

# Julie Robson

## Sirens and Tuneful Weeping

*Women's weeping songs were perceived as a genuine threat to the social order, with revenge laments supposedly infectious enough to incite criminal violence.*

*Laments have also been feared as "magic songs", and women were seen as the witches who could "open up perilous channels of communication between the living and the dead".*

*Here sighing, and here crying, and loud railing  
Smote on the starless air, with lamentation,  
So that at first I wept to hear such wailing.  
Tongues mixed and mingled, horrible execration,  
Shrill shrieks, hoarse groans,  
Fierce yells and hideous blether  
And clapping of hands thereto,  
Without cessation.*

Dante Alighieri, "Hell", *The Divine Comedy*<sup>1</sup>

I recently recorded a lament that I had composed quietly under my breath at Singapore airport. But as I am not from a country where singing is an integrated part of cultural life, or where grieving is sufficiently acknowledged or publicly addressed, the arrangement does not appropriate the unashamed wails and tormented cries of Dante's classical lamenters. Rather, my intimate ode to love and loss has been softly sung. Written, rehearsed and recorded in noisy cities where deep listening can be difficult, it is a gentle call asking for the cherished and the missing to return to the table where one has been sitting with grief. The piece was loosely arranged over two days with my long-term music and theatre colleagues Catherine Mundy and Dawn Albinger. We improvised it once in a lounge room and again at a kitchen table, Catherine's six-month old baby often in her arms. On day three we stood together around one microphone, singing gently until we had our take. The context for this small creative offering is linked to both an enduring myth and an ancient singing tradition. My song may be humble and young, but the gesture is none the less embedded in stories of the Sirens and a history of female lamentation that I feel I have only just begun to

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1. Dante Alighieri "Hell" in *The Divine Comedy*, translated by D. Sayers (1949), USA, Penguin.

discover. To elaborate, the article that follows draws on my academic research into the power of mythical and embodied female vocality.

The mythological Sirens are the irresistible bird women whose intoxicating voices lead mariners to their death. They are perhaps best known for their appearance in the Homeric poem, *The Odyssey*,<sup>2</sup> penned in the late 8<sup>th</sup> century BC. The hero listens, but escapes their deadly song of knowledge because he is tied to the mast of his ship and his oarsman's ears are plugged with wax.

Over time, the dominant perception of a Siren has become that of a monstrous femme fatale. Yet throughout mythology and folklore the Sirens also frequently appear compassionately guiding the dead with gesture and song in representations of mourning that are often overlooked, yet original to their story. They suggest the Sirens empathise with the bereaved due to their own experience of sacrifice, erasure, metamorphosis and misfortune, hence their evocation in times of deep sorrow and profound transition. Whether it is life, love or ships that are passing, the Siren's lament is infused with the recognition and knowledge of death and the emotions left in its wake.

The human embodiment of the siren myth can be found in the female lamenter and torch singer, performers who give unbounded voice to an alarmed or heightened state of being. Their crying songs, which quiver between formalised and untamed vocal poetics, bind the listener to the traumatic real, inducing the revelation of one's own pain, or drive, or desire. In this unsettling and liminal vocal cry is an acoustic bridge to other, alienated or alternative realities. Its temptation and amorous

pleasure resides in the psychic, emotional and physical catharsis that accompanies the release of tears. Odysseus' non-surrender can then be taken as an invalidation or mistrust of this corporeal and emotional impulse. In view of the demise and denigration of crying singers, Odysseus' victory becomes emblematic of the way in which society has suppressed the (female) songs and sounds of grief.

## THE SIRENS AS LAMENTERS IN MYTH

### Grief in the skies

After Homer, Euripides references the Sirens in *Helen* (412 BC), when the bereaved protagonist, consumed by her despair, calls them to accompany her amidst her grief:

*Oh, as I begin the great lament  
of my great distress,  
what mourning shall I strive to utter?  
Or what Muse shall I approach with tears  
or songs of death or woe?  
Sirens, may you come to my mourning with  
Lybian flute or pipe or lyre,  
tears to match my plaintive woes.  
Grief for grief and mournful chant for chant,  
may Persephone send choirs of death  
in harmony with my lamentation,  
so that she may receive as thanks from me,  
in addition to my tears,  
a paeon for the departed dead  
beneath her gloomy roof.*<sup>3</sup>

Why is it that Helen chooses the Sirens in this instance over the renowned vocal prowess of the Muses? Are the Muses too tame and relentlessly pleasing to sing the ugliness and unruliness of anguish and despair? Remembering that Odysseus, and

2. Homer, *The Odyssey*, translated by E. Vieu (1996), Bath, Viking Penguin.

3. Euripides, *The Bacchae and Other Plays*, translated by P. Vellacott (1972), Harmondsworth, Penguin.

later others, outwitted or failed the Sirens' evocative song, perhaps it is the vanquished bird-women's deep affinity with loss that makes them Helen's grieving companions of choice. If ships escaped their enchantment, the myth holds that some of the more bereft Sirens plunged into the sea, literally drowning their sorrow, silent then forever. We might also imagine that, dwelling on remote cliffs with so few passing travellers, they lamented their alone-ness, if only as a waiting game to pass the time. Notorious for living on a beach of shipwrecked sailor bones, we can at least assume the landscape of death and its rocky emotional terrain is somewhat familiar to these anthropomorphic beings. Also, the Sirens' island of Anthemoessa (meaning "flowery") was not far from the door of the underworld itself, and its Queen of the Dead, Persephone, was their close companion. Before the Sirens took bird form, they were maidens gathering violets and narcissi with Persephone when Hades kidnapped Demeter's daughter for his bride. Overwhelmed with her woe at not being able to prevent the abduction, the nymph Cyane, who is often named a Siren, dissolved into water itself, the very materiality of tears. In *Metamorphoses*, Ovid writes of Cyane's spectacular dissolution:

*You should have seen her limbs become slack,  
the bones pliant, the nails lose their hardness.  
In cold water, her most tender parts became  
liquid first: the black flowing hair, the fingers,  
the legs, the feet; and then the transformation  
of her other delicate limbs. Then her shoulders,  
back, hips, and her breasts dissolved into small  
streams. And, finally, into the broken veins, in*

*the place of living blood, entered water, until  
nothing more remained to be grasped.*<sup>4</sup>

For the maidens remaining at the site of Persephone's abduction, Ovid relays they asked Zeus for wings to fly, allowing them to search for Persephone and spread the news of grief, filling the skies with sorrow and song.

### Midwives of death

In addition to these early epic references, classical funeral iconography from ancient Greece tells us that the Sirens were closely associated with bereavement rituals and songs for the dead. Whilst grief can be a ferocious and ravaging emotion, a more tender side to the Siren is evoked by this representation as lamenters. No longer rendered as seductive and violent animals of destruction, they become "mitigators of death, compassionate creatures sharing in the suffering of those in mourning for their dead, as doleful and lyrical as Euripides found them".<sup>5</sup> Mariner Warner, observing sarcophagi from Magna Graecia, recalls imagery featuring the deceased as "clinging to the sirens who are ferrying them across the river dividing the earth from the Isles of the Blessed", and further writes:

*Surviving vessels and carvings show enigmatically smiling women with stiff braided hair bearing the souls of the dead in their feathered arms in the form of small human beings; they sometimes carry the corpse on their backs, where it can seem an Icarus bound to a flying machine, giant classical hang-glider, or they clasp the tiny bodies tenderly to their plump pigeon breasts, and row with wings upwards.*<sup>6</sup>

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4. Ovid cited in Lao, M. (1999) *Sirens: Symbols of Seduction*, translated by J. Oliphant and M. Lao, Vermont: Park Street Press, p.25.

5. Lao, op cit. p.17.

6. Warner, M. (1995) *From the Beast to the Blonde: on Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*, London, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, p.401.

The tombs of the playwrights Menander and Sophocles were each adorned with such Sirens, further evidence that the Sirens were favoured as exquisite and empathetic accompanists from life to death, melodious navigators of the death passage. It is also eloquently confirmed in the writings of the Greek historian Plutarch:

*The song, far from being inhuman and murderous, inspires in the souls emigrating from the earth to the underworld, errant after death, oblivion for that which is transient and a love for that which is divine. And the souls, captivated by the harmony of their song, follow it and bind themselves to it.*<sup>7</sup>

Here, the Siren song suggests a requiem for radical, religious transformation, a serenade for courting the soul onward, out of its body and over water, home to the after-world of Elysian Fields. And even after death the Sirens were also considered mouthpieces for the deceased, communicating on their behalf to the living.

### **Empathetic mermaids**

Beyond the Classical Greek era, the Sirens begin to be represented not just in bird form but also as serpentine sea creatures, variously appearing in northern European mythologies as undines, selkies, mermaids and sea nymphs. Whilst their sexual allure is ever-present, many of these Siren stories also reaffirm empathy and the experience of loss.

In the medieval French fable *Melusine*, the numinous mermaid is forced to hide her monstrous tail in order to happily marry a mortal man and procure his children.

Betrayed by her spying husband at bath time when her serpentine features are exposed, Melusine is demonised by the villagers and forced to leave the township. In anguish, she flies through the air releasing a chilling and piercing cry, sobbing for all she must depart. Like many other mermaid tales from around the world, Melusine cries for the trauma her transformation causes and the effacement it necessitates. As Warner writes, "The situation of engulfment and loss is reversed, and the Sirens, who threaten entanglement and erasure, are themselves done away with".<sup>8</sup> Just as Hans Christian Andersen's little mermaid trades her voice and her tail for love and legs that will keep her 'upright', many women experience a psychological need to hide, or give up, their identity and desire in order to feel accepted - a gesture of self denial constituting female masochism and a maintaining a culture of self sacrifice.<sup>9</sup>

If not explicitly described as laments then the sound of the Siren is often referred to as melancholic or anguished. In *Die Lorelei* (1827), the German poet Heinrich Heine writes that he is both compelled and saddened to recall the story of "the loveliest maiden", who sings from her rock in the Rhine, "a peculiar, powerful melody", that "seizes upon the boatman in his small boat / with unrestrained woe".<sup>10</sup> Whether weeping for themselves or for others in death or distress, the Sirens are icons for keening the passing of life and the ebbing of love's tide.

### **Singing and sea-quaking**

An intriguing reference to the Siren as lamenter exists in a figurine named Marie Celeste that was a treasured maritime object

7. Cited in Lao, op cit., p.53.

8. Warner, op cit., p.407.

9. Golden, S. (1998) *Slaying the Mermaid: Women and the Culture of Sacrifice*, New York, Three Rivers Press.

10. Hein, H. (1827), *Die Lorelei*, <http://www.business.uiuc.edu/vock/poetry/lorelei.html>.

of the poet Pablo Neruda (1904-1973). Along with her Siren-like features, she bears the title of the 19<sup>th</sup> century cargo ship en route to Italy that was mysteriously found crewless, drifting derelict on tranquil seas near the Portuguese coastline. Speculating on this legendary and superstitious maritime event of 1872, Williams has since theorised that this ship encountered a seaquake<sup>11</sup>. Mythological characters have often been conceived by way of explaining environmental phenomena and so here we have a fitting allegory for the Siren and her lamenting persona. Summarising Williams's account, when a seaquake occurs, the winds shift abruptly and cannot be read, the compass is puzzled and the sea rises erratically and violently. Ships are likely to heave and roll uncontrollably and, if caught in the seaquake's hypocentre, the seabed may open and the vessel can be "drawn under in a huge dome-shaped mound of frothing water". Significantly, seaquakes are acoustically dramatic, composed of "loud, sometimes painful, noises, lasting as long as fifteen minutes, bellowed up from the deep to reverberate against a ship's bottom, generating an incredible rumble throughout." Reporting on the physical effect, one sea captain wrote, "The tremendous concussion below the keel made the stout hull vibrate through every beam, and the tall masts quiver like young twigs in a gale."

As allegory, a seaquake poetically encapsulates the emotional turbulence experienced with death and dying, evoking seismic destruction and the unstoppable physical and vocal tremor of a welling cry.

Neruda's Siren figurine, her porcelain eyes fixed on the horizon, perhaps embodies the preceding stillness of the terrible event, when, as Odysseus recalls in the moments before he met the Sirens, "the wind fell in an instant, all glazed to a dead calm". Curiously, Neruda's 'seaquaker', does at times wear the lamenter's face of compassion and tears, for he tells us:

*Strange as it might seem, every year, during the winter, those eyes weep. No one can explain how or why. Perhaps the wood, as it dried out, developed some cracks which gathered water. In any case, the fact remains that those French eyes, during the winter, weep.*<sup>12</sup>

## SIREN VOCALITY IN FEMALE PERFORMANCE

### Ancient death songs and female poetics

The Sirens and their gestures of grief evoke the sound of chants and funeral dirges that belong to the vocal heritage of lamentation rituals around the world. In these performative acts of mourning, elements of song are often combined with icons of crying in order to honour the deceased by recounting their life and the loss it signifies. This ancient lineage of "ritualised wailing", "sung-texted-weeping" or "tuneful weeping"<sup>13</sup> can be traced as far back as ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia and Israel. It is also well documented in Ancient Greek and Roman times where women were attendants to the corpse and regularly hired for the purpose of wailing. Over thousands of years and across many cultures, the simultaneity of singing and crying the dead has developed into a sophisticated art form

11. Williams, D. (2003) *Was the Mary Celeste Abandoned during a Seaquake?* <http://www.deafwhale.com/maryceleste/index.html>.

12. Neruda cited in Lao, op cit., p.153.

13. Tolbert, E. (1995) "The Voice of Lament: Female Vocality and Performative Efficacy in the Finnish-Karelian Itkuvirsi", in *Embodied Voices: Representing Female Vocality in Western Culture*, eds. L. Dunn, and N. Jones, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p.179.

that is highly expressive and intricately aesthetic. Integrated into the very fabric of cultural economies, at various stages of history it has acquired the status of a profession or role unto itself. Significantly, this emotional labour and vocal performance style has predominantly been cultivated and mastered by women.

Lutz writes that women have found considerable cultural power and authority in "managing the communal emotions surrounding death", noting it as having been one of the few leadership positions available to women in patriarchal societies.<sup>14</sup> Beyond the cultural and religious authority of the role, he also says that women have taken pleasure and pride in the awe that their emotional prowess and seemingly shamanic dialogues with the dead can inspire. Holst-Warhaft, studying Greek lament and literature, confirms that even today, although it is a dwindling art, women are often still "the self-appointed mourners of the dead, composing and singing laments to express their grief and often their rage at losing their loved ones".<sup>15</sup> Elaborating on the apparent gender difference in the genre, she says that while men and women both weep in societies, "it is women who seem to be able to turn weeping into a controlled, often contemplative lament".<sup>16</sup> It is also her observation that, "in many cultures, men's weeping tends to be inarticulate and violent. Women's weeping, on the other hand, is in many cultures transmuted into prolonged improvised singing".<sup>17</sup> Having said this, women's laments tend to allow for extreme passion, even violence, so that the

holding form, the structure to the song itself, will often quiver, verging on collapse. Dillon, speaking with regard to female laments from ancient Greece, reasons men's generally passive involvement as follows:

*Despite various funerary legislations, it is clear that men, themselves emotionally 'crippled' by excessive societal constraints, and unable to participate fully in the dynamics of the funeral, looked to women to provide the effective mourning for the dead, to give them their due, and provide fitting tribute for the deceased, to provide for the one being buried what men could not or were not willing to offer: a dramatic and fitting funeral which expressed the depth of feeling of those left behind. Spectacular if perhaps unsettling, these groups of women who, weeping, singing and beating their breasts, lacerating their faces and tearing at their hair, processed from the house of the deceased to the cemetery, made it their business to express their grief and sense of loss, effectively denied, if not at Athens then definitely elsewhere, Perikles' admonition to show quiet grief in the face of heroic, glorious bereavement. It was almost a duty for women to ensure that the most awful and unavoidable of consequences of human mortality would not pass off quietly.<sup>18</sup>*

The presence and importance of these lamenters in Ancient Greek life is clear from what Dillon also identifies as their regular portrayal in geometric art of the Homeric period, as well as Athenian black-figure plaques, funerary vases and terracotta figures from 650-480 BC - artefacts that would have featured alongside

14. Lutz, T. (1999) *Crying: the Natural and Cultural History of Tears*, New York, W.W.Norton & Company Inc, p. 276-286.

15. Holst-Warhaft, G. (1992) *Dangerous Voices: Women's Laments and Greek Literature*, London, Routledge, p.3.

16. *Ibid*, p.20.

17. *Ibid*, p.21.

18. Dillon, M. (2002) *Girls and Women in Classical Greek Religion*, London, Routledge, p.292.



Julie Robson and Dawn Albinger in *The Quivering*, a meditation on death and dying by the performance trio Sacred COW. Photo: Marlene Ramirez Cancio

the aforementioned funeral iconography of the soul-singing Sirens.

### Features of lament

The features of lamentation styles are culturally specific. Particular protocols for these vocal ceremonies may vary considerably from village to village and province to country. Yet in reviewing various anthropological and ethnographic studies common features or motifs can be distinguished.<sup>19</sup>

Laments will usually have a basic melodic structure, including chorus and refrains, which can be coloured by a large

repertoire of local phrases, history, poetry, prose and imagery. The structure remains loose enough so that improvisation and creative interpretation personalise the particular occasion. Most often sung without musical accompaniment, soloists and chorus members interject stylised cries, sobs, wails and screams, and physical gestures for dramatic pathos and emotional ornamentation. These ornamentations can swell and heighten at various points of the funeral ceremony, such as the witnessing or removal of the corpse. The ecstatic vocality and passion of wept song, an indeterminate

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19. Exemplary studies include: Alexiou, M. (1974) *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition*, England, Cambridge University Press; Feld, S. (1990) *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics, and Song in Kaluli Expression*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press; Holst-Warhaft, op cit; Lutz, op cit; Seremtakis, N. (1991) *The Last Word: Women, Death, and Divination in Inner Mani*, Chicago, University of Chicago.

mix of language and wordless sound, is designed to be contagious and moving, functioning to rally and intensify feelings of grief, anxiety and dread.

Driving forces behind the keening and ululating vary. It may be to commune with the deceased, to receive their blessing, to send them on and away, or simply to sing the journey of life and death. Within the pattern and polyphony of laments, certain pitches and tonal qualities may be prescribed, and, as a way of enhancing the acoustic power and emotional performance, the singing weepers may draw directly from their own experiences of bereavement or oppression, which could be entirely unrelated to the deceased person. Often the endings to laments are left open-ended, sensed collectively by the group dynamic and the level of catharsis acquired.

Laments can be noisy events. In the case of Inner Mani traditions, "the acoustics of death embodied in screaming and lamenting and the presence or 'appearance' (*fanérosi*) of kin construct the 'good death'. The silent death is the asocial 'bad death' without kin support. 'Screaming the dead' counters the isolation of death".<sup>20</sup> Highlighting the pitch of fervour that can be reached, self-mutilation may also feature in lament, with the singer making physically explicit the psychic and existential trauma of loss. An anthropologist describes a lamenting Bororo mother of Brazil as, "weeping and wailing and jibbering in a low, squeaky voice which was almost gone, her body emaciated, covered with gashes and besmeared with blood".<sup>21</sup>

### Regulation and denigration of lament

Although Moslems, Jews, Christians, and other religious groups once carefully preserved the lament tradition, ritualised mourning is now heard only in remote pockets of the world, such as non-urban, isolated societies. As Caraveli-Chaves regrets, "a mother or grandmother who still laments for the dead constitutes an embarrassing admission of primitivism".<sup>22</sup> Researchers agree that the survival of the practice has been greatly hampered by the demise of village life in favour of cities, the rise of the middle classes, as well as prohibitions from the church and state. Other factors include the veiling of death by its medicalisation and hospitalisation. The consequence of this cultural shift has meant a diminished language with which to discuss death - verbal, musical, gesture or otherwise. Laments sublimation and decline is congruent with the lack of social channels for an authentic expression of personal and communal grief.

Negotiating what constitutes 'sufficient mourning' is a culturally and politically mediated act<sup>23</sup> and, at various points of history, clashing ideas and values on appropriate customs have led to the control or denigration of female lamentation. During 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, for example, the chief magistrate Solon attempted to domesticate and contain the 'barbaric' practice, prescribing legislation in Athens and other regional cities to control women's zealous and spectacular displays of mourning. Under his rule lamenters were prevented from extravagant gestures of grief, such as lacerating their cheeks or crying for too

20. Seremetakis, op cit. p.101.

21. Cited in Lutz, op cit., p.217.

22. Caraveli-Chaves, A. (1980), "Bridge between Worlds: The Greek Woman's Lament as Communicative Event", in *Journal of American Folklore*, no. 93, pp. 129-157.

23. Lutz, op cit., p.211.

long, and performances were restricted to hours between sunset and sunrise.<sup>24</sup> Women's weeping songs were perceived as a genuine threat to the social order, with revenge laments supposedly infectious enough to incite criminal violence. Laments have also been feared as "magic songs", and women were seen as the witches who could "open up perilous channels of communication between the living and the dead".<sup>25</sup> The significance of this is that:

*Such a dialogue with the dead places a certain power in the hands of women... In a patriarchal society where women are consistently undervalued, lament gives women, who, both as child-bearers and mid-wives already have a certain control over birth, potential authority over the rites of death.*<sup>26</sup>

Throughout history, lamenters across the world once praised for their ennobling and cathartic effects have also been accused of indulgence, insincerity and profiteering. The blatant performativity of emotion that may successfully function to establish the cultural forum for grief has been mis/construed as a deceptive, imitative act only, utilising false and inauthentic gestures, a "placebo".<sup>27</sup> The profession has been further debased by the general mistrust of the strong emotion that laments elicit - the very attitude of Plato who advised restraint when listening to the affecting poets who let us be carried away by our feelings.

This demise, regulation and denigration of lamentation can be seen to mirror four strongly held cultural fears. As established thus far, there is the fear of death itself,

which lamentation openly addresses. Secondly, there is also a fear, or resentment, of the power accorded to the women who control this profound event. The third anxiety concerns the mistrust of the lament's performativity and the destabilising and intense emotions it elicits. To add to this, a fourth misgiving rests with the negativity associated with female sound itself. As Seremetakis explains, "the vocality of women, the signs of dreaming and warning, the signs of death itself, are wild", leading to the social perception that, "they must be subjected to domestication through silencing or low voicing".<sup>28</sup> This is how Anne Carson perceives Solon's oppressive laws for female lament, as "the need to purify civic spaces of such pollution".<sup>29</sup> In her view, juxtaposed to "good" sounds - rhetoric that maintains the order and equilibrium of civil life - the "putrefying" acoustics of the "weaker, moister, vanquished sex" have become associated with the hysterical and regressive. Characterised as lacking control, laments have at times been valued as little more than degenerative, empty babble.

### **The torch singer as contemporary lamenter**

While the traditional female lamenter in contemporary urban post-modernity may not appear to exist, the Tin Pan Alley of the 1920s perhaps saw the lamenter reincarnated as the torch singer, a sentimental vocalist with a repertoire of suicidal blues numbers and commentaries on lost love. Pickering's thesis argues that the torch singer and her melancholy song are intimately linked to the Siren archetype as both

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24. Dillon, op cit., p.271.

25. Caraveli-Chaves, op cit., p.130.

26. Holst-Warhaft, op cit. p.3.

27. Lutz, op cit., p.200

28. Seremetakis, op cit., p.57.

29. Carson, A. (1995) *Glass, Irony and God*, New York, New Directions Books; p.127.

of these singers invite listeners to experience an impassioned way of being.<sup>30</sup> The torch singer is most like the Siren, and it may also be said the classical lamenter, in that the anguish and ardour articulated by the voice characterises the excessiveness, sentimentality and soulfulness that is the emotional terrain of those in grief. Like lamentation, torch singing is not a style exclusive to women, but it is widely recognised as a female vocal genre. The link with traditional lamentation is not so tenuous when considering that torch songs have a strong religious heritage in sacred Jewish music, the wailing of the synagogue cantorial and Yiddish singing style. Like sacred hymns for the dead, torch songs are a requiem to what is tragically lost. The transition in cultural icons - the demise of the lamenter and rise of the torch singer - is perhaps reflective of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's pivot away from religious orthodoxy and its customs.

## THEORISING SIRENS AND LAMENT

### The liminal voice

The torch singer, like the lamenter, does not attempt to distance the ache of abandonment nor apologise for an intensity or too-muchness. Her doleful sound offers catharsis and the location of meaning through suffering. Rather than self-indulgent or narcissistic, the singer is creatively engaged in cultural service, giving voice to emergency, directly and authentically honouring the painfully real. This basis of the crying song finds resonance with Salecl's theorisation of Siren singing, which, framed by Lacanian psychoanalysis, proposes the following:

*The past in the Sirens' song has not yet been symbolised, it has not become a memory; such an un-symbolised past is traumatic for the listener, since it evokes something primordial, something between nature and culture that the subject does not want to remember. And for Odysseus, it becomes essential to symbolise his encounter with the Sirens and to form a narrative about them... He is thus obliged to form a memory of his encounter with the Sirens, i.e. to cover up the trauma that they present.*<sup>31</sup>

The vocality of the Siren or the lamenting singer is thus dangerous, unbearable, or transgressive because it does not seek to cover or symbolise trauma but rather, in its all-consuming excess and presence, admits it, confronts it, and attempts to bind one to it. In the case of the torch singer, "she does not flee relationship or the painful emotions brought about by the loss of relationship. It is through her staying with, and binding to the experience, the pain, and the suffering that she finds meaning".<sup>32</sup> Similarly, the immediacy and tragedy infused into traditional laments is designed not only to be alarming but also bonding for bereaved performers and listeners.

In this context it is interesting to note Freud's idea of "cathartic therapy", a method based on returning to the traumatic moment. Aimed at purging rather than repressing pain and subsequent hysteria, it is otherwise known as the "talking cure", a rationally articulated discourse firmly underpinned by language and narrative. In contrast, the vocal poetics of sung-wept thoughts and feelings of lament evoke and traverse an un-symbolised realm, only semi-reliant on the formalising principles of

30. Pickering, G. (1999) *The Torch Singer: a Depth Psychology Study*, unpublished doctoral thesis, California, Pacifica Graduate Institute.

31. Salecl, R. (1998) *(Per)versions of Love and Hate*, New York, Verso; p.63.

32. Pickering, op cit., p.376.

logos, language and narrative. Crying with text, tears and melody transcends the symbolic order. For Lacan, *knowledge in the real*, that which resists symbolisation, is also termed *drive*, thus Salecl interprets Odysseus' confrontation with the Sirens as a metaphor for the deadly exposure with this form of 'cultured' animality.<sup>33</sup> Like an anthropomorphic Siren, who hovers between the physicality of a woman and an animal, the sound of lament is provocative because it is at once controlled and uncontrolled, acceptable and unacceptable. As Engh argues, this comes across as problematic or unsettling in that "the voice is at the site at which, in the distinction between the cry and the song, the human and the inhuman are differentiated in a state of perennial irresolution".<sup>34</sup> With female lament, boundaries quaver:

*Open wounds, the open female mouth that screams and improvises moiroloi (songs of fate), and metaphors of birthing, form a symbolic continuum, the official cartography of the female body. These are thresholds, limens, points of entry and exit where the outside and the inside - fate, truth, and the social order - meet in disordering contact.*<sup>35</sup>

The deadliness of Siren vocality thus resides in the quivering, in its quality of the liminal and ambiguous.

### Listening to desire

It may also be argued that reflected in the unresolved sung-wept cry is not only the

revelation of trauma but of desire. Crying songs can signal "our desire to turn back time, redeem loss", says Lutz, "as well as the bitter knowledge of the impossibility of that desire".<sup>36</sup> Salecl, pursuing this idea in the Siren myth, inverts Odysseus' victory: "That Odysseus escaped the Sirens is commonly understood as a triumph; however, it can also be understood as his failure to confront and pursue his desire".<sup>37</sup> This may be cause for a sad song in itself, another reason perhaps why the Sirens tunefully weep when the noble warrior passes, for as the philosopher Adorno has suggested, the invulnerable Odysseus is comparable to a prisoner: "The prisoner is present at a concert, an inactive eavesdropper like later concert goers, and his spirited call for liberation fades like applause".<sup>38</sup> Strapped to the mast of reason, he is unwilling to risk the destabilisation of the ego, listening only momentarily to the invitation to know himself.

### Acoustic bridges to otherness

The lament's purpose and effect, like the Siren song, is to bind. The performance of public mourning binds the community with collective sorrow, the bereaved to the trauma of loss, and the self to its keenly felt desire. As well as binding, it may also be seen as bridging. The sound of the cry is present at birth and at death when separation is experienced most acutely. In essence, the cry exists as a bridge, extended like an invitation to know the experience of another. The analogy of a "bridge between

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33. Salecl, R. (1998) op. cit., p.59-63.

34. Engh, B. (1994) "Adorno and the Sirens: Tele-phono-graphic Bodies" in *Embodied Voices: Representing Female Vocality in Western Culture*, eds. L. Dunn, and N. Jones, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press; p.134.

35. Seremtakis, op cit.; p.121.

36. Lutz, op cit.; p.22.

37. Salecl, op cit.; p.68.

38. *ibid.*

worlds" is used consistently amongst researchers when describing the power and function of women's lament. The confrontation with the Sirens may then be read as an invitation to experience 'otherness', their lamentations triggering what Adorno calls "the gesture of release", and the vivification of unfamiliar realms:

*Music and tears open the lips and set the arrested human being free... The human being who surrenders himself to tears and to a music which no longer resembles him in any way permits that current of which he is not a part and which lies behind the dam restraining world of phenomena to flow back into itself. In weeping and singing he enters into an alienated reality.<sup>39</sup>*

Significantly, in not succumbing to the sound of the Sirens, Odysseus resists the bridge to otherness that offers him the experience of an alternative way of knowing and being.

### **The voluptuousness of grief**

Odysseus does not submit to the Siren song as it is deemed a trick. Similarly, lamentation, or the emotional indulgence of the torch singer, has been labelled duplicitous, a false alarm that misleads the noble mind into dangerous, uncharted, emotional depths. It is derided as a magical enchantment of the senses that is merely a deluded and elusive understanding of a more difficult and true reality. Yet an aroused state of mourning and grief impels surrender, demanding the release of mind over matter. And just as there is an infamous pleasurable quality to the Siren song, there is also a sublime and aphrodisiac quality to this corporeal release. Psychic pain is soothed by

dissolving into tears, shuddering with sobs, overflowing with feeling, and this concept was well known to the Greeks. Socrates noted the amorousness of lamentation, describing it as, "pains of the soul itself yet replete with immense pleasures". Euripides, in *The Trojan Women* (415 B.C.) wrote, "... how good are tears, how sweet the dirges, / I would rather sing dirges than eat or drink". Physiologically, the catharsis might be explainable by the interconnectedness of the body's pain and pleasure tracts and their relationship to the parasympathetic nervous system. But, however it is justified, the pleasure accorded to the Sirens in this context may be seen as the voluptuousness of grief.

Utilising the sublime language of tears and song, women's sung-wept laments give body to the mythological vocality of the Sirens. These 'songs of knowledge' offer us the revelation of our trauma and desire, experienced as an altered, sensory, corporeal enveloping. Thus it not surprising that the extreme fear and pleasure accorded to the Siren myth and the female voice continues to endure.

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39. Adorno cited in Engh, op cit.; p.134.