

**‘Those women who were fighting men’:  
Monique Wittig’s *Les Guérillères*, a mythical re-vision**

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Abstract: ‘We can analyse a society’s dreams and anxieties through the myths in which it chooses to mirror itself’.<sup>1</sup> In a twentieth century devastated by war, many turned to the classical myths of antiquity for solace and guidance. In the latter half of the century, many others turned to those myths in the struggle for representation and freedom from oppression. Isobel Hurst states: ‘Reworkings of the androcentric mythology of the ancient world proved indispensable for the feminists who fought against restrictions on women’s identity in the second half of the twentieth century.’<sup>2</sup>

Monique Wittig responds to the feminist debate of the twentieth century with her text, *Les Guérillères*. In this article I shall argue that *Les Guérillères* constitutes a feminist reworking of the patriarchal epic as epitomised by Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. It is the *Iliad*, that ‘canonical text of warfare and male heroism’,<sup>3</sup> which provides the main inspiration for her feminist epic. In blatant defiance of the assertion in Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon* that ‘it is not womanly to desire combat’, Wittig places the female centre stage. The ‘guérillères’ are the central protagonists of the work, complete with their own unique weapons, their own military procedure, and their own community. With her text, Wittig questions the status of the male-dominated perspective of the patriarchal epic. Aware that myth is instrumental in both the establishment and challenge of deep-seated ideologies and stereotypes, Wittig chooses to manipulate this duplicity and execute an attack from within. She exploits classical myth to voice the concerns and experiences of the female and to reinsert woman into male-dominated history. In this way, I shall claim that her work constitutes a gap in the patriarchal transmission and reception of Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

‘Mythical characters or plots offer writers a distinctive perspective on the language and ideas of their day, enabling them to explore contemporary life with some critical distance’.<sup>4</sup> This is

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<sup>1</sup>Theodore Ziolkowski, “The Fragmented Text: The Classics and Postwar European Literature”, *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, 6, no. 4 (Spring 2000), 549-562, (p. 562).

<sup>2</sup> Isobel Hurst, “‘We’ll all be Penelopes then’: Art and Domesticity in American Women’s Poetry, 1958-1996 in *Living Classics: Greece and Rome in Contemporary Poetry in English*, edited by S.J Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) pp.275-294, (p. 278).

<sup>3</sup> Ellen O’ Gorman, “A Woman’s history of Warfare” in *Laughing with Medusa: Classical myth and feminist thought*, edited by Vanda Zajko and Miriam Leonard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) pp.189-207 (p. 201).

<sup>4</sup> Isobel Hurst, “‘We’ll all be Penelopes then’: Art and Domesticity in American Women’s Poetry, 1958-1996” in *Living Classics: Greece and Rome in Contemporary Poetry in English*, edited by S. J. Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) pp. 275-294, (p. 275). The quotation I have used in my title, ‘Those women who were fighting men’, is from Homer, the *Iliad*, trans. by Robert Fitzgerald (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), Book III, p. 48.

particularly pertinent with regard to Monique Wittig, who engages with the world of myth and epic in her texts, offering innovative and subversive interpretations of some of the best-known and most established stories from ancient mythology.<sup>5</sup> Her first novel *Les Guérillères*,<sup>6</sup> written in 1969, is an appropriation of the *Iliad* and reflects a turn to the classical tradition that characterized the literature of a twentieth-century struggling to come to terms with its postwar world.<sup>7</sup> The title of Wittig's work signals, indeed proclaims, the first departure from her Homeric source, and immediately reveals her objective: the manipulation and refashioning of an ancient text to convey a female perspective. *Les Guérillères* – a neologism formed from *les guerrières* and *la guérilla* – refers to a community of Amazon warriors who are engaged in an epic battle. But this is not a battle for land, for wealth, or for Helen. This is a universal war for 'renversement'. The opening page of *Les Guérillères* acts as a synopsis of the themes and objectives that are developed within the text. But the rhythm and flow of the words, and the repeated mantras 'les mortes les mortes les mortes' and 'les phénix les phénix les phénix (7)' also create the impression of a political manifesto; a rousing speech to a legion of followers. This impression is reinforced by the fact that this segment is printed in block capitals. The final word of this introduction, the word on which the inspiring speech closes is 'renversement': 'ELLES AFFIRMENT TRIOMPHANT QUE TOUT GESTE EST RENVERSEMENT' (7). Wittig's feminist views and objectives are clear from the start. This is literature with a political and ideological purpose.

That Wittig gives prominence to these warrior women is a subversion of the *Iliad*, whose primary focus is on the male. In this sense, it reflects the patriarchal society of

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<sup>5</sup> Her second novel *L'Opoponax* engages with Homer's *Odyssey* amongst others, and her third novel *Virgile, Non* is a reworking of Dante's *Inferno* and Virgil's *Aeneid*. For further discussion see Jean H. Duffy, 'Monique Wittig' in *Beyond the Nouveau Roman*, edited by Michael Tilby (Oxford: Berg Publishers Ltd, 1990), and Fiona Cox, 'Monique Wittig' in her forthcoming *Sibylline Sisters – Virgil's Presence in Contemporary Women's Writing*.

<sup>6</sup> Monique Wittig, *Les Guérillères* (Paris: Minuit, 1969). All references will be to this edition.

<sup>7</sup> For further discussion of the classics in the post-war world, see Theodore Ziolkowski, "The Fragmented Text: The Classics and Postwar European Literature", *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, 6:4 (Spring 2000), 549-62.

antiquity where the father is head of the household and inheritance is patrilineal. Here the term patriarchy refers to the organization of the body politic and its reflection in the microcosm of the home. Within this patriarchal world, women are conspicuously absent, regarded as objects, or defined in relation to men. The abduction of Helen provokes war between the Trojans and Achaeans. But it is male pride and the defense of a threatened masculinity that is truly at stake. Helen is a possession and her abduction constitutes an attack on male authority, as evidenced by the fact that lust for victory and glory quickly emerges as the driving force of battle.<sup>8</sup> While female characters occupy a place in the *Iliad*, it is largely as passive pawns within a male-dominated world. Even the goddesses, apparent symbols of a strong female identity, are subject to this restrictive identification. Athena, goddess of war, is repeatedly defined in relation to her father: ‘daughter of Zeus who bears the storm-cloud’ (Book v. p. 76). This greatly undermines her strength and influence, which are now seen to stem from the archetypal patriarchal figure of Zeus. In this context, the patriarchal world of epic now seems to embody the modern connotation of female oppression at the hands of male dominance.

Through her writing, Wittig is determined to weaken and overturn this patriarchal exclusivity. Throughout *Les Guérillères*, these Amazon warriors are depicted in Iliadic scenes. They frequently train with their weapons and travel to towns, recruiting new warriors and enlisting them into their battle (120). In addition, the Amazon women defend their city against attackers in a passage highly reminiscent of the conflict fought around Troy in the *Iliad* (Book XXII, pp. 378-395). Here, the ‘guérillères’ steadfastly and gallantly fight for their city: ‘Elles [...] soutiennent le siège, ne bougeant pas de leur place si ce n’est pour porter secours à l’une d’entre elles ou pour remplacer une morte’ (144). Significantly, the enemy is male, and they misinterpret the war tactics of the ‘guérillères’. Owen Heathcote states: ‘the

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<sup>8</sup> Hector says: ‘Now when the son of Cronos / Crooked Wit has given me a chance / of winning glory, pinning the Achaeans / back on the sea’, the *Iliad*, Book XVIII, p. 329.

*guérillères*' exposure of their breasts is interpreted, incorrectly, by their enemy as a gesture of submission'.<sup>9</sup> This apparent 'geste de soumission' (143) symbolises the exact opposite, with the Amazon warriors unleashing war on the male attackers. The (mis-)interpretation by the male enemy reflects the indoctrinated patriarchal mode of thought, where display of the female body is synonymous with submission to the male.

By appropriating scenes characteristic of the *Iliad*, Wittig is creating a female epic that can facilitate the development of an independent subjecthood. The active construction of a female identity is further assisted by the female names that are listed throughout the text. On the one hand, this list reinforces the identification of *Les Guérillères* as a feminist epic. The catalogue of female names punctuates the text on every sixth page, appearing in capital letters on an otherwise blank page. Wittig is determined to draw attention to this list of mythical, historical, and fictional female characters originating from different cultures and different epochs. This list supplants the endless list of heroes common to the *Iliad*, 'a standard set-piece in the epic', and in doing so challenges the 'divisive, patriotic dimension of the traditional epic'.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, this list represents the displaced female genealogy. The male genealogical system is privileged, and Homer, as the father of the patriarchal epic, is the first of the sacred male ancestors. However, women are deprived of such ancestry and this has repercussions for the development of female identity. Marie-Andree Roy states: 'Female genealogies are defined as cultural filiations that link women with their spiritual mothers – these female figures who are so significant as references in the construction of female identity'.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the suppression of female genealogies strengthens patriarchal dominance. Amongst the goddesses that she describes are those present in the *Iliad* but who

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<sup>9</sup> Owen Heathcote, 'Hermeneutic Circles and Cycles of Violence: "La fille aux yeux d'or", "Histoire d'O", "Les Guerilleres"', *South Central Review*, 19:4 (Winter 2002-Spring 2003), 44-62 (p. 53).

<sup>10</sup> Both quotations from Duffy, 'Monique Wittig', p. 209.

<sup>11</sup> Marie-Andree Roy, "Women and Spirituality in the Writings of Luce Irigaray", trans. by Sharon Gubbay Helfer, in *Religion in French Feminist Thought: Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Morny Joy, Kathleen O'Grady, and Judith Poxon (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 19.

remain trapped within and subject to the patriarchal tradition. The many other names seem obscure and unrecognisable but, in fact, identify strong female figures from the past and the present, from real and fictional domains. One example is Éponine from *Les Misérables*. By choosing the lesser-known Éponine, who fights and dies on the barricade at the Rue de la Chanvrerie, over Cosette, Wittig is foregrounding the female presence within the French national epic. The obscurity of the list serves to highlight the gendered nature of history that has consigned many of its most influential females to the ether. In contrast, Wittig's female genealogy is inclusive and universal, offering 'spiritual mothers' to women from all cultures and ages. In the words of Cixous: 'In woman, personal history blends together with the history of all women, as well as national and world history'.<sup>12</sup> Wittig's catalogue of female characters restores the displaced female ancestors, thereby renewing the construction of female identity.

Wittig also identifies and scrutinizes inconsistencies and contradictions within the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.<sup>13</sup> She exploits the ambiguity surrounding women's status in antiquity, for although a woman's life may appear expendable, it is in fact essential for the male transferral of power upon which patriarchal society is built. The female body thus becomes the object of suspicion and patriarchal dominance. Patriarchal society needs to control the female body and deny female sexuality in order to preserve the male transferral of power. One of the most effective and popular methods of doing this is to extend patriarchal dominance to discourse. Through its strangulation of the female voice, patriarchal society silences female (sexual) identity. Boose remarks: 'the talkative woman is frequently imagined as synonymous with the sexually available woman, her open mouth the signifier for invited entrance elsewhere. Hence the diction that associates "silent" with "chaste" and stigmatises women's public

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<sup>12</sup> Helene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa", trans. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs*, 1:4 (Summer 1976), 875-93 (p. 882).

<sup>13</sup> Homer, the *Odyssey*, trans. by Walter Shewring (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). All subsequent references will be to this edition.

speech as a behaviour fraught with cultural signs resonating with a distinctly sexual kind of shame'.<sup>14</sup> Given the 'obvious relation between the individual body and the body politic', the oppositional pairings of silent/chaste and talkative/promiscuous originate from strong political motivation, where control and possession of the female becomes synonymous with the preservation of the state.<sup>15</sup> Such views evoke the scold's bridle, the equivalent of a verbal chastity belt, which was frequently used in Elizabethan society to curb woman's tongue and, by association, her sexual promiscuity. This reflects the 'obsessive energy [...] invested in exerting control over the unruly woman – the woman who was exercising her sexuality or her tongue under her own control rather than under the rule of a man'.<sup>16</sup>

In response to the oppressive constraints and linguistic domination of patriarchal society, Wittig engages with Homer's *Odyssey* and the episodes that depict strong female characters. She refers explicitly to the Sirens who are described in Book XII of the *Odyssey*. The Sirens are represented as formidable adversaries whose song enraptures men and leads them to their death: 'the high clear tones of the Sirens will bewitch him. They sit in a meadow; men's corpses lie heaped up all round them, mouldering upon the bones as the skin decays' (Book XII, p. 144). Significantly, the power of the Sirens derives from their voice. This is perceived as being strange or 'bewitching' within the patriarchal world of epic. Wittig seizes upon this description of the Sirens and appropriates it as a powerful image of female identity: 'Il y a quelque part une sirène [...] Quelquefois elle se met à chanter. Elles disent que de son chant on n'entend qu'un O continu' (16). In doing so, she exposes the contradictions inherent within the patriarchal conception of women and the male anxiety that underpins them. Most of the adversaries that Odysseus encounters during his trials are female and the threat that they pose stems predominately from the open female mouth. Calypso and Circe

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<sup>14</sup> Lynda E. Boose, "Scolding Brides and Bridling Scolds: Taming the Woman's Unruly Member", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 42:2 (Summer 1991), 179-213 (p. 196).

<sup>15</sup> June Deery, "Science for Feminists: Margaret Atwood's Body of Knowledge", *Twentieth Century Literature*, 43, no.4 (Winter 1997), 470-86 (p. 475).

<sup>16</sup> Boose, p. 195.

are two goddesses who detain and hold Odysseus captive through their ‘bewitching’ powers. Each is continually described as ‘the goddess with the braided hair, with human speech and with strange powers’ (Book x, p. 116). Power and voice are somehow seen as sinister and inexplicable when they belong to a female. This is particularly evident in relation to Circe. As the previous quotation reveals, she is described as possessing ‘strange powers’, while her brother, Aeetes, is described as a ‘magician’ (Book x, p. 116). Both brother and sister possess knowledge of magic and potions, but they are defined differently. The female is removed from the general and therefore masculine ‘magician’, and confined within the particular and therefore suspicious ‘goddess of strange powers’.<sup>17</sup> The language reserved for the female has negative and sinister connotations. This association of the open female mouth with danger reflects male anxiety and fear of the female. The female mouth is a symbol of orality and speech, but also of sexuality. Consequently, the female voice is denied in an attempt to control the female and curb her sexuality and power.

Wittig infuses her depiction of the ‘guérillères’ with qualities of the fearsome female characters of the *Odyssey* in open defiance of the female oppression that male anxiety imposes. The warriors possess the open mouths and powerful song of the Sirens: ‘les combattantes sont vues, chantant sans s’arrêter, leurs grandes bouches ouvertes sur les dents blanches’ (144). Their battle cries are powerful enough to weaken the resolve and valour of the enemy (147). With their mouths, the site of the threatening and threatened female voice, significantly open in battle, they attack pre-existing convention and bring death to patriarchal dominance.

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<sup>17</sup> The original Greek text compounds this reading. The word for Circe is δεινή (10.136), which is described as ‘fearful, terrible; in Hom[er], of persons and things’ by Henry G. Liddell, and Henry R. Scott in *A Greek-English Lexicon, Ninth Edition, With a Revised Supplement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996). For Aeetes the word is ὀλοόφρονος, (10.137), which the Liddell and Scott translate as ‘mischief, baleful (so always in [*The Iliad*]); but in [*The Odyssey*], crafty, sagacious, of persons’. Stanford comments on the connotations of this description: ‘in [*The Iliad*] this epithet is confined to savage animals; in [*The Odyssey*] it is applied to Atlas [...], to Aietes brother of Circe (10, 137) and to Minos (11, 322), none of whom show any notably evil or cruel characteristics in H[omer]’, W. B. Stanford, *Homer: Odyssey. 2 vols* (London: Duckworth, 2009).

In this way, Wittig's work acts as a Trojan Horse. In her essay entitled "The Trojan Horse", Wittig uses the Trojan Horse as a metaphor for works that refashion conventional linguistic usage and, by association, conventional modes of thought. She says:

A literary work with a new form must operate as a war machine, because its design and goal is to pulverise the old forms and formal conventions [...] to sap and blast out the ground where it was planted. Then it must achieve universalization, to create a global form of work.<sup>18</sup>

Therefore, Wittig employs recognisable terms, such as 'elles', only to strip away their established meaning so that they can be seen in a new and 'unsexed' context. Similarly, Wittig exploits narrative form, taking the traditional epic form and subjecting it to a radical overhaul. Elements characteristic of the epic, such as the litany of heroes, the depiction of battle, and godly intervention are recast in a narrative that both aesthetically and formally defies convention. In *Les Guérillères* continuity of plot, characterization, and textual aesthetics are challenged. The text is divided into isolated, detached paragraphs, creating a fragmentary narrative; a narrative of *lacunae*. Here style reflects theory. Diane Crowder perceives that 'lacunae are absences which signify', signaling the absence of women from discourse, from history, in short from culture.<sup>19</sup> Throughout *Les Guérillères*, and particularly in the closing rallying speech where once again block capitals and repetition emphasize the point, Wittig urges women to appropriate these *lacunae*, which constitute a powerful weapon in the overthrow of patriarchal oppression, allowing women to reinsert themselves into language and history: 'LACUNES LACUNES LACUNES / CONTRE TEXTES / CONTRE SENS [...] / SANS RELACHE / GESTE RENVERSEMENT' (204).

Wittig's use of the Trojan Horse as a metaphor for such works that subvert patriarchal convention is, in itself, an example of a 'war machine'. The description in the *Odyssey* casts

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<sup>18</sup> Monique Wittig, "The Trojan Horse", in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), pp.68-75 (p. 68-69). This essay was first published in English, appearing in translation as "Le cheval de Troie," in *Vlasta*, 4 (1985), 36 – 41.

<sup>19</sup> Diane Griffin Crowder, "Amazons and Mothers? Monique Wittig, Hélène Cixous and theories of women's writing", *Contemporary Literature*, 24:2 (Summer 1983), 117-44 (p. 128).

the Trojan Horse as a female symbol. The men emerge from the horse as from the womb: ‘Then the bard sang how the sons of the Achaeans forsook their cavernous hiding-place, slid from the horse and sacked the town’ (Book VIII. p.97). The phallic Trojan Horse gives birth to warrior men, thereby becoming a symbol of both the masculine and the feminine.<sup>20</sup>

This multifaceted attack on patriarchal epic allows Wittig to ‘pulverise the old forms and formal conventions’.<sup>21</sup> This done, she advances towards ‘universalization and [the creation] of a global form of work’.<sup>22</sup> As *Les Guérillères* reaches its conclusion, Wittig also brings its world closer to her objective of the universal. The enemy in the warriors’ war is sexual difference, not exclusively its male perpetrators. Duffy states: ‘the women, at the end of the novel, are offering men a second chance, an opportunity to participate in the inception of a new society in which difference and its inevitable side-effect – warfare – will be eliminated’.<sup>23</sup> Consequently, women welcome men into this new world where each individual exists equally, irrespective of gender. This sense of harmony is encapsulated in the ‘co-operative renaming of the elements of this pristine world’.<sup>24</sup> The act of naming, which in the previous mode of exclusively male privilege had conferred power and assumed a dominant master/submissive subject relationship, is now a universal right.

It is ironic that myth can operate as the perfect vehicle for women to (re)write themselves into a tradition and culture from which they have been excluded. Writing does not begin with the effacement of mythical names, as posited by Lacoue-Labarthe. Rather, mythical names provide the opening for a way of writing that rewrites the patriarchal dominance of myth from within and carves out a new mythical voice. This reworking of myth in turn inscribes itself into cultural heritage, thereby ensuring the continued development and growth intrinsic

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<sup>20</sup> For discussion of the paradoxical status of the Trojan Horse as a phallic symbol and a symbol of feminist writing, see Linda Zerilli, “The Trojan Horse of Universalism: Language as a “War Machine” in the Writings of Monique Wittig”, *Social Text*, 25-26 (1990), 146-70 (p. 152).

<sup>21</sup> Wittig, “The Trojan Horse”, p. 68-69.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 68-69.

<sup>23</sup> Duffy, “Monique Wittig”, p. 209.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 209.

to culture and its survival. Through its versatility and dynamism on the one hand and its familiarity on the other, myth affords a balance that prevents the stagnation of art and ensures the continued renewal of culture. Myth also plays a key political role. Vanda Zajko and Miriam Leonard attest to the role of classical myth in the development of feminist thought, notably opening their introduction with reference to *Les Guérillères* and in particular the closing speech.<sup>25</sup> Adrienne Rich states: ‘Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival’.<sup>26</sup> Wittig is not challenging the patriarchy of Homer’s era nor indeed is she joining in the feminist appraisal of the *Iliad* as a patriarchal text. Rather she is responding to the patriarchal transmission and reception of Homer’s poems and the wider classical tradition. The distinction is a crucial one. Wittig perceives in Homer the myriad alternative interpretations and an accommodation of the female voice that the cultural authority of the patriarchal tradition seeks to deny and silence. Her work challenges the oppressive portrayal of women and removes the female from the overbearing shadow of patriarchal representation. In *Les Guérillères* Wittig is laying the foundation for a new conception of female identity. Through her mythical transmutations, Wittig is reinserting the displaced female into the gaps of history.

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<sup>25</sup> See *Laughing with Medusa: Classical myth and feminist thought*, ed. by Vanda Zajko and Miriam Leonard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) and in particular p. 1-2.

<sup>26</sup> Adrienne Rich, “When we dead awaken: Writing as Re-Vision”, *College English*, 34, no. 1, Women, Writing and Teaching (October 1972), 18-30 (p. 18).