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The Neo-mythological Novel: Re-writing the Epic in Contemporary British Fiction

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Introduction

In 2018, Boris Johnson's position as a trustee of the charity 'Classics for All' was suspended due to his inflammatory remarks on the wearing of burqas by Muslim women (Adams 2018). While perhaps only one moment in Johnson's chequered career, this incident reveals something of the role classical studies has played in the culture wars raging in the first quarter of the twenty-first century. After attending Eton and studying Classics at Balliol College, Oxford, Johnson had been a champion of the classics, but his several references to ancient Greece and Rome can be aligned to his belief in the preservation of class hierarchies based on the limited access of a privileged few to such markers of cultural capital. As Charlotte Higgins has noted, Johnson's classical allusions are actually 'flicks of show-offery, projections of superiority, mere flourishes that remind us that geeky Greekery is part of brand Boris' (Higgins 2019: n.p.). Implicitly recognized in the name 'Classics for All', however, the aim of the charity is to broaden and democratize the subject and make it more accessible to a modern, mainstream audience, an ambition put in jeopardy by Johnson's divisive remarks.[1]

British literary fiction has not been blind to this contest over the cultural positioning of classical literature (and education). Indeed, a discernible trend is the rise of novels that take classical literature as the basis for contemporary rewrites. In particular, ancient Greek literature has provided a popular source for British novelists in works such as Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* (2018) and *The Women of Troy* (2021), Natalie Haynes's *The Children of Jocasta* (2017) and *A Thousand Ships* (2019), Hannah Lynn's *Athena's Child* (2020), Daisy Johnson's *Everything Under* (2018) and Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* (2017), all of which have sought to re-examine classical Greek characters, narratives and themes

from a modern perspective. This growth is in one respect a response to similar trends in international literature and culture, especially in north America, including Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005), Margaret Miller's *The Song of Achilles* (2012) and *Circe* (2018) and Daniel Mendelsohn's *Odyssey: A Father, a Son and an Epic* (2017). Allied to this is the prominence of popular culture figures who have brought classical literature to new audiences such as Stephen Fry in his series of books: *Mythos* (2017), *Heroes* (2019) and *Troy* (2020); stand-up comedian and author Natalie Haynes in her BBC Radio 4 Show, 'Natalie Haynes Stands Up for the Classics', and Mary Beard in TV documentary series such as 'Meet the Romans with Mary Beard'. It could also be said that the return to a mythical past can be seen as a driving force in other popular television fantasy series of the 2010s such as *A Game of Thrones* (2011–19), itself an adaptation of George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Fire and Ice* series (1996–2011), as well as other series during this period that specifically cite classical narratives such as *Atlantis* (2013–15); *Troy: Fall of a City* (2018); *Britannia* (2017–); *American Gods* (2017–21) and *Domina* (2021–2023).

Of course, classical allusion and intertextual references are nothing new: from Shakespeare's classical history plays to Joyce's *Ulysses* and the reliance on classical reference in much modernist poetry of the early twentieth century (Eliot, Pound, Aldington, H.D.), but there is something distinct about this most recent reconfiguration of contemporary fiction and classical literature. In this chapter, in what is the first sustained study of what I term the neo-mythological novel, I want to read this new category of contemporary fiction with respect to two main areas. First, as a development and combination of a series of other literary-critical trends in the longer contemporary period stretching back to (at least) the 1990s: the neo-Victorian and neo-historical novel; the concept of metamodernism; the focus on historiographic metafiction as a characteristic of postmodern literary practice; the popularity of magic realism; and the intersection of popular genres with so-called 'serious' literary fiction. Second, these novels consciously promote the use of epic and mythological sources as a way to engage with a number of contemporary social, cultural and political concerns of the last decade or so, namely feminist revisions of past classics in the wake of the #MeToo campaign; increased LGBTQ+ awareness and continued campaigns against homophobia as well as a cultural focus on transgender identities and experiences; the popularization of critical race theory in response to movements such as Black Lives Matter, the Windrush scandal, decolonizing the curriculum, and an increased awareness of black history (including British involvement in the transatlantic slave trade); and a renewed interest in working-

class culture driven by increased inequalities due to a decade of austerity. These topics have direct relevance to the readings I make in this chapter of four novels that appeared within two years of each other in the latter half of the 2010s: Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* (2018), Haynes's *The Children of Jocasta* (2017), Shamsie's *Home Fire* (2017) and Johnson's *Everything Under* (2018). Before discussing them, however, I want to expand on some of the trends in literary and cultural studies informing the new genre.

One of the key categories of British fiction over the last forty years or so has been the neo-historical novel, itself a development of what Linda Hutcheon (1988) defines as 'historiographic metafiction', a body of writing that has formed distinct sub-categories such as the neo-Victorian, the neo-Georgian, the neo-Edwardian, and the neo-Tudor.[2] The neo-historical is difficult to pin down, but Elodie Rousselot (2014) defines it as a tension in the 'reimagining of the past', which 'on the one hand [. . .] strives for a high degree of historical accuracy, while on the other [. . .] is conscious of the limitations of that project. The mode of verisimilitude employed by the neo-historical novel therefore confirms its simultaneous attempt *and* refusal to render the past accurately' (4). Influenced by postmodern suspicions towards truth claims in traditional history writing, she stresses the temporal duality of the new form that is simultaneously aware of its duty to readdress the past while at same time recognizing the limitations of its own textuality. Similarly, Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn (2010), in focusing on the specific category of the neo-Victorian novel, make the distinction that:

> whereas 'historical fiction' encompasses within its title a notion of the fictional imagination, neo-Victorianism is potentially able to be interpreted as offering a different sense of the historical imaginary, and one which can be seen not only as imitating or mimicking an earlier style or mode, but also as seeking to inherit its position and in some senses displace its precursor.
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> Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 15

Rousselot and Heilmann and Llewellyn are keen to stress the potential of neo-Victorian fiction to interrogate the ideologies and structures of feeling of the Victorian period through the lens of contemporary ways of thinking and attitudes to whole series of cultural-political contexts, such as gender, class, race and sexuality. Nick Hubble (2015: 170–176), for example, in the 1990s volume of the Decades series, identifies the ways in which much neo-Victorian fiction of the 1990s was invested in interrogating Thatcherite rhetoric of championing the return of 'Victorian values'. One of the distinctions that all these critics draw attention to is the tension between neo-historical fiction's attempt to replicate

the voice, tone, style and structures of feeling of the period in which the fiction is set and a self-conscious sensitivity to the cultural and ideological sensibilities of their moment of publication. It is in this context, that I want to argue the neo-mythological novel has a distinctive contribution to the genre. In many ways, the retellings of ancient Greek narratives represented in the novels discussed in this chapter correspond to the general approach in the neo-historical to readdress and revise the past. As we shall see, the novels discussed here all succeed in critiquing attitudes to marginalized identities in the most famous iterations of the classical myths they draw upon. In a formal sense, therefore, the neo-mythological novel can be seen as another subsection of the neo-historical. The difference, of course, is that the focus in the originating texts on myth rather than history represents a differing ontological position; whereas the neo-historical novel can claim a certain understanding of an actual set of events (however far postmodernism complicated the notion of any sense of authentic access to the 'material reality' of the past) there is no serious recourse to fact against which the neo-mythological can be judged. Indeed, the classical era has since the Renaissance been regarded as a touchstone for permanence and essentialism rather than for historical specificity. Greek drama, epic and poetry still carry a sense of capturing certain essences of humanity that transcend time. This aspect of their cultural reception is intriguing for a period in which, following the credit crunch, fears about the permanence of Western capitalism, and various profound political divisions (such as Brexit in the UK and the Trump presidency in the US) has seen uncertainty and precarity prosper. Indeed, in a contemporary moment when truth seems to be a precarious concept, perhaps there's solace to be found in revisiting older narratives that seem to carry with them some sense of permanence. For the generation on the other side of postmodernism, the mythological, somewhat paradoxically, seems to replace the historical as the repository for truths about the human condition.

However, what is also apparent in the contemporary novels discussed in this chapter is that they combine a fascination with the exalted essentialism of the mythical with the suspicious irreverence of the more mundane modes of realism and/or the comedic. An interesting thing happens when reading these contemporary adaptations of myth: the conventions of the realist novel begins to impinge on the claims to the transcendent made by the epic. Of particular interest are the moments when a destabilizing fracture occurs between the mythic certainties and the attempt to convey a narrative through recourse to verisimilitude with respect to motivation and character. At such moments, a textual fissure destabilizes the reader's position vis-à-vis the characters and

events with which they are engaging. This is an ontological rupture: how can we trust these quotidian, reliable narrators when they too are subject to the divine intervention of the gods? Adapting Hutcheon, we can think of these novels as producing a form of 'mythographic metafiction', an attempt to portray a realistic (and modern) set of ethical positions in a form in which the realism is always under threat of slipping into the non-realism of the mythic and supernatural. Hutcheon (1988) describes historiographic metafiction as a form of writing that, 'refutes the natural or common-sense methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction [. . .] by questioning the ground of that claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems, and both derive their major claims to truth from that identity' (93). Mythological metafiction does something similar, but slightly different. It also gestures towards truth claims, but these claims are always couched in metaphoric, rather than literal notions of historical accuracy, thus destabilizing the reader's natural inclination to trust the events and characters to which they are introduced.

In this context, we can identify another cultural influence on the rise of the neo-mythological novel: the metamodern. Metamodernism emerged as a critical theory in the early years of the twenty-first century as a way of accounting for both the demise of postmodernism as a viable and still *avant garde* form of literary fiction, (paradoxically undermined by its popularity in the 1990s) and the subsequent need for a new generation of artists and novelists in the new millennium to move beyond a mode that was increasingly seen as passé.[3] For many theorists of the metamodern, however, this new form had not quite arrived. It is thus defined by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker (2010) as an early twenty-first-century trend in aesthetic practice that 'oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity. Indeed, by oscillating to and fro or back and forth, the metamodern negotiates between the modern and the postmodern' (5–6). In their formulation, the metamodern registers an attitudinal cultural and aesthetic shift that rejects the radical scepticism and irony of postmodernism while retaining some of its questioning attitudes to received discourses of power. In this formulation, the metamodern retains the power to distinguish between sincere and broadly accurate accounts of the past and the nihilistic excesses of an abandonment of all truth claims. This promise of a new sincerity is always under threat of buckling under poststructuralist textuality and the constructedness of all discourses, but it can carve out an authentic

foothold in the movement between the sincere and the ironic: 'Metamodernism moves for the sake of moving, attempts in spite of its inevitable failure; it seeks forever for a truth that it never expects to find' (5). This power to oscillate between truth and scepticism is particularly conducive to the way in which myth operates in the neo-mythological novel in its ready acceptance of timeless, essential poetic truths revealed through a set of narratives and characters that also resonate in a realist frame. This looking backwards to myth in order to reveal truths in the present is also at play in David James and Urmila Seshagiri's (2014) identification of metamodernism as a discernible trend in contemporary fiction that circumvents postmodernism's scepticism through a return to modernist techniques associated with the early part of the twentieth century. As they argue 'Metamodernism's value [. . .] lies in the ambition that unifies its otherwise varied artistic and historical positions: to reassess and remobilize narratives of modernism' (89). This remobilization is registered in a focus on both the stylistic and historical concerns of modernism in that it offers: 'a critical practice balanced between an attention to the textures of narrative form and an alertness to the contingencies of historical reception'.[4] This is reminiscent of attitudes to the mythopoetic adopted in much modernist writing of the early twentieth century, for example, in Eliot's celebration of classical allusions as fragments 'shored against [the] ruins' of the fallen present, and Joyce's mock-heroic transubstantiation of the epic Odysseus myth to the quotidian streets of turn-of-the-century Dublin. One of the key features of modernist literary practice is the use of intertextual references to classical and mythical characters and narratives as a way to critique a debased modernity. The recent trend for the neo-mythological novel can then in some ways be seen as a subcategory of James and Seshagiri's neo-modernism. However, as we shall see in the discussion of the selected examples in this chapter, the neo-mythological novel is not interested in merely maintaining a reverence for the cultural capital of its classical intertexts or of holding up a classical golden age to a tawdry present. It is also keen to interrogate the ideological discourses embedded in those classical precursors.

Indeed, as suggested at the opening of this chapter, it is in the context of the culture wars of the 2010s that the neo-mythological novel is provided with some distinctive angles of intervention. All of the novels discussed in this chapter address, to differing degrees, aspects of identity politics that have been at the heart of these culture wars over the last decade or so. This is achieved through interrogation of and confrontation with the lived ideologies of characters as they bump up against prevailing power structures. Barker's and Haynes's novels, for example, offer feminist revisions of the classical paradigms established in Homer

and Sophocles respectively. Barker's text is also interested in class formations, as is Johnson's *Everything Under*. Barker also examines LGBTQ+ relationships most prominently in the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus (perhaps taking the lead here from American author Madeleine Miller in her *Song of Achilles*). Johnson explores transgender identities through figures associated with Tiresias and her configuration of the character most associated with Oedipus in her contemporary re-telling. Kamila Shamsie offers her retelling of the Antigone narrative through a concentration on race and ethnicity; areas which can also be identified in Barker's examination of slavery in an ancient Greek context. The novels' relationships to their respective mythical intertexts are, therefore, ideologically complex and rich. Clearly the authors are fascinated by the stories in the sources they refer to – Sophocles, Homer, Euripides – but they are also keen to challenge many of the ideological assumptions embedded in their narrative structures and themes. In many ways they adhere to another concept developed by Linda Hutcheon in respect to postmodern historiographic metafiction, that of the 'complicitous critique' in that they celebrate the forms, feel and mood of the classical intertexts, while simultaneously critiquing much of the content (Hutcheon, 1989). This is achieved by defamiliarizing the originating narratives and highlighting aspects of the texts the originals overlooked. For example, in *The Silence of the Girls* the description of the violence presented in *The Iliad* as part of a heroic structure of feeling is defamiliarized through Barker's refraction through a contemporary feminist and class-based lens. This produces an interesting tension between being faithful to the original and wanting to convey a set of ideological considerations that are focused on our own times and therefore speak to contemporary inequalities of gender, class, race and sexuality.

Pat Barker, *The Silence of the Girls* (2018)

Pat Barker's 2018 novel, *The Silence of the Girls*, revisits some of the events contained in Homer's *Iliad* with particular attention to Achilles' feud with Agamemnon. It does so, however, by focalizing through a character that is barely mentioned in Homer's text, Briseis, the queen of Lyrnessus, who becomes Achilles' 'prize' when the Greeks sack her city. Although central to the plot, Briseis is primarily a silent figure in Homer, operating merely as a token in the homosocial rivalry between the two Greek warriors. Through the reclamation of this lost female figure, the novel aims to challenge the concept of the heroic as

presented in the original. As Catherine Lanone (2020) has noted, 'Rather than romance, Barker is interested in the politics of power' (n.p.). This is a formal shift as well as one of content. As part of the examination of the patriarchal and homosocial frameworks of power, Barker replaces the epic with a contemporary realism in her vivid descriptions of the horror and violence of the war especially as it is visited on women.

The opening of the novel clearly sets out Barker's aim to shift the modes: 'Great Achilles. Brilliant Achilles, shining Achilles, godlike Achilles . . . How the epithets pile up. We never called him any of those things; we called him "the butcher"' (2019 [2018]: 3). Much of the novel is told through Briseis' first-person narrative, which acts as a counter-narrative to the official mythologizing of Homer. One scene exemplifies this shift in mode well: Book 9 of *The Iliad* includes a description of Achilles 'giving pleasure to his heart with a clear-voiced lyre [. . .] singing tales of men's glory. Patroklus alone sat opposite him in silence' (Homer 1987: 137).[5] In Barker's version, Briseis and Iphis (Patroclus' wife) are audience to Achilles' performance and occasionally contribute to the conversation (2019: 55–57). Achilles' songs, which 'were all about deathless glory, heroes dying on the battlefield or (rather less often) returning home in triumph' and are 'stirring tales of courage and adventure' (56) are specifically gendered; as Briseis notes, she remembers many of them from her childhood, but 'the songs belonged to my brothers' (57). Later, Alcimus and Automedon play songs to Achilles during a drinking party which are all 'about battles, about the exploits of great men. These were the songs Achilles loved, the songs that had made him' (296). These songs are designed to romanticize war and to carry to future generations the codes of masculinity embedded in heroic deeds. While listening to them, Briseis reflects: '*We're going to survive* – our *songs*, our *stories*. *They'll never be able to forget us*.' (296, italics in the original). It would seem, therefore, it is the very power the songs have to convey the heroism of war that allow them to transcend their historical moment.

However, Briseis' narrative is invested in trying to undermine that power. Towards the end of the text, she writes, '*We need a new song*.' (314, italics in the original). This sense of newness is about form as much as content, and Briseis' narrative is presented in a form of realism that attempts to wrest control over the narrative away from the (masculine) epic tradition. The possibility of achieving a mark of relative freedom within the narrative, however, is fraught and Briseis seems to admit defeat towards the end of the novel: 'Looking back, it seemed to me I'd been trying to escape not just from the camp, but from Achilles' story; and I'd failed. Because make no mistake, this was his story – *his* anger, *his* grief, *his*

story' (297). Achilles' narrative proves to be difficult to resist, but it is significant that Briseis survives, while Achilles does not. As Lanone argues, 'Briseis becomes the voice of communal memory, retrieving the tales of silenced women, both famous and forgotten ones' (2020: n.p.). It is in this textual freedom that Briseis' narrative stands as testimony against the raw patriarchal power of the epic precursor.

Barker's narrative, then, although ostensibly *about* Achilles, serves to deconstruct the image of the nobility and honour of war on which his reputation is built. She does this by bearing testimony to the physical (and, in particular, sexual) violence on which this 'heroic' narrative is dependent. Briseis' role is to de-romanticize the narratives by providing a realist counter-narrative to the mythologizing aspects of Achilles' songs and stories. As Emilie Walezak (2021) has noted, the modes of epic and realism are broadly divided between the passages that describe Achilles and Briseis' first-person narrative respectively. There is, however, slippage between these two modes, especially in the later sections of the novel when the balance between the everyday and the supernatural moves Barker to a contemporary form that her previous novels have rarely approached, that of magic realism.[6] After the realistic frame has been firmly established through Briseis' account, the existential frame shifts when Achilles' mother, the goddess Thetis, returns to soothe the guilt-stricken Achilles after the death of his lover Patroclus. This point occurs around two-thirds into the text and is presented through a third-person narration focalized through Achilles, in a break from the first-person account of Briseis. This intrusion of the supernatural into what the reader has come to accept as a predominantly (secular) realist mode captures the sense of wonder at the appearance of the mythopoetic into the quotidian lives of the soldiers:

> What do they [the Greeks] see? A tall man standing on a parapet with the golden light of early evening catching his hair? No, of course they don't. They see the goddess Athena wrap her glittering aegis round his shoulders; they see flames thirty feet high springing from the top of his head. What the Trojans saw isn't recorded. The defeated go down in history and disappear, and their stories die with them.
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> Barker 2019: 206

Often the descriptions of the supernatural are left ambiguous; for example, when Achilles encounters Patroclus' ghost, it is left unclear whether this is a real intrusion into the ontological frame of the narrative, or a projection of Achilles' guilty imagination. There are moments, however, when Briseis' realism

corroborates the existence of the divine in what we might think of as the material or lived experience of all the characters in the novel, for example, in the sections that describe Briseis preparing Hector's body after he has been killed by Achilles, where she too accepts the effects of the supernatural. The repeated renewal of Hector's body after each occurrence of the severe damage inflicted upon it by Achilles sets out the magic realist parameters of the text. As Briseis notes, 'I was still finding it difficult to believe in the miraculous preservation of Hector's body' (271). This cognitive dissonance is caused by the tension between the narrative modes of realism and the epic, a tension that lies at the heart of the text's exploration of the relationship between modernity and the ancients.

A key theme in the novel that also foregrounds the tension between the realistic and the epic is Barker's de-mythologizing of the romance of war. One of her approaches in this context is to show how violence is normalized during war, and how barbaric behaviour is incorporated into the everyday lived realities of those caught up in it. This can be seen in the several matter-of-fact descriptions of violence, such as when Briseis summarizes a recent campaign by the Greeks: 'Another successful raid, another city destroyed, men and boys killed, women and girls enslaved – all in all, a good day' (26–27). Or when on her first night in captivity, Briseis comments, 'He fucked as quickly as he killed, and for me it was the same thing' (28). Achilles is particularly immersed in this lived ideology of nonchalant violence; as Odysseus tells Achilles when trying to coax him back to the battlefield, 'Fighting. You know you can't get enough of it. It's who you are' (155). Catherine Lanone has argued that in this aspect of the novel, Barker draws parallels between the fighting in *The Silence of the Girls* with her depiction of the First World War in her earlier Regeneration Trilogy (1991–1995). During the height of battle, Briseis engages in helping the wounded in scenes that are certainly redolent of her descriptions of the First World War in her earlier work. In this section of *The Silence of the Girls*, the heroism and valour of war is undercut by references to its horror and brutality registered in the field hospitals where 'there was a constant buzzing of bluebottles [. . .] and shouts and screams from some of the patients' and where 'more men died of infection [. . .] than from loss of blood' (138). The context of war, here, is framed with respect to an essentialist recognition of the perpetual power dynamics in terms of age, youth and patriarchy; as Breisis notes: 'so many of these men were very young, some of them hardly more than boys – and for every one who was gung-ho and desperate to fight there was another who didn't want to be there at all' (139). Later in the text Achilles meets Lycaon, Priam's son, in an encounter that references Wilfred Owen's 'Strange Meeting': 'one springs up and stares with piteous recognition in

fixed eyes [. . .] *Friend*, it says' (243).[7] The novel also registers modern attitudes amongst the rank and file of soldiers to the wars; as one of the wounded notes 'How many generals do you see here? [. . .] *No*, they're all too bloody busy leading from the rear' (141). As well as linking between the Trojan Wars and the First World War, the neo-mythological frames of the text also gesture towards the contemporary moment, and discussion of the non-heroic realities of war must be taken in the context of the 2010s, especially as more and more (filmic and textual) accounts of the experiences of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq began to circulate in the Western cultural consciousness.[8]

One of the other ways the novel undermines the epic is in reading the experience of war against modern medical and psychological knowledge about trauma. There are two specific examples in the novel of characters suffering from what contemporary psychologists would identify as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, the first after Briseis and the other women are subjected to watching their family members being killed before being enslaved by Agamemnon's forces; and second, in the description of Achilles' response to watching the death of his lover Patroclus. Indeed, much of the first sections of the novel are taken up describing Briseis' experiences of her city being sacked by the Achaeans, including witnessing her fourteen-year-old brother being killed by Achilles. In the period after this, she is presented as suffering from psychological symptoms associated with PTSD including depression, 'to my exhausted mind everything sounded like a battle, just as there was no colour in the world but red' (30); and nightmares, 'Again and again, behind my closed lids, I watched my youngest brother die' (31). Reminiscent of Cathy Caruth's identification of the way trauma is intimately related to memory and repetition, Briseis suffers from flashbacks and a disorientation of time. Caruth (1996) argues that the 'double wound' in trauma narratives of the initial experience and its repetition disrupts a forward trajectory and locks sufferers into an endless cycle. As she writes: 'At the core of these [trauma] stories [. . .] is thus a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival' (7). This chimes with aspects of Briseis' experience; in the immediate days after the violent attack on her city, she notes, 'Time played curious tricks too; expanding, contracting, burrowing back into itself in the form of memories more vivid than daily life' (37), and she laments, 'I wish I could forget it, but I can't' (14). However, Caruth's model only takes us part way into the representation of trauma in Barker's novel. Caruth's understanding of trauma fixates on the difficulty for the sufferer in moving beyond the traumatic experience because of

its repetition. For Briseis, however, memory can also provide a point of escape. For example, at the moment of her capture she forces her mind back to times in her 'favourite place', an inner courtyard in the palace where 'the sounds of lyres and flutes would drift out on the night air and all the cares of the day would fall away' (21). Ultimately, her memories are used by Briseis to fuel her desire for testimony and resistance; in relation to her brothers she notes, 'As long as I lived and remembered, they weren't entirely dead' (41). The mental resistance to the male violence perpetrated on her is thus a key feature of the novel's feminist revisioning of power and a resistance to the debilitating power of trauma to return the sufferer to the position of victim.

Briseis' narrative can, therefore, be read as a point of resistance against the heroic narrative. Briseis becomes the chronicler of this resistance, formed through her solidarity with her fellow sufferers. When first captured she notes, 'I felt responsible for every woman and child in that room, not to mention the slaves crammed together in the basement' (12). Later, when Chryseis is about to be returned to her father she notes, 'Gazing around, I was filled with warmth – with love, in fact – for all these women who had come to see her off' (104). This solidarity includes everyday acts of resistance and Carnivalesque humour, for example, in the bawdy discussions the women have about sex. As she notes, 'It seems incredible to me now, looking back, that we laughed' (49) when, for example, discussing Agamemnon's preference for the 'back door'; and when the women mock Myron's dead body by waggling his 'poor limp penis [. . .] at the rest of us' causing the slave women to 'hoot with laughter' (87). Later, in response to Tecmessa's ironic reference to the stock phrase 'Silence becomes a woman', she and Briseis suddenly 'burst out laughing, both of us together – not just laughing either, whooping, screeching, gasping for breath, until finally, the men turned to stare at us and Tecmessa stuffed the hem of her tunic into her mouth to gag herself. The laughter ended as abruptly as it had begun [. . .] we were back to our normal selves' (294). This moment of shared, Carnivalesque resistance to the patriarchy, ineffectual of itself, serves to cement a solidarity between the powerless and exploited women. This can again be approached in terms of literary modes where the epic masculine narration is undercut by the comic mode. This realist aspect of the novel connects to a modern audience in a way the epic model is unable to do and also cements Briseis' narrative as testimony to the experiences of the marginalized and unrepresented (mortal) women silenced in Homer's text. As Briseis notes, 'I met a lot of the women, many of them common women whose names you won't have heard' (217). Briseis' narrative steps out of time, here, a feature of much neo-historical fiction. The 'you' she

addresses is the 'you' of modernity, a reader placed after the events, and in its slippage of time, presumably a contemporary audience that, like Walter Benjamin's angel of history, is able to take the long view backwards.

Natalie Haynes, *The Children of Jocasta* (2017)

Intrusion into the epic mode by realism and comedy as part of a feminist revisionism is also at play in Natalie Haynes's work. Haynes's fiction is only one aspect of her career and she became a public figure in the 2010s as a champion of the classics, a comedian and radio broadcaster alongside her work as a novelist. Her fiction, therefore, is part of a wider project to promote a love of the classics in a culture that often sees the academic discipline as a luxury enjoyed by the privileged few secreted away in their ivory towers. Indeed, her novels intervened in a public discourse on the place of classical studies in a twenty-first century British higher education system that has witnessed the subject's removal from many post-92 and plate-glass universities in the UK, leaving the discipline predominantly the reserve of the UK's G5 and Russell Group universities. Control over accessibility to the study of classical literature and culture can also be seen as part of a broader conservative agenda to maintain class hierarchies within British culture. Novels such as Haynes's *The Children of Jocasta* (2017) and *A Thousand Ships* (2019) are attempts, then, to resist this cultural narrative by combining classical literary references with popular fiction and addressing the seriousness of the epic with irreverence of realism and comedy.

One of the consequences of this aim is that Haynes's fiction can be accused of a certain amount of presentism in its attempt to identify (or construct) connections between the structures of feeling revealed in the classical texts and the emotional and intellectual responses from a contemporary audience. Much of Haynes's radio comedy show, *Natalie Haynes Stands Up for Classics* turns on the attempts to neo-mythologize the classics with several jokes turning on the ludicrous presentation of women in classical texts observed from a contemporary audience grounded in an awareness of gender equality. *The Children of Jocasta* is an interesting example of this approach and in this section of the chapter I aim to show how the novel works hard to promote knowledge of classical stories to popular audiences by examining contemporary issues including, in particular, gender politics and the debates circulating around nationalism, and the Brexit crisis of the latter half of the 2010s.

Haynes's novel is divided between two storylines, a generation apart, which are alternated as the novel moves forward. The earlier (chronologically) takes

Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* as its intertext and describes Jocasta's narrative from being first married to Laius, losing her first born son, and then, after Laius' death, her relationship with Oedipus, who, of course is ultimately revealed to be her lost child. This narrative is told in the third person, but primarily focalized through Jocasta. The second narrative is the first-person account of one of Jocasta's daughters, Ismene, and broadly follows the events in Sophocles' *Antigone* charting the feud between Jocasta's two sons with Oedipus, Polyneices and Eteocles, their deaths and the subsequent conflict between Antigone and Creon the siblings' uncle (and Jocasta's brother). In both narratives, Haynes is keen to tell the well-known stories from the perspective of characters who are only given minor parts in Sophocles' original plays by giving centre stage to Ismene and Jocasta.

Ismene is described in terms that resonate with contemporary sensibilities: she has a desire to learn and to have access to levels of education usually associated with men only in the classical sources. Ismene tells us that she has a tutor Sophon (whom Haynes explains in an afterword to the novel is a modern addition) and that she likes to find the 'perfect place to read [. . .] the parchment roll I had taken from my tutor's office' (2018 [2017]: 6). Similarly, Jocasta is given a modern rationality that cuts through the belief in superstition that pervades the classical texts. This can be seen, for example, when she says of her husband Laius after his death, 'It can't make the slightest difference to him now, whether he travels in state or not'. This modern attitude to the departed stands in stark contrast to Antigone's outrage that Eteocles's body is left on the battlefield. This is not just a matter of distinction between character, it is a marker of the text's ability to combine responses to the structures of feeling from two distinct times and cultures.

It is in the context of this historical slippage that the novel's feminist revisionism resides. The text encourages the reader to reflect on the gendered power frameworks embedded in Sophocles, and presumably in the culture from which he emerges, from the perspective of an audience au fait with twenty-first-century feminism. Jocasta is thus outraged by the fact that her father has arranged her marriage to an old man without consulting her in ways that it would be difficult to corroborate from the evidence we have of texts from the period. Jocasta is not told how her marriage was arranged but suspects it was by 'a group of men in a room lit by smoky candles, drawing lots to decide whose daughter would be elevated to royalty' (2018: 13). This image of patriarchy in action is supported by the ideological apparatus that cements power in the form of religious discourse as she is, 'pledged by her father to a man she had never met,

before the eyes of a goddess who had ignored her prayers' (13). Indeed, Jocasta is given a healthy modern scepticism towards the place of religion and superstition in supporting the frameworks of patriarchal power; when presented with the prophecy of the Oracle about her son, she questions it on rational grounds: 'if the Oracle was all knowing, it should really have predicted her dramatic change in circumstances [. . .] she knew that oracles were riddlers, only to be understood by those versed in their opacity, like the priests' (133).[9] As with Barker's *The Silence of the Girls*, there is some slippage here between the modes of a rational realism and the mythological structures of feeling of the classical intertext. It is that she is reluctant (rightly so to a modern secular eye) to believe the Oracle's prophecy that leaves her open to the inevitable trajectory of her tragic narrative.

It is, however, her daughter Ismene who has more agency over the way her story is told establishing her resistance to the absolute patriarchal power to which she is subjected. As she explains to her tutor, Sophon, 'I want to keep a record [. . .] Of what's happening. When we talked before about history, you said I must always bear in mind who composes it' [. . .] So I should compose my own history, shouldn't I? Or it will be lost forever' (73–74). Ismene's role in the narrative is in part to become 'a historian, an astute chronicler of events' (215). It is in this context that Haynes decides to jettison the Sophocles narrative at the end of the text by having Antigone survive Creon and become queen of Thebes, and that Jocasta's suicide by hanging is portrayed as an act of bravery in order to save her family from the plague she realizes she has contracted rather than from the shame of discovering the secret of her incestual relationship with Oedipus. In this way, Haynes's narrative circumvents the tragic mode of Sophocles' version and by analogy shows the strong female characters evading the patriarchal structures imposed upon them. Comedy overcomes tragedy in this retelling, allowing positive futures for Antigone and Ismene and a resistance to the silence they inhabit in Sophocles' text.[10]

Alongside the feminist revision, *The Children of Jocasta* also obliquely comments on the rhetoric of nationhood and isolation at the forefront of public discourse due to the Brexit vote and subsequent crises in play during the period in which the novel was written and published. Haynes develops this contemporary counter-narrative through the theme of plague and how the city has to close its gates and disallow free movement. The return of the 'Reckoning', as the plague is called, makes people nervous of outsiders: 'Thebans wondered if they had made a mistake all those years ago, when they unlocked their gates after closing the city against the first plague to ravage their world' (239). This narrative of isolationism and fear of the outsider echoes rhetoric supporting the Brexit

campaign, as does the focus on market forces (cheap labour) as the cause of immigration. Oedipus, as an outsider from Corinth, is identified as a reason for the decline in the health of the body politic of Thebes: 'He had changed Thebes from fortress to market' (240). This parallel in the text between contemporary contexts and classical references is also echoed in the place of populism in the text. Brexit rhetoric in the latter half of the 2010s was often accused of a politics of populism and the response of the Theban crowd to the political speeches of its rulers in Haynes's novel is reminiscent of this kind of appeal to the mob. The novel also offers an implicit reference to the fact that Brexit had still not been implemented (or fully rejected) at the time the novel was published as suggested in the fact that 'Thebes never did reopen her gates, after two summers of the Reckoning' (323). This aspect of Haynes's narrative is part of her wider strategy to reclaim classical literature for twenty-first-century audiences by making associations to contemporary anxieties and concerns, and in doing so she is sensitive to the contexts against which the classics, like her Antigone, can be resurrected.

Kamila Shamsie, *Home Fire* (2017)

Like Haynes, Kamila Shamsie is keen to revisit the Antigone myth from a contemporary perspective. Indeed, given its focus on the tension between state power and divine justice, *Antigone* is a text that readily transfers to different political situations. In Jean Anouilh's adaptation of the play, first performed in Paris in 1944, there are clear references in its questioning of state authority to the occupying Nazi government as well as to the active resistance movement in France. Similarly, Athol Fugard, Jonn Kani and Winston Ntshona's *The Island*, set in the Maximum Security Prison on Robben Island used for political prisoners during the height of the Apartheid laws in South Africa, helped to promote (especially to an international audience) the injustices of the Apartheid system. The drama focuses on the staging of Antigone in the prison and uses the play within the play to champion moral right above the unjust laws of the state. After its premier in The Space, a theatre in the black townships of Cape Town, it travelled to London and New York and was particularly important in galvanizing international objection to the South African government in the call for the implementation of sanctions.

Kamila Shamsie, in her 2017 novel, *Home Fire* also uses the plotline and characterization of Sophocles' play to explore power relationships associated

with race and ethnicity and in particular the ways in which British Muslims are represented in political discourse and the media in the period after 9/11, the War on Terror and the rise of ISIS. As Ankhi Mukherjee argues, the novel foregrounds 'questions of citizenship, colonialism, and race, in particular in the insider-outsider, civilized-barbaric dichotomies determining paradigms of humanity and modernity in global cities today' (2021: 219). *Home Fire* presents its pressing political concerns through a narrative of family relationships in a way that strikes a balance with *Antigone*'s exploration of the personal with the political and philosophical. In five sections, each told from the perspective of the five main characters, it tells the story of Parvaiz who travels from Britain to Syria to join ISIS, and, after he is killed when trying to leave the group, his sister Aneeka's (the novel's modern equivalent to Antigone) campaign to have her brother's body brought back to Britain. It also gives narrative sections to Aneeka's sister, Isma who has a central role in the affair, Karamat Lone, the newly appointed British Home Secretary (the equivalent of Creon in Sophocles' play), and his son Eamonn (Haemon) who develops a sexual relationship with Aneeka. Through the use of these different (and competing) perspectives the novel draws attention to its mode of telling and thus, as perhaps befitting a 2010s adaptation, offers a metafictional re-engagement with the play's central themes. Shamsie's novel is particularly interested in examining the way in which cultural, political, racial and religious identity is constructed and performed through contemporary media platforms, a theme enhanced by the novel's formal structure.

Although the characters in *Home Fire* can be broadly mapped across to Sophocles' play, there are distinctions; for example, Shamsie's text devotes sections to the characters who parallel Polyneices (Parvaiz) and to Ismene (Isma), both of whom only have minor roles in Sophocles. True to Sophocles' play, however, Shamsie is keen to emphasize the ambiguous characterization of the Antigone figure and her challenge to state power. The novel opens with a clear distinction in character between the passionate Aneeka and her older sister, the more measured Isma, with Aneeka described as someone who 'knew everything about her rights and nothing about the fragility of her place in the world' (2018 [2017], 6). The 'place' referred to involves Aneeka and Isma's double-marginalization, to use Gayatri Spivak's (1988) concept, as Muslim women brought up in Britain and anticipates Aneeka's resistance to that unjust positioning in contrast to Isma's reluctant acceptance. Indeed, one of the key themes in the novel is the differing attitudes taken by each of the central characters to the ways in which Muslim people face prejudice in twenty-first-century Britain. Focalizing the five sections

though each character allows the presentation of the self-justification of each to the ways in which they navigate the social, political and cultural othering of the dominant media representations of Muslims in contemporary Britain. Aneeka's contradictory nature, in particular, is foregrounded; she is 'sharp-tongued and considerate, serious-minded and capable of unbridled goofiness' (23) and it is this mixture of commitment and naivety that is revealed in her display of resistance to the authorities based on her belief in a sense of higher moral right above the laws of state. The novel opens with the two sisters rehearsing imagined encounters with state authorities and it is clear that whereas Isma is willing to comply, Aneeka stresses her desire to show 'at least a tiny bit of contempt for the whole process' (6). It is this courage to stand up for what she thinks is right that eventually makes Aneeka a powerful advocate for the return of her brother's dead body to Britain. As she argues, it is 'because the nation to which they first belonged had proven itself inadequate to the task of allowing them to live with dignity' (215). Here she extends the justification from her personal situation to draw attention to the circumstances that have led to Parvaiz's decision to join ISIS.

In contrast to Aneeka and Parvaiz, Karamat Lone, (the UK Home Secretary) and his son Eamonn champion an integrationist approach to their experience of being a Muslim and living in Britain. Initially father and son are aligned in their attitudes to multiculturalism, summed up in Karamat's advice to British Muslims not to 'set yourselves apart in the way you dress, the way you think, the outdated codes of behaviour you cling to [. . .] Because if you do, you will be treated differently – not because of racism, although that does still exist, but because you insist on your difference to everyone else in this multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multitudinous United Kingdom of ours' (87–88). This advice is based on his belief in the possibility of advancement for someone of Muslim heritage in the United Kingdom, where he could imagine that 'the grandson of the colonised [could] take his place as Prime Minister' (214).[11] However, he is aware that in order to achieve such social mobility he has had to navigate the vicissitudes of the British press with respect to his Muslim identity and how that intersects with his national context. In one example, he describes how 'the tabloids that had previously attacked him' now rebrand him as 'a LONE CRUSADER taking on the backwardness of British Muslim' (35).

It is this integrationist position that has persuaded Eamonn to anglicize his name from Aymon, and to adopt a broadly apolitical nature, as seen when he first meets Isma in the US. Eamonn's position towards his father shifts, however, when the latter's policies come into direct conflict with Aneeka's desire to retrieve

Parvaiz's body. This element of the text parallels the speech in Sophocles' play in which Haemon attempts to temper Creon's decision to punish Antigone's transgression of the edict not to bury the body of Polyneices. Haemon argues, 'No, it's no disgrace for a man, to learn many things and not be too rigid' (Sophocles 1984: 96). This attempt to appeal to a leader's power to revoke a harsh decision is transfigured in Eamonn's meeting with Karamat, during which he also appeals to his father's desire to be seen to do the right thing; as the son argues, 'A government that sends its citizens to some other country when they act in ways we don't like. Doesn't that say we can't deal with our own problems?' (217–218). It is interesting in the context of the mid-2010s that this is the very argument that was brought into play in the campaign to allow Shamima Begum, a British Muslim teenager to return to Britain, when she and two friends from the same school in West London went to Syria to join ISIS in 2015. As Urszula Rutkowska (2022: 872) has noted, the affair bears an 'uncanny resemblance' to events in Shamsie's novel. Indeed, *Home Fire* entered a live public debate with Shamsie explaining in interview that: 'I wanted to connect it to a story that was very much in the news at the time, that of young British Muslims and their relationship with the British state' (Heriyanto 2018: n.p.). The Shamima Begum incident was at the forefront of this media furore and Shamsie seems to combine the British teenager's experience across the characters of Parvaiz and Aneeka. Parvaiz is shown to have been attracted to the ISIS propaganda that was attempting to draw British youth to ISIS. Shamsie's novel is, indeed, invested in portraying the appeal of ISIS in Britain during the period as a kind of subculture aimed at youth. Claire Chambers (2018) has picked up on this aspect of Shamsie's novel and, following work by Marc Sageman (2004), identifies the way in which group dynamics can be a strong driver towards radicalization. Parvaiz decides to leave Britain because he is groomed by Farooq, an older agent of ISIS working to recruit people form the UK, whose 'faux-Arabised accent of a non-Arab Muslim' provides 'an instant glamour' (123). Farooq appears at just the moment when Parvaiz is coming to terms with his own identity as the son of a jihadi terrorist who has been killed in Bagram and the identification of his father as either a courageous freedom fighter or national traitor. Farooq utilizes Parvaiz's identity crisis and combines it with propaganda about the promised land of the ISIS Caliphate being built in Syria, 'A place where migrants coming to join are treated like kings [. . .] Where schools and hospitals are free, and rich and poor have the same facilities. Where men are men' (144). This appealing narrative is a powerful antidote to the mainstream media presentation of British Muslims as disruptive to the sense of the nation. The presence of competing narratives

fought out in individual responses to lived experience is a key theme of the novel and this is presented especially in Aneeka's section which is formally fractured into different kinds of texts including TV, radio and newspaper reports (201), and Tweets (190). As Chambers notes, '*Home Fire* is deeply concerned with texts: sacred texts and secular, texting, online texts and the various typographies of texts' (Chambers 2018: 202). This attention to the forms and (platforms) in which information is circulated foregrounds the mediatized context of the debates over identity. It is significant, in this context, that Aneeka also uses the media to communicate her sense of injustice. When Parvaiz is eventually taken to Pakistan, she choreographs a scene in which his dead body is laid in a public park during a high wind which swirls rose petals and leaves around it, causing her to cry with 'a howl that came out of the earth and through her and into the office of the Home Secretary' (224). This Debordian political spectacle is specifically framed through the context of visual media as 'The cameras panned, then zoomed'. Karamat's one word response – 'Impressive' – shows that he appreciates the powerful symbolism and the manipulation of the mediated public discourse that this scene effects more than any recognition of her genuine pain. The use of modern technology to enhance her claim that 'All these things happen according to the law, but not according to justice' neatly contemporizes Antigone's address to the polis in Sophocles as a cry to a higher level of justice than Creon's manmade power.

The novel, then, is precisely neo-mythological in its combination of using an established 'classic' narrative to explore contemporary political contexts and ethical dilemmas. Its foregrounding of the narrative structures and techniques against which the political debates are framed supply a metafictional aspect to the narrative that draws attention to the ways in which identities are performed and contained within already prescribed parameters that people must negotiate in order to claim some degree of individual agency. One of the key themes of the retellings of the *Iliad*, *Oedipus* and *Antigone* we have discussed so far is the tension between free will and determinism framed through the imposition of a prophecy or an unavoidable outcome. This is a tension related to mode as much as a genuine set of choices individual characters might take. In the original, characters are locked into the rigid trajectories of the epic and tragic modes. However, the neo-mythological rewriting of the myths juxtaposes this trajectory with a modern realism in which characters' lived experiences offer the possibility of evading or escaping those determined outcomes. This thematic and modal tension is also at the heart of Daisy Johnson's 2018 novel, *Everything Under*.

Daisy Johnson, *Everything Under* (2018)

Daisy Johnson's innovative and intriguing *Everything Under* captures the mood of the Oedipus myth, but the correlation of its characters to the figures in the epic tale is at first difficult to identify. Like *Home Fire*, *Everything Under* transfers its classical intertext – *Oedipus Tyrannus* – to a contemporary setting and, in a complicated set of non-linear narratives, tells the stories of Sarah (the character associated with Sophocles' Jocasta) and her daughter Gretel (Antigone); Margot/Marcus (Oedipus) who comes to live with Sarah and Gretel on their riverboat; Roger (Polybus) and Chloe (Merope) who have brought up Margot, and a number of other important characters in the Oedipus narrative such as Charlie (Laius) and Fiona (Tiresias). In this section, I will argue that the novel picks up from its classical intertext the relationship of free will and determinism, the importance of riddles and the inscrutability of language, and, in a Lacanian sense, language's fundamental importance to an individual's psychosexual development.

The main settings for the events are on (or near to) secluded waterways, which places the characters outside of mainstream society in evoking the experiences of marginalized people in a contemporary setting. We are told, for example that 'River people aren't like other people. You won't see the police down here. You won't see child services or priests' (2019 [2018]: 165), and as Sarah and Gretel explain to Margot, 'We don't call the police here. We don't call the fire engines or the ambulances. It's always been that way' (2019: 194). This secluded setting contributes to the hidden and mysterious nature of the plot and like the Oedipus narrative, it has, at its heart, a riddle that needs to be solved. This riddle is primarily linguistic, and the ambivalent power of language to both reveal and conceal meaning is indeed one of the main themes of Johnson's novel. Sarah and Gretel develop their own private language system which has the positive effect of cementing their close connection, but also locks them into a personal relationship that isolates them from others. We are told, for example, that 'They had cut themselves off from the world linguistically as well as physically' (190) and occasionally that they are 'undone' by their shared vocabulary (6). That Gretel has become a lexicographer in her adult life also stresses the intimate connection between her sense of self and the language games that form her identity. As she explains to her mother, 'If – in any sense – language determined how we thought then I could never have been any other way than the way I am [. . .] It was in my language. It was in the language you gave me' (136). For Gretel, language determines thought and consequently it also determines fate.

It is significant, therefore, that when Gretel rediscovers her mother after a number of years apart, Sarah is suffering from Alzheimer's disease and language and meaning have become volatile and precarious. As Gretel explains in her second-person address to her mother, 'For you memory is not a line but a series of baffling circles' (5). This is echoed in Charlie's belief that, 'life is a sort of spinning thing. Like a planet or moon going round a planet' (81). This connects thematically to the difficulties Gretel has in unravelling the mystery that surrounds her mother's past. As we are also told 'There is degeneration at work', a term that connects the sense of breaking down with the idea of heredity in the form of the convoluted generational relationships between the characters. Degeneration also refers to the way that meaning is becoming precarious and that connections need to be deciphered like the riddles. In this sense, Gretel and Sarah are compelled to 'endlessly, excavate, exhume what should remain buried' (6). The riddle that is set up at the beginning of the novel is how does Sarah's story connect Gretel's father, Marcus/Margot and Gretel herself; a story that will include some 'some lies, some fabrications' (9).

As with the novels we have looked at so far in this chapter, *Everything Under* is also interested in the play between differing modes, in particular the realist frame of the scenes and interactions between characters, and the non-realist (or magic realist) incorporation of the supernatural. Gretel, herself, is imbued with something of a mythical quality; we are told that, as a child, she has in her notebook, 'Next to the riddles [. . .] strange, spindled drawings of misshapen creatures with the head of one animal and the body of another' (141). These drawings of uncanny creatures are projections of Gretel's otherness, her non-human characteristics, which, like her mother, configure her as a partly mythic figure; when Marcus first encounters her, for example, she was 'covered in a thin film of dirt, as if she'd been dug out of the earth' (114). Gretel, and indeed all the characters seem to hover between a material (realist) existence and supernatural symbolism. The supernatural, however, is registered most obviously in the figure of the Bonak, a creature that stalks the characters at different moments in the narrative. The Bonak is described variously, often in terms of its smell or its 'slow, almost-bovine digestion' (23). Its materiality is fluid and ephemeral; Gretel describes how it can take the form of 'anything' and explains, 'Last summer it was this stupid dog that was so hungry [. . .] but ages ago it was a storm that nearly wrecked the boat and another time it was a fire that burned a lot of the forest and that we thought would burn us too' (148). From this description, it is evident that the Bonak does not have an ontological existence but is projected by Sarah and Gretel onto external events and situations that induce fear. Later she describes how it 'runs on self-imposed paranoia' (164) and that 'It meant a lot of different

things over the years but it was always whatever we were afraid of' (168). At one point it is also described as 'prehistoric, cragged, dappled gold' with a 'long thoughtless face' (132). Its monstrous qualities are combined here with its timelessness, or specifically its pre-historic nature, in that it precedes human writing. The mythic qualities of the Bonak, then, also reflect something of the pre-verbal, which is consequently allied to a psychoanalytical significance. The Bonak represents something deep in the earliest memories of the individual, in what Lacan (1977) would identify as the imaginary or pre-mirror stage; the period before the child enters the symbolic realm of language and social interaction, breaking the primary relationship of child and mother. The Bonak combines something of this Lacanian lack with an embodiment of the deep sense of fear and guilt that is generated by the incest myth at the heart of both the classical tale and Johnson's retelling. This combination of psychosexual fear and the return of the repressed is combined in Gretel's final encounter with the monster in which it and Sarah seem to become the same entity. The locus of the fear, or what Lacan (1992) terms the unknowable 'Thing' of the unconscious, is thus located specifically for Gretel in her mother's body. The only way that it can be defeated is through knowledge about it (or rather knowledge over it); by drawing it out of the emptiness of the semiotic and into the systems of the Symbolic. The Bonak is (almost) destroyed through ingestion, a process that draws it inside the body and thus contains it; Gretel and Sarah 'took turns holding each of the organs, weighing them with the same kind of wonder with which we used to read the encyclopaedia' (250). To be eaten, of course, it has to have a physical substance but this passage gestures to the fact the constitution of Bonak, its very materiality, is indeed located in language. It is conceived as a master signifier that needs to be controlled both through the intellect and through the physical and the final act of feasting on its organs, which represents the same wallowing in the private language that the mother and daughter have shared. Gretel's conclusion on the nature of the trauma is specifically centred in language: 'Again and again I go back to the idea that our thoughts and actions are determined by the language that lives in our minds' (256). Language here is given an ontological quality; although it is of the mind and the intellect, it nevertheless 'lives', and has a corporeal status that is as fearsome as any objective reality. But in this sense it can never be defeated and continues to roam in the recesses of the mind; even after Gretel has rediscovered Sarah, the Bonak lurks, 'rattling through the rooms above our heads' (257). Given the Bonak's status as an internally created monster that is assumed to have external materiality, removing it similarly takes an act of will. However, the belief in the Bonak's

demise is something that needs to be sustained and indeed, we are told that the monster returns to haunt Gretel after it has supposedly been killed off by Sarah.

This returns us to the point about language determining life, and, that if the belief is powerful enough, language can determine the actions of the characters. The prophecy that lies at the heart of Oedipus myth, thus takes on an inevitability that is driven by the will but is no less determined in its material effects than a supernatural system imposing its already-written, fixed model of the future. Sarah tells Gretel (in reported speech) that 'there is no escaping, that the way we will end up is coded into us from the moment we are born and that any decisions we make are only mirages, ghosts to convince us of free will' (47). Gretel tries to resist this deterministic structure of feeling; however, the power of language overcomes her belief in the possibility of any free agency: 'I'd always felt that our lives could have gone in multiple directions, that the choices you made forced them into turning out the way they did. But maybe there were no choices; maybe there were no other possible outcomes' (76). The inevitable trajectory of the prophecy in Johnson's novel is not related to some fixed supernatural law, but to Gretel's inability to escape from the epic mode (where events are set in stone) into a modern realism, where actors have individual agency. As she concludes, 'Again and again I go back to the idea that our thoughts and actions are determined by the language that lives in our mind' (256). The inevitability of the end is also evident in Margot's unflinching belief in Fiona's prophecy that is both a predictor and cause of the tragedy. Of course, this is a novel that follows the classical intertext, so it inevitably drives towards Margot's killing of her father and sleeping with her mother. However, the tragic flaw that the novel inscribes is more related to Margot's inability to view the future as undetermined; for her, the prophecy is 'certain as iron, certain as the seasons, unbendable as stone' (174). The theme of prophecy offers a way, therefore, to compare determinism and free will. This opposition correlates in part to the distinction between the mythical (timeless) qualities of the Oedipus narrative and the sense of modernity that points to more individual agency. Where Barker and Haynes allow their heroines a modern (realist) escape from their epic narrative trajectories, Johnson's text draws them back into the inevitable void at the heart of the Oedipus myth; the blinded father and the hanged mother.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined a number of examples of what I have called the neo-mythological novel. After identifying similarities (as well as differences) between

them we can thus define the genre as a category of neo-historical fiction that draws together cultural-political revisionism, historical metafiction, and magic realism honed with a metamodern sensibility that combines postmodern irony with a sincere (modernist) celebration of mythopoeia. Indeed, in such fiction classical myths occupy a particular cultural significance in the post-postmodern potentiality of an authentic belief in the possibility of reclaiming truths from the noise of contemporary multivocality and perspectivism. Unlike the major religions, whose truth claims have come under sustained scrutiny, classical myth, precisely because it is not taken seriously for its religious importance, paradoxically achieves a certain kind of cultural gravitas and probity. The fact that the contemporaries no longer believe the literal veracity of classical heroes and gods, means these stories are able to circumvent postmodern scepticism of claims to historical truth, which (perhaps ironically) allows them to carry privileged cultural weight based on their 'metaphoric' or 'essentialist' truths about the human condition. In this way, the suspicion towards fixed belief systems in the present creates nostalgia for past systems that still carry within them the potential for continuing certainties, a desire that might explain the recent popularity of the form. However, what we also see in the examples discussed in this chapter is that the truth claims embedded within the mythical imagination still carry ideological flaws and fissures that can be put under pressure in the name of drawing attention to the scaffolds on which their power hangs. The recent phenomenon of the neo-mythological novel could be seen as a recurring cultural phenomenon rather than historically specific to the early twenty-first century; however, as with all aspects of the neo-historical, the mode is always Janus-faced, looking back to the strangeness of our ancestors' beliefs in order to throw light on the strangeness of our own.

Notes

1 True to form, Johnson reached for a reference to Cincinnatus in his prime ministerial resignation speech in 2022, with the allusion that he would, like the Roman senator, return for a second term of office after a period of tending his farm. Such a reference implicitly embeds a hierarchical power relationship to those whose educational background might not readily recognize such allusions and it is not difficult to see how this rhetoric is revealing of deeper social divides and culture wars.

2 Critical works in this area (in addition to the ones discussed directly in this chapter) include Louisa Hadley, *The Neo-Victorian Fiction and Historical Narrative: The Victorians and Us*. Houndmills: Palgrave, 2010; Jakub Lipski and Joanna Maciulewicz

(eds). *Neo-Georgian Fiction: Reimagining the Eighteenth Century in the Contemporary Historical Novel*. New York: Routledge, 2021; and the essays included in *Exoticizing the Past in Contemporary Neo-Historical Fiction*, Elodie Rousselot (ed.). Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014.

3 One of the ironies of this metamodern turn is that the very definitions of postmodernism were couched by Fredric Jameson (1991) in terms of the need for 1950s and 1960s cultural practitioners to distance them from their modernist progenitors of the early part of the century.

4 James and Seshagiri identify a number of twenty-first-century novels that include aspects of this return to modernism, including Julian Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending* (2011), J.M. Coetzee's *Youth* (2002), Tom McCarthy's *Remainder* (2006), Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001), Taiye Selasi's *Ghana Must Go* (2013), Zadie Smith's *NW* (2012) and Will Self's *Umbrella* (2012).

5 The Oxford edition of Homer cited here uses the spelling 'Patroklus'.

6 Most of Barker's previous novels deal in a grounded, working-class realism coming out of the 1950s Angry Young Man and kitchen sink narratives, for example, in her early novels, *Union Street* (1982), *Blow Your House Down* (1984) and *Liza's England* (1986).

7 Owen's poem has 'one sprang up, and stared/ With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,/ [. . .] "Strange friend", I said, "here is no cause to mourn"' (Owen 1988). Wilfred Own's convalescence under the care of the psychiatrist W. H. R. Rivers after suffering PTSD from his experience in the trenches in the First World War is one of the subjects of Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy of novels (1991–1995).

8 For example, Jon McGregor's novel *Even the Dogs* (2010) and acclaimed films such as *Hurt Locker* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2008), *American Sniper* (Clint Eastwood, 2014), *War Dogs* (Todd Phillips, 2016), and *Lone Survivor* (Peter Berg, 2013).

9 It should be noted that Jocasta's doubt is not an example of modern presentism but is in Sophocles' original. It does seem, however, that a contemporary audience is more likely to accept her reasoning in Haynes's formulation, than a classic audience would have towards Jocasta's doubt in the Oracle.

10 It should be noted, of course, that Sophocles' is only one version of the Antigone myth. Euripides, for example, in a lost play has Antigone survive Creon and marry Haemon.

11 As several critics have noted (Mukherjee, Rutkowska), Shamsie's text anticipates the appointment of Sajid Javid as the first Home Secretary of Muslim heritage in Britain, in 2018.

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