2019, Undergraduate Long Essay, English Literature

To what extent do women writers use Echo to expose, but also challenge, the gendered hierarchies evident in her figure and her legacy?

This essay centres around the issue of gendered language as it pervades literature from the classical era to the present day. Through engagement with Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the work of female experimental poets Denise Riley and Veronica Forrest-Thomson, my aim is to expose patriarchal bias at a linguistic and literary level and explore the ways in which women poets confront this issue. The roots of misogyny are deep and varied. However, in closely examining misogyny in language and literature I hope to make somewhat less foggy the construction and perpetuation of the patriarchy through these prominent forms. In taking a sociolinguistic as well as a literary approach, I accept the notion in the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of a connection between linguistics, literary and societal gendered hierarchies; 'The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, as usually formulated, searches for isomorphisms between grammar and culture and views language as either providing the means for thought and perceptions, or, in its stronger form, conditioning thought, perception, and world view'.[1]

In engaging with gendered language, I endorse the intimation that patriarchal values have perpetuated and still perpetuate within known Western societies, and that the fields of literature and language are complicit in this dynamic. Various arguments have been posed in the assertion of these forms as a patriarchal tool. Pauwels noted how 'Men signalled their authority in language through their roles in the dictionary-making process, in the writing of

[1] Joel Sherzer, 'A Discourse-Centered Approach to Language and Culture', in *American Anthropologist,* New Series, LXXXIX, II, ed. by H. Russell Bernard (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 1987) pp. 295-309 (p. 295).

normative grammars, in the establishment of language academies and other normative language institutions'[2]; Richards and Thorne discussed the notion of rhetoric as masculine; termed 'Homo rhetoricus', in which

> rhetoric can be seen as an exclusionary model [...] The acquisition and dissemination of rhetorical skills is grounded in masculine institutions […] which are defined by their capacity to generate and cement homosocial bonds, and which rhetorical skill comes in turn to symbolise and consolidate.[3]

Meanwhile, both Barthes and Bloom 'see the creation of new texts from old as an intertextual relation of paternity'.[4] It is from accepting the domination of men in the Western literary canon as well as in the creation and reproduction of mainstream language use that my argument will draw. Moreover, when citing the view that men are originators and superiors within these spaces, I acknowledge the reductive and sweeping nature of such a claim. Whilst it is impossible to prove, I assert that this is a perceived reality. In terms of its social and cultural impact perception is paramount, and very real gender dynamics exist in accordance with this belief.

In analysing my primary texts with reference to gendered language, I engage with Lakoff's notion of 'Women's Language'; a termed she coins following a study of the differences in masculine and feminine linguistics.[5] My argument centres around the understanding that 'Women's Language' categorises itself in being a derivation, in other words, an 'echo', of

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[2] Anne Pauwels, 'Linguistic Sexism and Feminist Linguistic Activism', in *The Handbook of Language and Gender,* ed. by Janet Holmes and Miriam Meyerhoff (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003) pp. 550-570 (p. 551).
[3] Danielle Clarke, 'Speaking Women: Rhetoric and the Construction of Female Talk', in *Rhetoric, Women and Politics in Early Modern England,* ed. by Jennifer Richards and Alison Thorne (Abingdon and NY: Routledge, 2007) pp. 70-88 (p. 72).
[4] Naomi Segal, *Narcissus and Echo: Women in the French Recit,* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988) p. 222.
[5] Robin Lakoff, 'Language and Woman's Place', in *Language in Society,* II, I, ed. by Jenny Cheshire (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973) pp. 45-80 (p. 222).

men's language. This is one reason for women's prevailing subjection, and why Echo of Greek Myth becomes a pertinent figure for inquiry.

Through an analysis of *Metamorphoses'* Echo, I argue that she embodies 'Women's Language' and resultantly lacks agency, autonomy and authority. Turning to the poems of Riley and Forrest-Thomson, I examine in what ways their poems replicate Ovid's Echo, how they engage with literary and linguistic traditions as androcentric, and to what extent they challenge these. Both poets expose women's inferior position in these realms as pervasive, and highlight the difficulty women face attempting verbal expression from an oppressed position. Nonetheless, despite depicting women's speech as continuing to be an echo of men's, both poets undermine this norm. Riley's speaker advocates women, in being echoes, can create a space for the female voice by way of the language which marks them inferior. Forrest-Thomson goes further. Through manipulating the notion of an 'echo', Forrest-Thomson's speaker comments back upon the patriarchal literary world by revealing literary and linguistic pasts as a construction of continuous echo, undermining the perception of men as originators and sovereigns of language. Again, such a venture creates a platform for female voices to assert in a sphere where it formerly seemed impossible.

This section will explore the means by which the concept of an 'echo' in linguistics plays a role in gendered constructs. I will introduce the concept of 'Women's Language' before relating it to the concept of an 'echo', and use this to ground my analyses of Ovid's Echo as a linguistic personification.

Lakoff's *Language and Woman's Place* is a sociolinguistic study of American and English speaking 'Women's Language'. It is important to note the ambiguous nature of this term.

Lakoff relates her conclusions to informal spoken language, arguing that the features of 'Women's Language' are those used by self-identifying women, and that not all women, or only women, speak in these ways; rather, 'women use them, or are likely to use them, in a wider range of linguistic, psychological, and social environments'.[6] Linguistic studies are inevitably subjective, and general language use is constantly changing and difficult to measure or consolidate. Thus, whilst 'Women's Language' cannot be definitively categorised, I would embrace Lakoff's definition, and add that I accept the view that English-speaking self-identifying women have prevalent features of speech which are absent from the majority of self-identifying men's speech. Features such as hedging and tag questions ('well', 'I guess', or 'kinda'), for example, typically indicate 'an apology for making an assertion at all'.[7] Suffixes in the nomenclature for women, such as 'actress' and 'usherette' similarly portray a 'male as norm' principle.[8] For this argument I assert these differences as overarchingly informing and informed by societal androcentrism. As Pauwels notes, 'the semantic asymmetry that characterizes the portrayal of women and men in language is of particular concern to feminist activists, as it is an expression of women's and men's perceived values and status in society. [...] The marginality and powerlessness of women is reflected in both the ways women are expected to speak, and the ways in which women are spoken of'.[9] Lakoff asserted that features of language predominantly used in female discourse and in referring to women 'signal womanliness through deference and lack of confidence'.[10] She argued societal consequences of these as ensuring women were less successful in the public world through an inability to effectively get their points across, noting 'that women typically lack assertiveness […] in more contexts than men do', and that 'surely we listen with more

[6] Lakoff, p. 82.
[7] Lakoff, p. 80
[8] Lakoff, pp. 78-81.
[9] Pauwels, p. 553.
[10] Lakoff, p. 183.

attention the more strongly and forcefully someone expresses opinions, and a speaker unable - for whatever reason - to be forceful in stating his views, is much less likely to be taken seriously'.[11] My focus is upon the concept that features of women's speech display a lack of confidence, agency and autonomy, and depict women as linguistic and social inferiors of men. As such, throughout this essay when discussing 'Women's Language', I see the term as carrying with it the suggestion of androcentric hierarchies. When discussing 'men's language', I refer to Lakoff's suggestion of it as lexis used by and applied typically to self-identifying men, which exists in opposition to 'Women's Language', and is a symptom and a tool of patriarchal values.

I will here establish 'echo' in the field of linguistics, and argue that 'Women's Language' exists as such in it being an echo of men's. The Oxford English Dictionary definition of an 'echo' states it as: 'repetition'; 'secondary or imitative sound'; 'so as to supply an answer to the question contained in it'; 'to give a continuous sense'; 'occasionally with wider meaning'; 'an enfeebled reproduction'.[12] I would like to draw attention to an echo as something which repeats but alters, is seen as secondary to the thing it echoes in its nature as existing temporarily after and ontologically dependent upon its forerunner, but which has the possibility for 'wider meaning'. In applying 'echo' to the realm of gendered linguistics, I argue that echoing can be seen in linguistic derivation, a process playing a significant role in the differing of 'Women's Language' from men's language. This term refers to the formation of a new word from an existing one, often with a prefix or suffix. Women are commonly identified using linguistic derivation. Hedging, tag questions and modifiers indicate this. Turning to Ovid's Echo, her name and her central identity being one of linguistic disability

[11] Lakoff, p. 82.
[12] "echo." *OED Online*. www.oed.com/view/Entry/59326 [accessed 26 January 2019].

means the gendered hierarchies propagated by her figure are ones grounded in language. Specifically, in embodying a linguistic echo she represents the derivative, and consequently inferior nature of 'Women's Language', and for these reasons she is generally recognised as an oppressed figure.

Turning now to a close analysis of Ovid's Echo,[13] I discus her as a linguistic embodiment and relate this to the androcentric values evident in her figure. I argue Echo epitomises female oppression in the realms of language and literature. Nonetheless, through close analysis I determine her to contain some linguistic agency and potential ability to overturn the structures which constrain her.

Metamorphoses is an eminent Latin narrative poem from the Roman period chronicling tales from the Greek mythical tradition. This tradition, and Ovid's poem, remain culturally, literarily and socially significant today, and, as such, I accept the premise that the text is one which reflects and informs social norms. As argued in Beard's *Women and Power*, silent women were a normative feature of Ancient Greek life and myth; women were actively silenced with the intention to remove authority from what they had to say.[14] Whilst Ovid did not invent Echo, he did record her story. In doing so, *Metamorphoses* is an example of a man constructing a limiting portrayal of women in literature, typical of the patriarchal classical tradition to which it belonged.

I would like to assert the close relationship between language and literature, and note that just as 'Women's Language' is a linguistic stance emphasising women as secondary to men in

[13] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. by Brookes More (Boston: The Cornhill Publishing Company, 1922).
[14] Mary Beard, *Women & Power: A Manifesto* (London: Profile Books, 2017) p. 22.

language, the same dynamic exists in the literary tradition; the two complement and inform each other. It is useful to briefly note the major parts of Echo's story. Ovid's narrator asserts she is an Oread who once had ordinary linguistic abilities. When Juno discovered Echo had been helping Jupiter have adulterous affairs by talking to, and thus distracting Juno, she punished Echo by making her only able, and forced, to speak the final words of phrases spoken to her.[15] Echo falls in love with Narcissus. The pair converse briefly before Narcissus rejects her, and Echo retreats into the wilderness where she fades until she is nothing but a faint, echoing voice.

Recalling my prior discussion regarding the definition of an echo, and of linguistic derivation as an echo and as signalling 'Women's Language', I here suggest Ovid's Echo epitomises these qualities. It is significant firstly that, with respect to characterisation, Echo is a woman and Narcissus a man; also, that she is named 'Echo'. This signals plainly that her capacity for language effects and informs her identity, that this identity is tied to sound, and that a conscious narrative decision was made to place a woman as linguistically disabled and a man as able. As Berger states, 'Echo is then, literally, the daughter of her name, a strange and difficult lineage: she embodies the conversion, by anthropomorphosis, of the phenomenon of repetition - the echo - into a singular figure.'[16] Echo's final state is described thus: 'though we hear her calling in the hills, 'tis but a voice, a voice that lives, that lives among the hills'.[17] The pronouns '*we* hear *her*' [my emphasis] indicate the narrator and readership in opposition to Echo; as men's language; as Ovid the male author and as Narcissus, the example of a male originator of speech. This serves to bolster men's language as the norm in this field of

[15] Ovid, III.368-70.
[16] Anne-Emmanuelle Berger, 'The Latest Word from Echo', in *New Literary History,* XXVII, IV, trans. by Rachel Gabara, ed. by Bruce Holsinger (Baltimore, The John Hopkins University Press, 1996) pp. 621-640 (p.622).
[17] Ovid, III.400-02.

literature. The fact the reader meets her only in her transformed state and she later loses her physical form furthers the notion that her linguistic confinement is her inescapable identity and strengthens the overarching characterisation of her as helpless. In narrative terms, Echo is a part of Narcissus' story, making her dependent upon, and therefore ancillary to him. The syntax ascribed to Echo's voice bolsters this. Her speech is 'vapid', she 'babble[s]', her tongue is 'silly' and 'freely wagged'.[18] The trivial and animalistic attributes degrade her speech and, returning to the definition of echo mentioned previously, her voice is 'enfeebled'. Echo's speech is 'repetition' plus 'alteration' of his: 'He tries again, again, and is deceived by this alternate voice', '"Take off your hands! you shall not fold your arms around me. Better death than such a one should ever caress me!" Naught she answers save, "Caress me!"'.[19] Narcissus initiates their conversation and her voice. As Echo she repeats ('"Caress me!"') but also alters, indicated by her repeating only the final two words of his twenty-one word phrase, and the term 'alternate'. Segal aptly notes Echo is a 'personification of the acoustic self-reflection', 'not only are her words initiated by the man, but even her sound is appropriated by an angle of hearing which expects, and therefore receives, a man's voice'.[20]

Having established Echo as a figure exemplifying 'Women's Language', I will here determine androcentric hierarchies as existent alongside this conception. Echo's narrative purpose is her love for Narcissus: ''Oh, how she longed to make her passion known!', however 'She cannot choose but wait the moment when his voice may give her an answer'.[21] Her linguistic punishment removes her ability to communicate desire, assigning emotional authority to Narcissus. His rejection of her heightens this. He commands 'Take off your

[18] Ovid, III.359-70.
[19] Ovid, III.380-90.
[20] Segal, p. 3.
[21] Ovid, III.370-80.

hands!', so that 'Thus rejected she lies hid in the deep woods', and later the narrator describes Narcissus had 'deceived the nymph'.[22] He unquestionably retains the active role within the couples' power dynamic. In turn, the story's central feature is Narcissus' undying love for his own reflection, which can famously never be returned. As such, Echo, in loving him, is merely giving him what he wants. She is a reflection of his desire, implying she is not the agent even of her own love but is a narrative vehicle for his words and wishes, serving to heighten the tragedy of his fate. Segal correspondingly notes 'the woman's desire is barely audible, it becomes in the ears of the hero translated into what he wishes to hear'.[23]

Nonetheless, when analysing Echo as a figure of deconstruction, she exhibits some level of linguistic agency. Derrida saw Echo as reshaping her own words out of Narcissus'. He states she lets be heard 'something other than what she seems to be saying" in order to speak "of herself and on her own', and views this as intentionality.[24] Ovid's narrator emphasises this when describing 'from the woods she hastens in accordance with her words, and strives to wind her arms around his neck'.[25] Intentionality is exemplified by her forward physical movement towards the thing she desires. An aligning of Echo's language with action ('in accordance with her words') implies she is using Narcissus' speech to autonomous ends, indicating a subversion of her position as simply the incapable female. In terms of linguistics, Berger asserts Echo as 'an originary figure of deconstruction, as altering repetition (differance), as a mode of reading immanent to the text which turns reflexively back on itself, as a poetic method of production (of meaning) by reproduction (of sound)'.[26] Indeed, in

[22] Ovid, III.380-403.
[23] Segal, p. 11.
[24] Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, ed. and trans. by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005) p. 12.
[25] Ovid, III.375-385.
[26] Berger, p. 622.

managing to use her voice, even to a small extent, to express desire (‘“Caress me!”’) she is assigning an original meaning to an existing form (‘“Better death than such a one should ever caress me!”’). In revealing Narcissus’ words as capable of being manipulated she questions their authority. She highlights Narcissus’ language, thus language itself, *as* signifier, and to which meaning is subjectively and contextually brought.

The gendered framework manifested through Echo is exemplified by her sorrowful ending, her linguistic confinement and consequential inability to autonomously communicate. In aligning her fate with the notion of echoing in linguistic derivation and ‘Women’s Language’, I have shown that Echo’s oppression is tied to the fact that men traditionally and typically have power over language. Echo could only be female, and Narcissus, male; moreover, Ovid could only be a male writer in a male-dominated tradition. Whilst maintaining Echo is overarchingly a figure of women’s linguistic, and consequently social and cultural, oppression by men, she exhibits not fully realised potential for subversive deconstruction of her fate. In reshaping the language of Narcissus, she establishes a possible future in which women’s voices can subvert those of men’s, and the language which forms them.

The patriarchal convictions evident in *Metamorphoses* still hinder contemporary society. The poems of Riley and Forrest-Thomson were published amidst a rising awareness regarding the role of language in the perpetuation of these convictions, convictions manifest in Ovid’s Echo; ‘Second-wave feminists argued and convincingly demonstrated that language was important, both as a mechanism of sexism and as a tool for combating it.’[27] Essential to my analysis of these poets is the notion that English literary institutions have historically

[27] Elise Kramer, ‘Feminist Linguistics and Linguistic Feminisms’, in *Mapping Feminist Anthropology in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Ellen Lewin and Leni M. Silverstein (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016) pp. 65-83 (p. 65).

prioritised men over women. It is this which constructs the dynamic of 'Women's Language' as a category differing from 'men's language'. The English language, in line with this, has also been dominated by men, and much female poetry in this period explores the resultant difficulty women face regarding self-expression and recognition. Given the continuing prevalence of these issues, reading Riley and Forrest-Thomson in conjunction with a text from the Classical period allows for a greater understanding of the ways in which female linguistic oppression has perpetuated.

Riley's '"Affections of the Ear"' is a revision of Ovid's Echo and Narcissus story through the first person narration of Echo.[28] I argue the poem exposes the gendered constructs exemplified by Echo in showing her as trapped, and thus made powerless, by her existence as a replica of men's language. Nonetheless, in portraying Echo as a figure of linguistic manipulation, Riley's poem takes a step towards challenging the structures which confine her. The poem is engaged with the Narcissus myth from the opening line, in which Echo the narrator confidently states 'Here's the original Narcissus story'.[29] In retelling a story written by a canonical male poet, in repeating and altering, she echoes its words, so situating her narrative as 'Women's Language' in relation to the original.

The speaker asserts an awareness of the congruence of literature and linguistics when stating 'All I may say is through constraint, dictation straight from sounds doggedly at work in a strophe'.[30] A 'strophe' could be read as a section of ancient Greek Choral ode, or section of lyric poem; as is 'strophe' a section of 'catastrophe', the word repeated at the end of each stanza. As such, the speaker syntactically aligns linguistics and literature in relating a

[28] Denise Riley, *Selected Poems* (London: Reality Street, 2000).
[29] Riley, p. 94, l.1.
[30] Riley, p. 96, l. 117-18.

linguistic pun to a formal feature of classical literature. The speaker likewise hints at gendered hierarchies within both these fields through allusions to philosophical academic discourse: '"Ears are the only orifices that can't be closed"'; '"To make yourself seen reflects back to you, but to make yourself | heard goes out toward another"'; 'Philosophy | recommends a severe self-scrutiny'.[31] Alluding to Lacan reminds readers that academic Philosophy has been historically dominated by men. Placing '"Ears are the only orifices that can't be closed"' within a context suggestive of sexual violence ('though force may | get some others to succumb'[32]) reiterates a dynamic of men with power and women without in canonical literary narratives.[33]

Riley's poem maintains Echo's speech, in line with Ovid's Echo, as secondary and derivative. Kinnahan, writing on 'Feminism's experimental 'work at the language-face'' aptly stated 'Riley's poems present the female subject's struggle with systems of culture and language representing woman as Other'.[34] The use of quotation marks around the title immediately implies the narrator's discourse is not her own. In turn, when introducing herself, Echo claims she is 'your reporter'.[35] The pronoun 'your' suggests she is speaking for the purpose of someone else. Determining her a 'reporter' again removes agency; a 'reporter' being someone who transmits information on behalf of one party to an audience. Moreover, she introduces herself only in the second stanza, structurally suggesting a lack of confidence and importance regarding herself in the narrative she tells. Her use of parentheses to communicate herself before returning to the central narrative bolsters this. Parentheses signal

[31] Riley, pp. 94-6, ll. 99, 119-120, 20-21.
[32] Riley, p. 96, ll. 99-100.
[33] Riley, pp. 94-6.
[34] Linda Kinnahan, "Postmodernism and the Language of Poetry: Feminism's Experimental 'work at the language-face'." in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century British and Irish Women's Poetry*, ed. by Jane Dowson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) pp. 254-279 (p. 263).
[35] Riley, p. 94, ll. 29-30.

information of less importance. Marking herself as less significant than Narcissus' narrative is an instance of 'Women's Language' in that a lack of self-confidence is implied. Equally, the modal 'should' of 'I should explain myself, I sound derivative?'[36] suggests an anxious desire to gratify her readership. The question mark, too, signals awareness of a readership from whom she seeks confirmation.

Riley's use of refrain and inner rhyme is further indicative of Echo's confinement. Each of the five stanzas ends with 'catastrophe'.[37] In terms of the structure of her speech, she is literally repeating final phrases, indicating her voice as trapped by her identity as an echo. This notion is seconded by inner rhyme and assonance throughout the poem: 'as I am made to parrot others' words so I am forced to form | ideas by rhymes, the most humdrum.'[38] 'Forced to form' and 'humdrum' are micro echoes, suggesting syntactically that the figure Echo is, too, trapped *inside* language. The dragging sounds made by the stressed vowels 'forced to form' imply negativity on her part, and accentuate the violence of 'force' as a descriptor of her punishment.

When relating her situation, Echo states she echoes any sound 'pitched louder than | the muttering of a dove'.[39] Dehumanising her speech mimics Ovid's delineations of her voice as 'freely wagged' and 'vapid', both of which are derogatory comparisons. 'Muttering' is a further passive and impotent mode of speech. These lexical features indicate Echo the speaker is aligning herself with her position in Ovid's story; in other words, exposing the perpetuating of her linguistic oppression. It is useful here to note Riley's conception of

[36] Riley, p. 90, l. 29.
[37] Riley, pp. 94-6.
[38] Riley, p. 95, ll. 15-16.
[39] Riley, p. 95, ll. 31-32.

interpellation, influenced by Althusser, which expresses the importance of language being internalised and forming identity:

> Individuals do not ‘‘become’’ subjects but are always-already constituted as such by interpellation or hailing. Riley follows Althusser in giving the impression that interpellation is always negative, that the subject identity it discovers is an identity of subjection to a repressive identificatory regime.[40]

Accordingly, the fact that Echo has been the subject, as opposed to the writer, of language, means she has internalised this and it has come to define her. In this way, she is unable to verbally express or claim selfhood with total autonomy.

Nonetheless, whilst portraying the gendered hierarchies of Ovid's Echo as continuing, Riley's Echo, in an act of deconstruction from within her lexical confines, subtly subverts her assumed incapacity. The opening line calls her story the 'original'. This is a confident assertion of herself as the initiator, instead of the echo, of the language which constitutes this narrative. Claiming to be 'original', however, is implausible due to the renown of Ovid's *Metamorphoses,* and of the story she tells being mythical. Myths lack a single source and are altered in each retelling. Thus, her far-reaching claim of 'original[ity]' instead draws attention to the fabricated and indeterminate nature of the tale; by consequence critiquing the authority and validity of the narrative's professed writers. Riley herself states Echo 'shows that iteration can explode a category from within, and that language's parrotings sometimes do have a salutary agency.'[41] In alluding to Lacanian philosophy but recontextualising so as to apply it to her own situation, she is echoing Lacan but showing autonomy within this act; displaying a possibility for creative agency.[42]

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[40] Andrea Brady, 'Echo, Irony and Repetition in the Writings on Denise Riley', in *Contemporary Women's Writing,* VII, II, ed. by Holly A. Laird and Kaye Mitchell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) pp. 138-156 (p. 148).
[41] Denise Riley, *The Words of Selves* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000) p. 156.
[42] Riley, pp. 94-6, ll. 99, 119-120.

Deconstruction is further evident through Echo's wordplay. Narcissus, she states, is ''Numbed by affection of his heart, now dried he'll cure the ear | affections'.[43] Exploiting the homonymic nature of 'affections' for her own poetic purposes indicates lexical ability. Riley writes that 'Enough repetition … and the word suffers a mutation, its thingness abruptly catapulted forward.'[44] The suggestion of repetition exaggerating the 'thingness' of language is aided by Echo's manoeuvring of the synonymic nature of her daughter's name: 'my daughter Iynx, a wryneck, torticollis, twisted neck';[45] 'Echo literally re - presents - and this act makes the word strange, its context is chopped off'.[46] In each instance, in repeating, echoing, altering, she is seizing lexical control and revealing the 'thingness'; exposing the capacity for manipulation of the lexis she echoes.

In emphasising Echo as predominantly restricted and powerless, Riley exposes the linguistically defined andocentrism in her legacy. Even so, in maintaining Echo as simply an 'echo', Riley gives her the power to comment back upon what she mimics. In assigning her some linguistic agency from within formal confines, Echo takes a step toward revealing the language she echoes as constructed, unstable and able to be manipulated, thus challenging the gendered hierarchies perpetuated by men as literary and linguistic authorities.

[43] Riley, p. 96, ll. 105-106.
[44] Riley, *Words of Selves*, p. 158.
[45] Riley, p. 95, ll. 63-64.
[46] Riley, *Words of Selves*, p. 158.

Forrest-Thomson's 'Cordelia, or 'A Poem Should Not Mean, But Be'' is a 20th century experimental poem which explores women's place in language and literature. This section asserts Forrest-Thomson's poem as akin with Riley's poem and Ovid's Echo in that it engages first and foremost with the notion that women's voices are echoes of men's; specifically, female voices within the literary realm. However, as noted previously, I regard women's situating in language as synonymous with literature. In contrast to the previous texts, Forrest-Thomson's speaker take a greater step towards subversion and asserts a greater critique of the stability and power of language as a patriarchal form.

Amongst the extensive wordplay of the poem's speaker is the assertion language is connected to political, cultural and social influence. A central motif of the poem is the inevitability of endings. The speaker delineates the deaths of 'Dante dei Aligeri', 'T.S. Eliot', 'Agamemnon [...] Priam [...] Theseus, of the Athenians. | And like all Good Kings, they are dead'.[47] She elaborates 'I have lived long enough having seen one thing; | That term has an end'. The homonymic nature of 'term' having both a linguistic and a temporal meaning here aligns political power with language. Moreover, when assessing the relationship of Dante and Beatrice, the speaker confidently states:

> He said he loved Beatrice. Whatever he did
> He didn't love Beatrice. At least the
> Beatrice Portinari whom history gives.[48]

In proclaiming 'history' to be false, and assigning it agency through the third person singular verb 'gives', she answers back to the otherwise accepted epistemological power of 'history' in revealing it as a constructed fabrication with which she has the capacity to disagree.

[47] Veronica Forrest-Thomson, *Collected Poems,* ed. by Anthony Barnett (Exeter: Shearsman Books, 2008) pp. 152-155, ll. 32, 51, 111-113.
[48] Forrest-Thomson, p. 152, ll. 20-22.

A patriarchal gender binary is suggested alongside this notion through the sheer volume of allusions to male writers and historical figures. The poem's opening stanza is reminiscent of traditional canonical Western poetry in its assertion of the traditional theme of the transience of life and love,[49] hyperbolised use of rhyme and iambic heptameter[50]:

> To those who kiss in fear that they shall never kiss again
> To those that love with fear that they shall never love again
> To such I dedicate this rhyme and what it may contain.[51]

The speaker markedly alludes to Shakespeare, Homer, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, John Donne, Lewis Carroll, Socrates, Plato and countless others. In doing so, she draws attention to their historical prominence, and incites awareness of the overwhelming number of men in relation to women in this category. Moreover, the speaker explicitly reveals her own language as shaped by the discourse of these men. The poem's ending, which describes 'we [...] went on in sunlight into the University Library | And ate yogurt and talked for an hour'[52] is an implicit revision of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Moreover, the speaker expresses an overt awareness and distaste towards her own mimicry:

> I wish I didn't keep sounding like Richard the Third
> Except that if I don't I tend to sound
> Like Richard the Second. And who wants that.[53]

Her allusions align her with Ovid and Riley's Echo's, as her voice is a repetition plus alteration of a past male discourse. As well as twice identifying herself as 'Veronica', ('My name is Veronica Forrest-Thomson'[54]; 'I, Veronica did it'[55]) the speaker associates herself with famous female literary figures; 'But first and last read me, the beloved | [...] I, Helen, I,

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[49] Alison Mark, *Veronica Forrest-Thomson and Language Poetry* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001) p. 105.
[50] Otherwise called a 'Fourteener', a meter found commonly in English poetry from the 16th and 17th centuries, famously used by George Chapman when he produced one of the first translations of *The Iliad*. Also used in Lord Byron's 'Youth and Age' and Egdar Allan Poe's 'Annabel Lee', for example.
[51] Forrest-Thomson, p. 152, ll. 1-3.
[52] Forrest-Thomson, p. 157, ll. 204-206.
[53] Forrest-Thomson, p. 154, ll. 89-91.
[54] Forrest-Thomson, p. 154, l. 110.
[55] Forrest-Thomson, p. 156, l. 183.

Iseult, I, Guenevere, | I Clytemnestra and many more to come'.[56] In making herself parallel with fictitious historical females who are principally famed for being the 'beloved[s]' of celebrated men, the speaker draws attention to the normative binary in which woman is literary object and muse, and man is author. Such a suggestion is again reminiscent of Riley's discussion of 'interpellation'. Forrest-Thomson's speaker reveals the fact that she, a woman, has internalised the inferior identity assigned to women as subjects of canonical literature.

Resembling Echo, the speaker is self-consciously trapped in this linguistic stance. In claiming 'I wish I didn't keep sounding' like historical men, she expresses distaste towards her position. The desperate tone of the stressed beats 'didn't keep' strongly hint at her desire to not speak in the language of these men, and her inability to do so. The title reiterates this. 'Cordelia' references Lear's daughter in Shakespeare's famous tragedy, *King Lear*. In another allusion to an eminent literary figure, 'Cordelia' carries connotations of a passive daughter utterly under the command of her father. As Mark notes,

> The very use of Cordelia's name evokes that silencing of the female poetic voice occasioned by the significant exclusion of women poets from the literary canon, and in particular from the discourse of the epic.[57]

Forrest-Thomson's speaker makes clear a correlation between men as the authority of a language and literary past and women as both silent and subordinate.

Returning expressly to Lakoff's 'Women's Language', Forrest-Thomson further places the language of her speaker within this bracket by asserting an insecure, 'enfeebled' tone typical of Lakoff's categorisation. Whilst the speaker's use of lyric 'I' is in constant flux, it is often

[56] Forrest-Thomson, p. 156, ll. 163, 166-167.
[57] Mark, *Language Poetry*, p. 104.

expressed as such: ‘I may not know much about gods but I know that..’; ‘Even I know about cross words’; ‘I may look stupid but I’m not | so simple as to think your name is’.[58] In acknowledging the assumption that, as a female voice, she is expected to lack knowledge and ability, she depicts the ‘deference and lack of confidence’ characteristic of ‘Women’s Language’ as an ‘echo’ of men’s; the fact that she ‘is much less likely to be taken seriously’, *because* she is a woman speaker, and is not part of the male dictated literary history the poem unmasks.

Nevertheless, like Riley’s Echo, Forrest-Thomson’s speaker deconstructs the stability of the allusions upon which her discourse is grounded. Within her references, the speaker suggests the lexis she echoes is itself an echo:

> Prynne says that if I don’t come back
> Safe from Sicily by the thirtieth April
> They will send a posse.
> March is the cruellest station.[59]

This expression alludes again to T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, whose use of the phrase was an allusion to the opening of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. Placing these words in the mouth of Prynne portrays another layer of allusion; another ‘echo’. In depicting figures in the male literary canon as being, like herself, literary derivations of language which came before, she disrupts the impression of there being any original speaker. Consequently, the authority of the male literary canon whose power she portrays is undermined.

In turn, the speaker’s exercise of echoing *within* the poem serves to also displace the disclosed lexical androcentrism. Seven times the speaker references the conversation between Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet regarding whether they heard a lark or a nightingale. She

[58] Forrest-Thomson, pp. 152, 154, ll. 11, 18, 107.
[59] Forrest-Thomson, p. 154, ll. 96-99.

echoes Shakespeare's words in alluding to the conversation, and then echoes herself echoing *these* words, with playful alterations. Shakespeare is almost directly quoted in the first reference 'It was the lark, my love, and not the nightingale', before she exploits the polysemy of 'lark' and 'kick' as well as the structure of the phrase until it becomes nonsensical: 'I like kicking up larks or | Larking up kicks'; 'I get a kick out of larking up nightingales'; 'It is the kick, my love, and not the nightingale | I like larking up kicks myself | But not kicking.' The final echo is a return to the faculty of the original reference: 'Anyway it is the lark, my love, | And not the nightingale.' [60] The speaker's voice becomes derivative of her own voice previously, allowing for continual repetition and change, which in each instance is moving away from, and undermining the existence of, a singular language authority or 'source'. As Cixous attentively writes on this issue: 'If woman has always functioned "within" the discourse of man, [...] it is time for her to dislocate this "within," to explode it, turn it around, and seize it.'[61] Forrest-Thomson's speaker faces her own positioning as "within" the discourse of man, and 'dislocates this' from this very stance. Again, the stable authority of the male literary canon she parodies is challenged.

In like manner, in portraying an addressee of the poem, Forrest-Thomson takes a greater step towards overturning the hierarchies which encompass the voice of her speaker: 'The word you want is Dante'; 'Do you realise whoever did that | Would be excommunicated if'; 'I'm not | so simple as to think your name | Is Elizabeth Brown'; 'And if you don't know about this you ought to'.[62] Having been given a suggestion of prior literature being itself an echo of *even prior* literature, the repeated second person pronouns suggest that, as the speaker is an echo of literature she has read, so will the addressee read the language of this poem and go on

[60] Forrest-Thomson, pp. 153, 154, 156, 157, ll. 61, 71-72, 95, 170-172, 194.
[61] Helene Cixous, 'Laugh of the Medusa', in *Signs*, I, IV, trans. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976) pp. 875-893 (p. 887).
[62] Forrest-Thomson, pp. 152, 153, 154, 156, ll. 19, 40, 107-109, 159.

to echo it; a process of ever fluctuating layers of language. This is reinforced by the poem's lack of stillness. Forrest-Thomson makes use of enjambment, caesura, no regular rhyme scheme, and no consistent setting, voice, or subject matter:

> Agamemnon came home and, as I said, was stabbed by his wife
> In his bath. Anyway it is the lark, my love,
> And not the nightingale. I follow the sacred footsteps of
> Hippolyta, the blest, the best.[63]

In line with Kinnahan's assertion 'The poem asserts the here and now as a product of the past, of a past of failed or damaged relationships. [...] temporarily, the poem can never be finished because there is no sense of 'now''.[64]

Forrest-Thomson's poem aligns with Ovid and Riley's Echo in presenting a female whose voice is defined by, an echo and derivative of, past male voices. Androcentrism permeates this dynamic, and Forrest-Thomson's poem illustrates this through exposing the domination of men in the literary world and the lack of lexical autonomy this grants women. Nevertheless, in engaging with a process of linguistic echoing, the poem's speaker answers back to the men's language she mimics, asserts linguistic agency over it, and exposes the polysemic and indefinite nature of language in order to undermine male precedence over the form.

This essay has engaged with Lakoff's examination of 'Women's Language' and the patriarchal values the notion unveils. In applying her study to Ovid's *Metamorphoses,* I have argued Echo as a figure whose oppression is defined by her coding as female; her lack of linguistic power; and her production by an androcentric literary tradition. In analysing the poems of Riley and Forrest-Thomson, I have determined the ways in which the poems

[63] Forrest-Thomson, pp. 157, ll. 193-196.
[64] Kinnahan, 'work at the language-face', p. 257.

reiterate Ovid's Echo; how they portray 'Women's Language' in constructing female speaker's whose voices are linguistic and literary echoes of men's; how they suggest women's powerlessness results from this; and how they suggest women can claim authority over language within and in spite of these bounds. In reading these texts synchronously, this essay has shown that the male dominated gendered hierarchy which has pervaded western culture is heavily characterised by and exercised through language; that it corresponds from the classical era to the modern day; that women, in lacking the ability to autonomously or fully express through language, have instead come to be characterised and oppressed by it; and that women can, through destabilising and reshaping language, create a sphere in which future women can overthrow these confines and begin to linguistically reshape their identities and social positioning. My argument echoes Beard's assertion that in order to overthrow gendered language, women will have to be 'resituated' on the inside of power, as well a power itself having to be redefined.[65] I have catered to the latter part of this assertion through reading Riley and Forrest-Thomson as confronting language itself as a tool of power.

Undeniably, in 2019, issues around women's oppression and silence continue. Coining the term 'himpathy', philosopher Kate Manne examines misogyny in relation to a societal concern for men which rests upon two main ideas: that masculinity is more important than women's voices; and that women voice's cannot be trusted or believed.[66] Affirmation of this saturates Western culture. Responses to the 'Me Too' movement signal a societal disinclination to believe women despite overwhelming evidence and awareness of a history of 'victim blaming'. Lawrence reiterates 'it is the very difficulty of speaking that exemplifies women's speech under patriarchy.'[67] With respect to the literary world, a 2018 Guardian

[65] Beard, *Women & Power*, p. 34.
[66] Kate Manne, *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).
[67] Amy Lawrence, *Echo and Narcissus: Women's Voices in Classical Hollywood Cinema* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991) p. 111

article noted of a renowned poetry prize shortlisting ‘While around 46% of poems and articles published were by female or non-binary poets and critics, the study found that male critics were twice as likely to review other men than women’.[68] Given this, experimental work from female poets such as Riley and Forrest-Thomson, in their provocative reshaping of traditional attitudes, is essential.

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