
> dig you up. Like Heathcliff. Or Rossetti. I promise to unbind you and
> gather you in my arms. Skin on skin. My sweat will be our glue as I rip
> off that t-shirt and bond you to me one last time. (*Exhumed* 11)

The speaker slips between the immediate intimacy of the moment with her soon-to-be-former lover and a deep series of literary legacies. Her words are interrupted by these constantly rising layers, echoed in her body, but the speaker is constantly acting to resume control of this persistent activity: "But now we / are done. Donne. And you peel me like a grape. I slither out my skin." Rather than adopting the role of a voiceless victim, drowning in a sea of literary precedents with which to address her emotional reactions to the end of a romance, Atherton's speaker expertly and playfully traverses each layer to ultimately take control at the end of the poem. Though the speaker is almost overshadowed by intertexual links, the

unpredictable flow of these is another reminder that she remains in control of the form and frequency. The reference to Gwen Harwood adds another layer of intertexual discussion. Australian poet Harwood (1920-1995) has become famed for her acidic feminist poetics in works such as "Suburban Sonnet" and "In the Park," as well as her more subtle, playful portrayals of gender imbalance in persona poems such as "Boundary Conditions" and "Prize-Giving." Atherton's dedication is a firm establishment of her work as another stage of this legacy of Australian feminist poetry, acknowledging canonical connections but simultaneously problematizing their links with voicelessness

Conclusion

Australian poetics does not need to "move away" from literary and mythical predecessors in order to resonate on contemporary feminist issues. By engaging with Western literary traditions, canons and figures, enduring legacies of problematic relationships with women, voice and agency can continue to be criticised. However, as the works of both Gig Ryan and Cassandra Atherton demonstrate, there is a wryness and playfulness to this relationship. Ryan and Atherton perpetuate a dynamic "otherness" at times, emphasising the distance and relative impotence of the classical or canonical figures in their works, then legitimising these in others. Intertexuality provides grounds to examine the implications of legacies of silence, bodily autonomy, and who has the right to speak. For both poets in the works examined here, whenever a female figure is silenced within a poem, the speaker must take control, and vice versa. This on-going preoccupation with the ability to speak and exercise control over one's voice, thoughts and actions, is indicative of a broader anxiety surrounding the autonomy of women over their bodies. Atherton and Ryan are in a constant state of creation, reusing and adapting canonical texts and writers to generate new platforms for their voices and their foci on female voices, agency, and autonomy.

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