University of Reading

Cogitating with Barbara Cassin: ontology, sophistics, feminine voice

Article

Published Version

Creative Commons: Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0

Open Access

Mckeane, J. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2141-079X (2023) Cogitating with Barbara Cassin: ontology, sophistics, feminine voice. S: Journal of the Circle for Lacanian Ideology Critique, 13. pp. 31-46. ISSN 1874-9062 Available at https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/104344/

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See Guidance on citing.

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the End User Agreement.

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

Central Archive at the University of Reading

University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online

John McKeane

COGITATING WITH BARBARA CASSIN

Ontology, Sophistics, Feminine Voice

What does it mean to cogitate with Barbara Cassin? If cogitating is simply taken to mean thinking, then to follow her thought is to question the supremacy of the One over the Many, to reject gestures that legitimize the former by excluding the latter. But if cogitating is taken as an echo of the Cartesian *cogito*, then we are able to be more precise about Cassin's role in contemporary thought.

This is not to say that Cassin is a neo-Cartesian, for whom the *cogito* would represent a line drawn in the sand, an attempt to establish a firm basis for a system of thinking. Instead, to speak of cogitation enables us to look at the way Cassin deals with the tension between the two sides of the equation, as it were, of *I think therefore I am*: thinking and being. She does this via her engagement with early Greek philosophy, notably Parmenides, whose poem 'On Nature or Being' claims that 'being and thinking are a single and same thing' (Cassin, *Si Parménide* 44).[1] This claim is foundational for the ontological tradition in philosophy, and throughout her career Cassin examines the setting, implications, and noteworthy refutations of this claim. To this end, she produces multiple major publications: from *Si Parménide: Le traité anonyme* De Melisso Xenophane Gorgia. *Édition critique et commentaire* / *If Parmenides: the Anonymous Treatise* On Melissus, Xenophanes, and Gorgias. *Critical Edition and Commentary* (650 pages, 1980), to *L'Effet sophistique* / *The Sophistical Effect* (700 pages, 1995), looking at the 'sophistical' others of the ontological tradition; and from a critical edition of Parmenides's Poem itself, *Sur la nature ou sur l'étant: La langue de l'être?* / *On Nature or On the Existent: the Language of Being?* (1998) to a treatment of the foundational myth of Helen of Troy addressing the same questions, *Voir Hélène en toute femme: d'Homère à Lacan* / *Seeing Helen in Every Woman: from Homer to Lacan* (2000).[2]

These activities are the driving force behind the career that has seen Cassin become well known as the editor of the *Dictionary of Untranslatables* (2004/2014), member of the Académie française (2018-), and more. The critical work of tracing Cassin's best-known positions back to her emergence and evolution as a noteworthy figure

still needs to be undertaken, and that is the path on which this article sets out. I therefore hope to provide important pieces of the context for the prominent role she now occupies in French and continental thought.

We shall therefore begin by reading Cassin on Parmenides. This means studying her exposition of his 'Poem on Nature or Being' in its importance for ontologizing philosophies – up to and including Heidegger – which claim a privileged, direct access to being, nature, or reality. Our first section will therefore establish what Cassin takes to be the claims of ontology and the various advantages they present. While taking this tradition as a worthy interlocutor, Cassin is not content to remain within it, and my following three sections track her as she makes this move beyond ontology. She does so by combining in virtuosic ways the rival, ancient tradition of 'sophistics', and a privileging of feminine voices in canonical episodes from Greek mythology and literature (a fore-taste of her provocative approach can be found in the statement 'the first women I came across in philosophy were the Sophists'; Cassin, *Sophistical Practice* 5).[3] Our second section explores why this double, sophistical-feminine move beyond ontology might be possible or necessary by setting out what Cassin takes to be the rebarbative masculinity of that school of thought. Once this is established, it becomes possible to move to the final two sections, in which Cassin re-examines two treatments of femininity (and more specifically, feminine voice or discourse) in ancient Greek culture. These treatments address the Sirens who tempt Ulysses in the *Odyssey*, an episode which Cassin presents as being cited significantly in Parmenides's 'Poem on Nature or Being', and the figure of Helen of Troy in her interactions with the same Ulysses. Across these various discussions, we hope to set out Cassin's thinking with its compelling mix of erudition, vivacious aphoristic expression, and concern for movement and vitality.

1. The Claims of Ontology

In order to come to our aim of examining how Cassin moves beyond ontology (via a sophistical-feminine voice) and the reasons for her doing so (its supposed masculinity), we must first establish the basic tenets of that school of thought. A key interlocutor of Cassin's, as of any contemporary French discussion of ontology, is of course Martin Heidegger, but her contribution in this context is made by way of a thinker at the other end of the ontological tradition, the Greek pre-Socratic Parmenides. Cassin edits a French edition of Parmenides's sole known work, a fragmentary poem sometimes referred to as 'On Nature', and for which she proposes a double title, 'On Nature or on the Existent [*l'étant*]' (Parmenides, *Sur la nature ou sur l'étant*). The latter term is difficult to translate in English, being a substantivized present participle, with the sense of an existent or *being* that is actively in the process of existing or being.

The active, verb-like quality of Parmenides's term combines with another grammatical feature, which is to exploit Greek's capacity for this being to remain free of any predicate, giving a sense that can only be awkwardly translated in English as 'being *is*', 'being exists', or 'there is being'. Thus the being or *étant* does not exist in any particular way (it is not large or small, colourful or monotone, happy or sad, etc.), but just *is*.[4] This is what provides the impulse informing ontological philosophy: to examine that which is shared by all beings in existence or in the world, above and beyond any differentiated attributes they might have. What is the being that all beings share? How can we think about such beings in a rigorously equal way, beyond the infinitely distracting worlds of local or cultural difference? For thinkers in this Parmenidean tradition, philosophy is the pursuit of such absolute even-handedness, and the rejection of culturally-specific special pleading. Being, or what really is, or the way things ultimately are, is the proper subject of philosophy, and to this end one must reject distracting 'noise'. Parmenides gives the example of anything that is born or dies as such a distraction, because its relationship to being is inconstant (Sedley 118). In this spirit one would not then study the exploits of individual humans (even symbolic or representative ones, such as Ulysses, as we shall see), though one could study the underlying, permanent forces at work in their lives (e.g. any shared human nature that becomes apparent through accumulated examples). In short, with Parmenides solidity and permanency are privileged, and abstraction from the individual or local level is not some unfortunate side-effect, but the very methodology of rigorous thought.

Such is the universalising force behind ontology's attention to being that it has little bandwidth left over that would enable it to pay attention to the way that being is framed and shaped by language or discourse. This is where we can find Cassin's main interest in, and points of contention with, Parmenides. Cassin tells us that 'the poem sets out to follow "the path of 'is'", where being, thinking and speaking belong to one another' (Cassin, *La Nostalgie* 42). Cassin unpicks this supposedly unproblematic mutual belonging of being and the way in which we think and speak about it – the supposed ability for being to enter the realm of language with little or no resistance, reframing or reshaping. In order to counter this claimed mutual belonging of being and language, Cassin's critical edition spends considerable time setting out the way the Poem provides narrative framing for the lesson on the topics of being and non-being which is dispensed to the narrator-protagonist by a goddess he is taken to meet.[5]

Being and non-being are presented as two radically divergent paths, and the unnamed traveller is strongly enjoined to follow the former.[6] Following the latter would be wasted effort, as nothing can be known or expressed about non-being. Non-being has no inner necessity, is only fleeting appearance, and indeed those who are distracted by it are condemned to turn back on themselves, to become as if dumb and blind, to plunge into 'dark night, a dense and heavy body' (Parmenides, *Fragments* 75).[7] Far better to concentrate on that which stands above the ephemeral, is without beginning or end, and has its own inner necessity. The positive, true

path, albeit one less often trod, is that of this being, and Parmenides describes it in various ways: like a flame, burning equally on all sides, or like a sphere, emanating out from its centre in absolute equality, without privileging one direction or one plane over any other. This physical model stands for a philosophical principle of certainty or foundation, against which the ever-changing human world can be measured. Due to the solidity with which this model binds being and the thinking of that being, Parmenides's thinking has been authoritatively described as the precursor or 'grandfather' of Descartes's *cogito* (Leonard 22).

Despite all of this, Cassin's ultimate strategy is to undermine Parmenides's reputation as 'the first true philosopher, which is to say the first Platonist or, at least, the first rationalist' (in Parmenides, *Sur la nature* 17). She begins to draw out interpretative tension with the statement which opens the Poem's fragment VIII: 'Only remains therefore the tale of the way / "is"' (Parmenides, *Sur la nature* 85). The question for Cassin is how seriously to take the trope of the path here; is this just a figure of speech enabling an understanding of being as opposed to non-being? Or is the path, road, or way to be understood in a stronger sense, with being only able to be glimpsed by those who depart on a journey, making space for mobility, change, becoming? It seems probable that Cassin's sympathies lie with the second possibility. To see this more fully, we must look in more depth at what she presents as her specific contribution to scholarly understanding of Parmenides's Poem.[8] This contribution is to signal that the Poem quotes line-for-line another episode of a traveller along a path, *the* traveller in ancient Greek culture, the masculine Ulysses as he meets the feminine Sirens. But before we come to this central aspect of Cassin's reading, in the latter sections of this piece, we must pause to draw out the stakes of her objections to ontology in terms of gender.

2. What is Masculine about Ontology?

In our final two sections, on Cassin's readings of Ulysses's encounters with the Sirens and with Helen of Troy, we will see (missed) encounters with feminine voices being placed explicitly at the centre of the way Greek (and later Western) culture constructed (and constructs) its mythology. But what will later be explicit is already implicit, for Cassin, in the functioning of ontological thought, that other expression of Greek and broader Western culture, insofar as ontology claims to avoid falling into superstition, instead claiming to pay due attention to reality (or what really is, or being).[9] This is to say that although there is little or no explicit thematization of gender in ontology, starting with Parmenides, in fact it betrays patterns of thought that display characteristics of masculinity.[10]

Take the claimed rigour of the thought of being, as discussed above. Seen positively, this is a righteous discourse concerned with even-handedness or equality, and with implications for justice both epistemically and socially. But if seen negatively, it can provide expression for arid abstraction – Cassin calls being 'the abstraction

of abstractions' (*Debate*) –, speaking to a detachment from worldly minutiae and differences that leaves one comfortably numb. Abstraction leads to a lack of nuance, to insensitivity; and indeed Parmenides's ultra-rationalist position has been described as the following: '[t]here are no half-truths. No proposition is both true and false. No question can be coherently answered "Yes and no."' (Sedley 115). This might appear pleasingly coherent and elegant in its own terms; it nonetheless seems an unhelpful attitude in many situations. Does ontology, with its stock-in-trade methodology of abstraction and its claim to stand above the world, ultimately shrink from that world, out of fear of its complexity?

Cassin's aim of unpicking the co-belonging of being, thought, and speech means she is sympathetic to such positioning. To take there to be a natural, unproblematic bond between being and thinking, between Descartes's *I think* and his *I am*, is surely more likely when one has been culturally conditioned to believe that what one thinks or says is true.[11] Or when one has been similarly conditioned to believe that it is possible to express – directly, without compromises with institutional power-structures – the way things really are.[12] Displaying masculine gender seems very likely to contribute strongly to the likelihood of adopting such positions. While ontological philosophy is not explicitly concerned with privileging one gender, it can come to be associated with masculinity in this roundabout way. Cassin's institutional self-positioning suggests that she holds this to be the case; she refuses to simply 'rehabilitate' sophistic thinking (*Sophistical Practice*, 14), as this would leave the hierarchies of power in place, merely inverted. She titles one of her major works 'the sophistic effect' because she is aware that it suits the aims of rationalist philosophy to be able to export or project certain ways of thinking onto an artificially-created sophistic other, i.e. to create a sophistics than is more a secondary effect than it is its own reality.[13] And she has written of the way in which the French academic institution sought to 'situate her work as literature or memoir, thus excluding it from being properly philosophical. Strikingly, she tells us that to conform to this situating would be no more radical, for a woman, than 'making a chicken casserole'.[14]

We must therefore proceed with care when discussing the genre into which Cassin's writings fall. Nonetheless, while she defends her right to be considered a philosopher with full privileges (as it were), she also does maintain an expressive, wide-ranging approach more characteristic of the figure of the intellectual in broader French culture. It is from this strand of her work that we can take two examples illustrating her approach to the implicit masculinity of ontology. Each is a laconic utterance, to be found in multiple locations across her various modes of interventions as a renowned figure in contemporary French culture. The first ironizes the position of someone who takes as read the co-belonging of being and speaking, which is to say that it represents in miniature Parmenides's position. In fact the statement – in blue language – is by Cassin's maternal grandmother, and consists in the observation that 'thirty-six arse cheeks make eighteen arses' (Cassin, *Avec le plus petit*, 22; and as epigraph to *Jacques le Sophiste*). The

grandmother intended this as a no-nonsense debunking of supposed attempts at sophisticated discourse; but the humour intended by Cassin in her use of the phrase comes from the sheer obviousness or redundancy of the observation. By adopting this catchphrase in an apparently rationalist spirit, for which being and thinking/speaking belong to one another without remainder, the grandmother prepares the way for Cassin to elaborate a more complex view of the relationship between language and reality. The second statement goes to the other extreme, insofar as it condenses the thinking of someone who has broken free of the assumption that reality and language 'belong to one another' (Cassin, *La Nostalgie* 42). It stems from another of Cassin's family legends, namely that during WWII, when soldiers came to seize her Jewish father, they were greeted on the doorstep by her mother, of Catholic French origin, drawing herself up and stating in fake outrage 'me, marry a Jew, never!' (Cassin, *Avec le plus petit*, 24). This is the statement of someone who has managed to dissociate the effect she wishes an utterance to produce on the person before her (the German soldiers) from any obligation to be ultimately truthful.[15] As the wife of a Jew, she playacts as someone horrified at the thought of marrying a Jew. Thus the relationship of speech to what really *is* is able – or rather is forced, on pain of deportation and death – to alter fundamentally.

3. Parmenides and the Sirens

We have attempted to show that, for Cassin's thinking, there is an implicit masculine bias in ontology, insofar as it is a thinking that considers the ultimate epistemic equality of all beings rather than helping to dismantle lived inequalities in this world. We can now move to two areas where she discusses explicit treatments of femininity in the Greek and broader Western tradition. What's more, each of these shows a close intrication of femininity and voice, thus aligning with the sense that for Cassin, to move beyond ontology means that it is necessary to foreground sophistics and femininity together.

The first of these areas is found in the Parmenides Poem discussed above. If the goddess that the adventurer encounters presents him with two paths, that of being and that of non-being, Cassin lays her emphasis on the fact that we are dealing with paths here. Being (if that is indeed to be the path chosen) is not simply waiting to be found as pre-existing language, but instead reaches full self-realization only through an enunciation in language. Accordingly, language is – as it were – an dynamic reactant here, rather than just another ingredient to make up the numbers. Cassin's emphasis on the path leads her to discuss one episode in particular, when Parmenides directly quotes the Homeric verses depicting Ulysses's encounter with the Sirens. This episode is all the more significant insofar as Parmenides intends Ulysses's stance when tied to the mast to provide an image of the solidity of being, according to the thought that, as we saw above, Parmenides takes only that which is unmoving – unbeginning and unending – as truly worthy of the designation 'being'.

Now, the hero of the *Odyssey* is not named by Parmenides, but by the precise quotation of verses, including metrical features, Cassin argues that the reference would have been unmistakable within ancient Greek culture. But even if such a writerly move is or was readily comprehensible, why should it be significant? It seems far from revolutionary for a Greek thinker to quote Homer. However, we should remember Parmenides's scientistic claim to speak of a being in a sense that is equally or neutrally applicable to all existents in the world. If being is truly being, then it must be – in equal measure – the being of a stone, of an animal, of a human, of a mathematical number. It would be striking for such claimed philosophical rigour, the new dawn of Western thought saluted by Heidegger and many others, to collapse back onto the local, culturally-specific model of a named adventurer, Ulysses, however symbolic or exemplary he may be.

Let us come to the detail of the episode cited palimpsestically by Parmenides, Ulysses's encounter with the Sirens. The relevant section of fragment VIII of the Poem reads:

> Moreover, changeless in the limits of great chains
>
> [It] is un-beginning and unceasing, since coming-to-be and perishing
>
> Have been driven far off, and true trust has thrust them out.
>
> Remaining the same and in the same, [it] lies by itself
>
> And remains thus firmly in place; for strong Necessity
>
> Holds [it] fast in the chains of a limit, which fences it about
>
> (Parmenides, *Fragments* 69).

The palimpsestic quotation here allows Cassin to identify the chains as those binding Ulysses to his mast, preventing his being drawn to the alluring Sirens' song (which he nonetheless listens to with unstopped ears, unlike his crew of rowers). The emphasis in these Homeric lines is on the solidity of his footing, the strength of his stance, and the self-containedness of a system that goes from the same to the same without significant dalliance with the other. There is of course some, residual relation to the other, which represents either Ulysses's ingenuity or his cowardice (depending on one's perspective). He listens to the Sirens' song without suffering the usual fatal consequences; he defeats their magical spell, tames the forces of nature and lives to tell his triumphant tale. Western man is born. For her part, Cassin is intensely interested in all that goes on in this half-missed, half-pursued encounter, and her strategy is to consider matters from the point of view of the feminine Sirens. In the published version of her account of this moment in Parmenides, she writes that

> [t]he Sirens name Ulysses using his name of glory, and essentially propose that he hear the *Iliad*, which he knows only too well, having lived it. […] the

> Sirens create a short caricature of epic within the epic itself, one intended to capture and kill the hero (Parmenides, *Sur la nature* 61).

This 'short caricature of epic within the epic itself' recentres the Sirens, rather than Homer, the bardic tradition incarnated in him, posterity, or any such construction, as those with the capacity to shape the narrative. Cassin therefore locates the novelty of this episode in the Sirens' status as speaking subjects, narrating the *Iliad* from their perspective, rather than adopting their traditional role of objects caught up in the classically masculine gaze of the *Odyssey*.

It is worth looking in slightly more detail at the way Cassin relates the same episode in a different setting. In a debate with Alain Badiou, she concentrates on

> a key moment in [Parmenides's] Poem, when he is describing the existent [*l'étant*], *to ôn*, which is to say the subject of philosophy for ever more, the moment when, here we go, he *says it*. He picks up, he quotes the words used by Homer to describe Ulysses passing by the Sirens while tied to his mast. It is completely extraordinary. Ulysses has himself tied to the mast in order not to jump into the water, and drown, attracted by what the Sirens are going to say to him. What's more, what they tell him is *nothing*. They tell him: 'come here, Ulysses, the renowned one, honour of Achaea, we are going to tell you who you are' – even if he knows that full well… […]. First of all, this is a crazy scene: you have the Sirens, you have sublime vases where we can see Ulysses, completely naked and tied to his mast, then we also see the rowers with their ears stuffed, rowing like beasts, then the Sirens, who in fact turn into birds, did you know?, throwing themselves into the sea and committing suicide. It is an extraordinary scene: […], 'his feet are solidly fixed to the floor, and he is tied up, bound within the limit of powerful chains'.[16] And these words are used to describe the abstraction of all abstractions, which is that of being: we have to admit this is crazy! (Badiou and Cassin, *Debate*, emphases original)

Cassin emphasizes the dynamics of attraction, she demystifies – even humanizes – the Sirens by laying out their strategy plainly. This strategy is composed partly of flattery (referring to Ulysses's previous great deeds and reputation), and partly of a promise of knowledge (Homer's poem reads: 'we know all things that come to pass upon the fruitful earth', Homer, Odyssey, 12.190). Despite the sexual undertones, we are therefore on epistemic terrain: Ulysses is after all a Greek, and the Sirens' appeal is to his desire for knowledge.[17] The oral quality of this version of Cassin's account allows several of its elements to be better understood: first, in telling us that 'what they tell him is *nothing*', she demystifies the Sirens (theirs is no supernatural power, but just an everyday seduction technique), as well as underlining Ulysses's vanity in listening to such approaches. Second, she concentrates on the Sirens' frustration, on their reaction to being thwarted by Ulysses, namely of drowning themselves in the sea. Again, the episode is re-balanced to take seriously the presence of the feminine Sirens, as something more than a tempting Other, one that is heroically

avoided, patiently dominated by the traditional protagonist. Third, Cassin reminds us that this scene features palimpsestically in Parmenides's Poem in order to create a double valency: Ulysses/being on the one hand, Sirens/non-being on the other. The complex dynamics of the scene describe nothing other than 'the abstraction of all abstractions, which is that of being', and it is confirmed that we are some distance away from the emptied-out, disincarnated Greeks often discussed, for example by Heidegger. If this scene is used by Parmenides to militate for being over non-being, Cassin enjoins us to reconsider the dynamics of exclusion at work in the foundational episode of universalization that the Poem, read by Cassin as a post-Heideggerian thinker in a French context, represents. Her thought is ultimately that when beings are folded into the broader category of being, this enfolding risks becoming a suffocation, if we do not take care to preserve those aspects of being that are mobile and shifting, here represented by the sophistical, feminine voices of the Sirens.

4. Seeing Helen in Every Woman

The second discussion of feminine voices to which we can turn, thus extending our understanding of the way Cassin steps beyond ontology, concerns Helen of Troy. In *Seeing Helen in Every Woman*: *from Homer to Lacan*, Cassin looks at the treatment of this figure across a multitude of works (including Euripides, Marlowe, Shakespeare). She notably explores Gorgias, the Sophist and author of a 'Treatise on Non-Being' which she presents as at once the logical consquence and overcoming of Parmenides, in terms of his 'Encomium of Helen', which Cassin presents as an early recognition of the potency of language. However, we can limit ourselves to the 20th-century French play *Protée* by Paul Claudel.[18] It is with her discussion of this setting that the discursive rather than ontological status of Helen – and with it the move towards a sophistics associated with the feminine voice – is clearest.

In this play, the Spartan general in the campaign against Troy, Menelaus, is waylaid on his return to Greece by the sea-god Proteus. The sea-nymph Brindosier, seeking to escape Proteus, plans a subterfuge involving swapping her identity with that of Helen. Cassin picks up the tale:

> Proteus is open to having Helen instead of Brindosier, and Menelaus to having Brindosier instead of Helen. They are interchangeable, given the purposes for which they are used. For, in any case, as Menelaus says: 'I am the master of all the Helens in the world', 'There is only one Helen for me', and even: 'Helen: there is no other woman in the world'. In Helen, the proper name [*nom propre*] becomes a common noun [*nom commun*]: 'Helen', like 'Marie' for domestic staff, allows them to be referred to with no risk of a mistake. 'Helen', the/a woman [*la/une femme*], allowing those like Menelaus to have them all (Cassin, *Voir Hélène* 135).

In this moment, Menelaus, uses the proper name Helen interchangeably to signify woman (indeed elsewhere Cassin plays on that name's possible Greek etymology as the one who is undecidably ravished and ravishing; accordingly women would not have individual identities as subjects, but be caught in a reversible economy of conquest).[19] The economy of exchanging subservient women is of course unpleasant, even in when it is set in ancient Greece, and even when it comes to supernatural beings such as sea-nymphs. Cassin only implicitly aligns herself with feminist outrage, however rightful, instead preferring to concentrate on what she sees as a bigger prize: a complete analysis and deconstruction of the thought-system within which these examplars of masculinity, and the Western tradition that holds them as examples, operates.

This thought-system operates on a principle of interchangeability where women are concerned, which is to say that a woman is seen as never being a fully singular individual, but instead a being whose main task is to provide echo-chambers for the supposed superior qualities of the masculine. In Cassin's words, 'a *pharmakon*, an *eidôlon*, Helen is, like a currency, the general equivalent of all women. Her voice is capable of modulating every name, she can make any sound she desires. She is equal to them all [*elle les vaut toutes*]. She is the/a woman [*la/une femme*]' (Cassin, *Voir Hélène* 146). Helen is currency in the sense of being current or valid in different circumstances, but also in the dehumanizing sense of being an object of exchange and consumption (including sexual consumption). Cassin's language becomes playful even as she makes this serious point: 'elle les vaut toutes' has the meaning of Helen having the same value as all women, but also of Helen being their match.[20] And she proceeds to capture the sense of Helen being at once an individual and the site of a generalizing, symbolic operation, with the composite, strictly speaking ungrammatical, double article 'the/a woman'. She is a woman, but also all women, everywoman, and Cassin's reading suggests that the stakes of dehumanization and mythologization are no less here than with other major figures of woman in Western thought, for instance Mary mother of Jesus or Elizabeth I, Virgin Queen of England.

Let us see how Cassin relates these discussions of Helen of Troy and symbolic womanhood or everywomanhood to that other Homeric episode, quoted by Parmenides as we saw, of Ulysses and the Sirens. It is notable that she refers to the *Odyssey*, a work whose proper name has become a common noun meaning quest, via a similar construction as 'the/an epic [*la/une épopée*]' and 'the/a myth' (Parmenides, *Sur la nature* 50). In her discussion of Helen, Cassin starts off by relating the Trojan horse story, focusing on a lesser-known aspect of it:

> The Greeks have feinted their retreat. The Trojans bring the great horse abandoned on the shoreline inside the ramparts.
>
> Helen, followed by her new husband Deiphobus, walks around the horse, a hollow trap within which the Greeks' best men are hiding. The latter have not heard or seen their wives in ten years. To the great stupefaction of

> Homerologists everywhere, she imitates with her voice the voice of each of their spouses, she calls each man by his name, using this voice which, each time, is that of the man's wife. They want to rush out, Ulysses alone manages to hold them back. The torching and the massacre will begin the very same night (Cassin, *Voir Hélène* 96).

Similarly to the episode of the Sirens, Ulysses demonstrates his superiority to his men, and once again it is by resisting the temptation to follow alluring voices. Western man has developed another supposedly key characteristic. But Cassin's main interest is in Helen's miraculous performance of the men's wives' voices. In creating this scenario, which dramatically deprives the men, hidden within the horse, of sight and thus emphasizes the importance of their hearing, the Homeric tradition inscribes Helen's special, symbolic status right at the surface-level of the plot. And this status is what Cassin describes as being 'the/a woman': hers is a woman's voice, obviously, but also one able to mimic the voices of other women, the men's wives. It is not only other to the men because it is feminine, but offers a version of that otherness that we must imagine to be homely and alluring in equal measure, a bonded otherness, one simultaneously maintained and suppressed.

Cassin commentates:

> From this I deduce, amongst other things, that femininity and voice are linked.
>
> The sounds of the voice, that of the woman, and the proper name of the man: the sound of the voice speaking the proper name gives one desire, this is the essence of the spark [*élan*] between a man and a woman.
>
> Helen's voice imitates those of all the other women. For each man, Helen is a voice that is valid for all women. Helen is the/a woman, insofar as a woman is a voice calling a man by his name (Cassin, *Voir Hélène* 96).

It is notable that Helen's thrown voice serves as the setting which envelopes a saying of the men's name (which latter is no neutral category, but the vehicle of their renown and reputation). This is a first point of convergence with Cassin's description of the song the Sirens directed towards Ulysses: 'renowned Odysseus, great glory of the Achæans'. Cassin is acutely aware of the dynamics of a situation in which these warriors' pride is flattered by hearing their names uttered by – what they believe is – the feminine voice that is dearest to them. But as we saw with the Sirens, Ulysses resists, and it is also for that reason that the tradition has him as a hero. Cassin's description of this aspect is important:

> Against Helen-*logos*, defined by the power of her voice, the physics of sound, and by the magic of the proper name, which allows the signifier to stick to the reference, only Ulysses is able to resist. Ulysses is a hero not due to his valour, like Achilles, but due to his cunning (*mêtis*), he is the only one capable of holding firm when faced with this conjunction of woman-*logos* (the

> sounds of the voice and the appeal of the proper name): Helen, the Sirens (Cassin, *Voir Hélène* 97).

The first point to note is that Helen not only represents 'the/a woman' here, but becomes the composite entity of 'Helen-*logos*'. Hers is not just any discourse, but discourse itself, the episode of throwing her voice to seduce and to trick the soldiers inside the wooden horse stands for the seductive aims of all discourse. Second, Helen is also made into a composite with the Sirens (Cassin's laconic expression 'Helen, the Sirens', is more readily understandable in the French). Despite or due to Cassin's philological training, she violently compresses together these two Homeric episodes to create a concept of discourse intertwined with femininity, and representing an adversary not only to the character Ulysses, but also to the Parmenidean ontology with its resistance, or deafness, to all the aspects of language that surrounds.

5. Conclusion

The femininity that Cassin concentrates on in her discussion of Helen of Troy is not an ontological or essentialist one (and indeed she speaks of 'the womanly side of ourselves'; Cassin, *Discours de réception*, 77). It is not a question of simply replacing masculine power structures with feminine ones, as this may well leave in place the principles of hierarchy and of exclusion. Instead, she puts forward a sophistical femininity, one based in Helen's case on thrown, fictitious voices. On one level it is absurd or unbelievable for Helen to intervene in a war by successfully imitating the voice of each warrior's wife. But over and against this idea of the everywoman, it is possible to see Helen's use of her voice as a disarming one, humanizing both her and the warlike men. We saw Cassin speaking of a composite model of femininity represented by 'Helen, the Sirens', and for their part, the Sirens are certainly humanized in Cassin's demystifying – insider? – account of the way they sing to Ulysses ('what they tell him is *nothing*').[21] The best way to be rid of a masculinist, combative model is of course simply not to engage with it, and instead to insist on the sophistical power of voice and voice alone. Cassin's work shows that such masculine models are not confined to Homeric warriors but have replicated themselves throughout the epistemic and institutional structures of Western thought: for instance Parmenides's ontology, but also all 'cogitation' in the sense of that which propounds the unproblematic co-belonging of being and thinking. With her particular combination of precision and ambition, such are some of the traditions that Cassin's thought helps us to unpick.

Notes

1. Throughout, translations from French are mine unless stated otherwise, and page references refer to the untranslated French editions. Elsewhere she quotes the verse as 'the same is indeed both thinking and being' (Parmenides, *Sur la nature* 79); and 'for the

same is thinking as well as being' (Cassin, *Si Parménide* 66). She also quotes Heidegger's translation, which in English becomes: 'being, thinking, the same' (Cassin, *Sophistical Practice* 32). Gallop's English translation is as follows: 'the same thing is there for thinking and for being' (Parmenides, *Fragments* 57).

2. These works have not been translated – the translated titles are given for information only.

3. In the interview from which is statement is taken, she also comments interestingly: 'I'm not interested in those who are "rehabilitating sophistics" because rehabilitating sophistics consists in making Sophists into philosophers after all. They are welcomed back into the flock ("agrégés"!). […] That type of rehabilitation, which merely reverses the Platonic judgement about the Sophists while maintaining his scale of values, doesn't interest me at all' (Cassin, *Sophistical Practice* 14).

4. Cassin's regular collaborator Souleymane Bachir Diagne discusses the (un) translatability of being and the *cogito* in various African languages (Diagne, 252-53).

5. The Poem opens with an unnamed 'I' relating a journey (Gallop identifies this narrator with Parmenides, but Cassin does not agree). He is carried in a chariot pulled by horses and driven by young girls who are 'Daughters of the sun' (Parmenides, *Fragments* 49). At a fast pace, with the spinning axles creating a flute-like music, he is taken on a divine path reserved for those who think ('the man who knows'; Parmenides, *Fragments* 49). He is carried to a gateway opening on to the diverging paths of day and night, which the girls' sweet words persuade the figure of Justice to open. He therefore finds himself in some celestial or cosmological space, and there encounters a benevolent goddess who takes him by the hand and tells him that he has been guided to this place by 'right and justice' (Parmenides, *Fragments* 53). This goddess proceeds to dispense a series of lessons about being and non-being.

6. Sedley points out the mention of a third path, 'a "backturning" one representing ordinary human acceptance of a variable world – the path of know-nothing "two-headed" mortals, who somehow manage to conflate being and not-being' (Sedley 114).

7. Cassin translates 'la nuit sans enseignement', night without teachings (Parmenides, *Sur la nature*, 91).

8. 'What is craziest is that no-one has ever noticed this. I think I am the first to have noticed it. Perhaps it has been noticed, but it has not been *said*' (Cassin, *Debate*). Badiou's evaluation is as follows: 'one of [Cassin's] most important gestures of thought, perhaps the most important, is to have placed Homer in the foreground of her interpretation and translation of Parmenides' (Badiou 33).

9. Parallel investigations to the present one could be carried out into Cassin's treatment of the Greek notion of appropriate discourse / speaking well as *hellenezein* (excluding non-Greeks); or into the first part of her *Aristote et le logos*, which is titled 'Speaking as a Man?'

10. I have mostly used the terms feminine/masculine rather than those of woman/man, though as the quotations taken from Cassin occasionally show, she does not necessarily seek to disassociate gender and sex.

11. 'We recognize the sons of Protestant ministers and school teachers in scholars by the naïve assurance with which they already assume that they have proven their case, when all they have really done is present it heartily and with fervour; they are thoroughly

accustomed to people believing them – it was part of their fathers' 'occupation'! A Jew, by contrast, in accordance with the business circles in which he moves and the past of his people, is least accustomed to people believing him. Observe Jewish scholars in this regard – they all place great emphasis on logic, that is, on compelling assent by offering reasons' (Nietzsche 235). See the interview between Cassin and Feltham, American University of Paris, 21st June, 2022, in this issue of *S*.

12. For example, Badiou writes: '[being] is what, expressly, debars all effects of language, and bears witness […] to the birth of a thinking removed from the power of language, and in which we glimpse, implacable and identical to itself, a totally bare fragment of the real' (Badiou 29).

13. 'Sophistic doctrine, which is a historical reality, is at the same time artificially produced by philosophy. The essence of this artifact is simply to construct the sophist as the negative alter ego of the philosopher: his bad other' (Cassin, *Sophistical Practice,* 29). One sense in which this is true is that the major portraits of Sophists we possess are found in the works of an author arguably committed to caricaturing them: Plato.

14. She says of *Avec le plus petit et le plus inapparent des corps* that 'the stories came out of the same type of work on language and the same type of work on the dominant, orthodox, or again ontological, phenomenological tradition. It is exactly the same type of philosophical work' (Cassin, *Sophistical Practice* 7). This passage illustrates her account of having wanted to publish the stories at the same time as *L'Effet sophistique* (1995), but having been prevented on the grounds of maintaining her scholarly reputation. *Avec le plus petit et le plus inapparent des corps* eventually appeared in 2007.

15. Such a position is at the opposite pole to Cassin's characterization of Aristotle: 'a terribly honest philosopher […] never does writing present him with any advantage'; 'Aristotle as the paradigm of the *phenomenologically correct.* […] Correct […] in the ease, which we can call ontological and sapiental, with which he says the world as it is' (Cassin, *Aristote et le logos* 1, 4, emphasis original).

16. Here this verse differs slightly from the versions in the translations by Cassin and Gallop: 'he remains fixed to the floor, for powerful necessity / holds him in the chains of the limit which encircles him completely' (Parmenides, *Sur la nature* 87) / '[it] remains thus firmly in place ; for strong Necessity / Holds [it] fast in the chains of a limit, which fences it about' (Parmenides, *Fragments* 69).

17. The title of Cassin's work is drawn from Goethe's *Faust*, in which a magic elixir allows he who drinks it to 'see Helen in every woman'; Cassin also uses the phrase because it is picked up by Freud, for whom seeing Helen in every woman stands for the possibility of extracting significance from psychic phenomena that at first sight seem less promising.

18. 'The knowledge the Sirens are taken to possess is presented as double-edged: they represent 'the temptation to lose oneself in "all that can be born", in the event, in becoming'. This works in an ambivalent way: 'the Sirens' song represents both the immortality of glory and the physical reality of death, of bones and rotting flesh' (Cassin, *L'Effet sophistique* 39).

19. She quotes Æschylus for whom Helen is 'Taker of ships, taker of men, taker / of cities (*helenas, helandros, heleptolis*)' (Cassin, *Voir Hélène* 90).

20. Cassin uses the same play elsewhere: 'Le chant des Sirènes vaut la *doxa*' (Parmenides, *Sur la nature* 61), the Sirens' song is a match for received opinion or ideology. Elsewhere Cassin writes, 'Aristotle is *doxa* itself' (Cassin, *Aristote et le logos*, p. 2)

21. Throughout *Seeing Helen in Every Woman*, Cassin dialogues with Lacan on the point of this nothingness – whether this be in terms of the Lacanian dicta that 'la femme n'existe pas', 'there is no sexual relation', or in terms of female *jouissance*.

Works Cited

Apter, Emily, Barbara Cassin, Jacques Lezra, and Michael Wood, editors. *Dictionary of Untranslatables. A Philosophical Lexicon.* Princeton University Press, 2014.

Badiou, Alain. 'Éloge de Barbara Cassin'. In *Les Pluriels de Barbara Cassin ou Le partage des équivoques*, ed. Philippe Büttgen, Michèle Gendreau-Massaloux and Xavier North. Le Bord de l'eau, 2012, pp.25-42.

Cassin, Barbara. *Si Parménide: Le traité anonyme* De Melisso Xenophane Gorgia. *Édition critique et commentaire.* Presses universitaires de Lille, 1980.

---, *L'Effet sophistique.* Gallimard, 1995.

---, *Aristote et le logos : Contes de la phénoménologie ordinaire.* Presses Universitaires de France, 1998.

---, *Avec le plus petit et le plus inapparent des corps.* Fayard, 2007.

---, *La Nostalgie. Quand donc est-on chez soi ? Ulysse, Énée, Arendt.* Autrement, 2013.

---, *Sophistical Practice: Towards a Consistent Relativism*. Fordham University Press, 2014.

---, *Discours de réception de Barbara Cassin à l'Académie française.* Fayard, 2020.

Cassin, Barbara, and Alain Badiou. *Debate on 'Homme, femme, philosophie'* (2019). Consulted online on 1 September 2021 at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cc8Y61acKbo (from 43 minutes).

Cassin, Barbara, and Maurice Mathieu. *Voir Hélène en toute femme. D'Homère à Lacan.* Institut d'édition, 2000.

Diagne, Souleymane Bachir. 'L'universel latéral comme traduction'. In *Les Pluriels de Barbara Cassin ou Le partage des équivoques.* Edited by Philippe Büttgen, Michèle Gendreau-Massaloux and Xavier North. Le Bord de l'eau, 2012, pp. 243-55.

Homer. *Odyssey, vol. 1: Books 1-12*, trans. A. T. Murray, revised by George E. Dimock. Harvard University Press, 1995.

Leonard, Miriam. *How to Read Ancient Philosophy.* Granta, 2008.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Joyous Science*, trans. R. Kevin Hill. Penguin, 2018.

Parmenides. *Sur la nature ou sur l'étant. La langue de l'être ?*, ed. and trans. Barbara Cassin, Éditions du Seuil, 1998.

---, *Fragments,* ed. and trans. David Gallop. University of Toronto Press, 1984.

Sedley, David. 'Parmenides and Melissus' in *The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy*, ed. A. A. Long. Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 113-33.