A Strategy of Seclusion: Cavarero's Feminist Decentering of Arendt's Political Theory

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Abstract

Through her reading of *The Odyssey*, Adriana Cavarero proposes a strategy for feminist action based on the creation of small communities as a means of disconnection from patriarchal society. On the face of it, her argument may seem like a straightforward appeal for feminist separatism, but it is in fact intended as a critique of the political theory of Hannah Arendt. In arguing that the public space is inherently patriarchal, and proposing that women therefore abandon the public space in favour of small communities that can provide islands of freedom from patriarchy, Cavarero rejects Arendt's valorisation of action in a central public realm. This makes Cavarero's work interesting in the context of contemporary debates on Arendt, in which several commentators have attempted to 'decenter' Arendt's political theory. Cavarero's 'small-community' model of action also unsettles the traditional dichotomy between models that locate action within a central, public space and models that construe action as the individualistic transgression of social norms. Her work is therefore important in the context of the growing interest in small-community models of action. However, Cavarero's gendering of Arendt's concept of political action as masculine leads her to engage in identity politics, and this renders the strongest version of her argument unsound. Nonetheless, a slightly weaker version of Cavarero's argument can support her thesis that Arendt's political theory must be decentered by the inclusion of a small-community model of action.

Through her reading of *The Odyssey*, Adriana Cavarero proposes a strategy for feminist action based on the creation of small communities as a means of disconnection from patriarchal society. On the face of it, her argument may seem like a straightforward appeal for feminist separatism, but it is in fact intended as a critique of the political theory of Hannah Arendt. In arguing that the public space is inherently patriarchal, and proposing that women therefore abandon the public space in favour of small, local communities that can provide islands of freedom from patriarchy, Cavarero rejects Arendt's valorisation of public action. She also appropriates Arendt's concepts of intimacy and plurality to show how this 'strategy of seclusion' can create communities that are genuinely independent of patriarchal society. This makes Cavarero's work interesting in the context of contemporary debates on Arendt, where thinkers such as Bonnie Honig (1993, p. 101), Seyla Benhabib (1995, pp. 99-101) and Dana Villa (1997, p. 200-201) have proposed that we 'decenter' Arendt's political

theory in order to overcome her exclusive focus on the public space as a site for action. It also means that Cavarero's critique of Arendt constitutes a work of political theory in its own right. By proposing a particularistic 'small-community' model of action as an alternative to agonistic political action, she unsettles the traditional dichotomy between models that locate action within a central, public space (for example, those of Arendt and Marx) and models that conceptualise action as the individualistic transgression of social norms, such as those given by Henry David Thoreau and Friedrich Nietzsche. Cavarero's work is therefore important in the context of the growing interest in small-community models of action (e.g. Bey 1985, Foucault 1997, Schutte 2004). However, as I will argue, Cavarero's work is not without its problems. Her gendering of Arendt's concept of political action as masculine means that, in her attempt to conceptualise an alternative to political action, she portrays feminist action as producing communities characterised by a specifically feminine social harmony. This constitutes an identity politics that undermines Cavarero's attempt to conceptualise a form of community that is genuinely independent of patriarchal society. Nonetheless, I will argue that a slightly weaker version of Cavarero's argument can be used to support the strategy of seclusion that is, ultimately, the central thesis in her reading of *The Odyssey*. As an aside, it should be noted that this paper will not examine Cavarero's engagement with Arendt's concept of the human condition of natality, which is part of her reading of the myth of Persephone and is worth an extended treatment in itself.

Cavarero's reading of *The Odyssey* is given in the first chapter of *In Spite of Plato*, a book she describes as a 'feminist rewriting of ancient philosophy' (Cavarero 1995). Her aim in that book is to retell the stories of female figures in ancient Greek texts and remove them from what she calls the 'patriarchal symbolic order' – the social and ontological framework of our culture that underpins the subordination of women. She does so by retelling the stories in a way that privileges the female character, and interpreting each one through the lens of feminist philosophy. In the case of Homer's *Odyssey*, Cavarero makes Penelope the main character of the story. Although Penelope's role in Homer's version of the story is relatively minor, Cavarero turns her

into a hero of feminist action, and uses her story to illustrate the possibility of withdrawal from society as a means of resistance to patriarchal oppression.

Homer's *Odyssey* is set after *The Iliad* and the sacking of Troy. It tells the story of Odysseus' journey home, and the various difficulties he encounters along the way. It also tells of what happens in Ithaca while he is gone, which is the part of the story that interests Cavarero. After Odysseus is presumed dead, his wife Penelope is urged to remarry, and a number of suitors gather at the palace. The suitors demand that Penelope marry one of them, but since they are keen only to usurp Odysseus' place in Ithaca, and none of them seem to consider Penelope as anything more than part of the prize, she is unwilling. In order to keep the suitors at bay, Penelope devises a scheme that tricks them into thinking she is planning to marry soon, but in fact allows her to stay unmarried indefinitely. As she later recounts to Odysseus:

> First some god inspired my mind with the thought of a robe;
> I should set up a great loom in the halls and weave on it
> A large and delicate fabric. I told them once:
> 'Young men, my suitors, since godly Odysseus is dead,
> Wait, though you are eager for this marriage of mine, till I finish
> This robe.'
> ....
> Every day I kept weaving there on the great loom,
> And the nights I undid it when I had the torches set up.
> So for three years I fooled the Achaians and persuaded them.
> (Homer 1967, XIX 137-151)

By putting the condition on her marriage that she must first weave this fabric, and then covertly undermining her own efforts at weaving it, Penelope stalls the suitors and remains unmarried. Although she appears to be moving toward the day when she will be ready, she is in fact hiding herself in a potentially endless loop of weaving and unweaving that will not see her remarry at all.

It is this endless loop, and the way it frees Penelope from her role as a woman, that Cavarero takes as the main point of interest in the story. As a woman, Penelope can be nothing more than a wife and a menial worker. Even though she is queen, she has no actual authority – she is simply required to make herself useful about the house and

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prepare to remarry. However, by nullifying the productive value of her work and covertly putting off her marriage, Penelope subverts her gender role. Furthermore, Penelope's endless loop of weaving and unweaving also transforms the weaving room into a secluded space that she shares with her maidservants. In Cavarero's words, this space "displaces the patriarchal order, setting up an impenetrable distance between that order and itself" (Cavarero 1995, p. 17). Cavarero elaborates on this point by making a distinction between Penelope's 'place' and her 'space' (Cavarero 1995, p. 12). Penelope's place is the role given to her as a participant in the patriarchal order. It is a state of oppression to which she is confined. Penelope's space, on the other hand, is a space of freedom created in the weaving room and occupied also by the maidservants who work with her. Penelope's move from a 'place' to a 'space' thus transforms the traditional exclusion of women into a voluntary seclusion that subverts patriarchy.

> To enter the world, that world at that time, is a way of accepting a place and role that the world of men has provided: men reserve the whole world for themselves, and assign to women a nook by the hearth. But then this nook becomes a space that is impenetrable to the motives of the world, a hearth of one's own. (Cavarero 1995, p. 17)

Penelope's suitors must know that it does not take years to weave a burial sheet, but in Cavarero's interpretation of events, they are dumbfounded. They do not know how to penetrate the space of seclusion and make Penelope progress toward marriage, so they wait, hoping that she will come around sooner or later (Cavarero 1995, p. 14). Penelope's strategy of seclusion thus creates a space in which she and her maidservants are free from the influence of the patriarchal order. Of course, the wider world is still none of their business – these women will always be excluded from public life in one way or another – but at least they can create a space of their own that the wider world cannot touch. Cavarero even suggests that the final moment of this seclusion, when Odysseus returns home but Penelope does not believe it is actually him, should be interpreted as a sign that Penelope is hesitant to give up the life she made while her husband was missing (Cavarero 1995, pp. 13-14). Odysseus may want to save her from the suitors, but he also wishes to return her to her 'place'

as a married woman and ruin her life of quiet independence.

However, it is interesting to note that Cavarero can only make this claim because her retelling of *The Odyssey* differs from Homer's version. Instead of weaving and unweaving her fabric in an uninterrupted loop, leaving the suitors stalled and aimless, Homer's Penelope only weaves for three years before she is betrayed by her maidservants and forced to finish the work:

> But when the fourth year came and the seasons came on
> As the months waned, and many days came to an end,
> They indeed though my maidservants, uncaring bitches
> They came and caught me, and all shouted at me together
> And so I finished it, though unwilling and under duress.
> (Homer 1967, XIX 152-156)

Cavarero's version of the story portrays Penelope's space of seclusion in an idyllic way, emphasising the harmony between the women as they work and socialise together. In Homer's text, however, there is betrayal and disharmony when Penelope's deception is discovered by her maidservants and she is forced to finish her task once and for all. There are two things to note about this discrepancy. First, it lets us know what Cavarero sees herself to be doing in her discussion of the story of Penelope. By putting forward a more optimistic version of the story, in which women act honourably even when men fail to do so, she aims to persuade the reader that her strategy of seclusion is feasible, and challenge the misogynist tendency to underestimate the abilities and moral character of women. From this we can infer that Cavarero's retelling of *The Odyssey* is aimed primarily at empowering its readers, and should be judged in terms of its success in this respect rather than its correspondence with the original text. In this way it is akin to Michel Foucault's controversial historical analyses, in which objective truth is less important than the task of empowering the reader to transform themselves. However, the discrepancy between Homer and Cavarero's versions of the story of Penelope also highlights the problematic nature of Cavarero's picture of community among women. By portraying community among women as characterised by an idyllic social harmony, she not only

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reinforces a questionable gender stereotype but also conceptualises feminist action as the creation of a specifically feminine form of community, and in doing so grounds feminism in an identity politics that contributes to the concretisation of identities and social structures. This will prove to be a major weakness in Cavarero's argument – a weakness that undermines her ability to construct a sound response to Arendt's political theory. I will show why after examining the conceptual background to her reading of *The Odyssey*.

Through her interpretation of *The Odyssey*, Cavarero suggests a strategy of seclusion as a response to the normalisation that women experience under the patriarchal order. As translators Serena Anderlini-D'Onofrio and Áine O'Healy note:

> This category [of seclusion] is part of Cavarero's strategy of undermining patriarchal discourse by retrieving the feminine. It operates on several levels. One is a mere acknowledgement of the place the social order assigns to the feminine. Another level emphasises the action of transforming this place into a space where new feminist strategies can be forged. A third level offers philosophical speculation on the possibilities for generating a new logic from this different rhetoric. (Cavarero 1995, pp. xxi-xxii)

Cavarero's strategy of seclusion is thus a three-step process. First, we must investigate the many ways in which the patriarchal order puts women in their 'place,' so to speak, excluding them from the public realm and robbing them of agency. Second, we must turn this undesirable 'place' into a 'space,' and trade exclusion for seclusion. Then, finally, we must generate a 'new logic' that will be an alternative to the logic of the patriarchal order. This means creating a new symbolic order as a basis for a form of existence that does not reproduce the patriarchal character of contemporary society. The three stages identified by Anderlini-D'Onofrio and O'Healy combine into a practical strategy for resistance against patriarchy. As I suggested earlier, this strategy is not expected to bring an end to the patriarchal order. It is much less ambitious, and only involves disconnection from an otherwise thoroughly patriarchal society. Nonetheless, it allows the victims of patriarchy to escape oppression to a certain extent, and create a way of life that would not otherwise be possible.

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The most interesting question raised by Cavarero's strategy of seclusion is that of the character of the new form of community to be created in the secluded space. As Anderlini-D'Onofrio and O'Healy suggest, this new form of community would be structured on the basis of a new feminine logic or 'matriarchal symbolic order.' However, the exact character this matriarchal order remains unclear in Cavarero's work. It could constitute an essentialist move, in which she contends that community among women should be organised on the basis of the universal character of femininity, or it might be a non-essentialist move, in which she aims to encourage new ways of thinking about self and society that go beyond those available within our patriarchal culture. There are a couple of indications that can help us address this question. First, if we keep in mind the way that Penelope's story stands in contrast to the *Lysistrata* (a comic play by Aristophanes about the immense influence of a unified movement of women), we can assume that Cavarero wants, at the very least, to avoid the crudest and most universalistic notions of feminist solidarity in favour of a particularistic approach to change. This suggests that she understands the matriarchal order as a cultural construct rather than as grounded in the universal character of femininity. Furthermore, the notion of a matriarchal symbolic order is necessary for Cavarero not because it can ground a universal feminist solidarity, but because it can help us *avoid* a universalistic approach to feminist action. Liberal feminism usually takes recourse to the ideal of gender equality as a basis for its critique of patriarchal culture, but this ideal is based on the notion of a universal human nature, or 'man,' that, as Cavarero argues, is complicit with patriarchy and the oppression of women. Thus denied recourse to the notion of equality, Cavarero must challenge the patriarchal symbolic order by proposing an alternative symbolic order that can allow us to conceptualise gender difference in a way that privileges the feminine. Cavarero thus uses the matriarchal symbolic order as a means of challenging the patriarchal foundations of our culture without falling into the trap of inherently patriarchal universalism. This anti-universalist approach suggests that Cavarero does not see the matriarchal symbolic order as grounded in the essential character of femininity but, rather, as a something to be created as a response to patriarchal culture. Nonetheless,

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these are only indications, and even if the matriarchal symbolic order can be taken as a cultural construct it is still difficult to infer from this what form of community it would produce. One way to shed some light on the issue is by turning to an examination of the relationship between Cavarero's reading of *The Odyssey* and Arendt's political theory. Understanding this relationship will help us get a better grasp on Cavarero's vision of an alternative to the patriarchal symbolic order.

Although Cavarero's reading of *The Odyssey* might appear to contain nothing more than a straightforward, unsophisticated argument for feminist separatism, it is in fact intended as a critique of Arendt's political theory. This critique can be drawn out using the distinction, shared by Arendt and Cavarero, between the agonistic action that unfolds in the public space and the process of menial labour that takes place in the private space. On the one hand, the life of action is exemplified by Odysseus: "The adventure at sea, the landing on an unknown shore," Cavarero writes, "become an optimal platform for the hero's *action*, the kind of action that erupts unpredictably and points the future toward one of its possible trajectories" (Cavarero 1995, p. 15) Odysseus is an actor in the most heroic sense, and as testament to the extraordinary nature of his actions, his story is recounted in the public space and preserved in Homer's *Odyssey*. By contrast, Penelope's life is devoted to labour in the private space. "Her place is the weaving room," Cavarero tells us, "not the hall where speeches are delivered nor the high seas where action occurs" (Cavarero 1995, p. 19-20). Cut off from the life of action in this way, Penelope lives out her small story among her maidservants, and makes of it what she can by seeking seclusion from the demands of men. The contrast between public action and private labour is thus exemplified by the very different lives of Odysseus and Penelope.

However, as both Arendt and Cavarero note, action and labour are not equally valued activities. The world is centred on action and the public space, while the labour process is only necessary because its productivity supports the life of action. In her political theory, Arendt valorises this state of affairs. She argues that authentic political action, which consists in agonistic contestation in the public space, is the

highest realm of human achievement. Not only does it bring new and unexpected events and ideas into the world, it also discloses the identity of the actor in the most human sense – as an irreplaceable and intrinsically unpredictable individual, as opposed to an individual with a given set of personal attributes (Arendt 1998, p. 181-188). Referred to by Arendt as 'who,' rather than 'what' one is, this superior form of identity gives action an existential significance that, in her view, is lacking in all other human activities (Kateb 2000). Arendt thus valorises action and, on this basis, makes her famous condemnation of the institutional and depersonalised nature of modern public life. Cavarero, on the other hand, takes a negative view of agonistic political action. She argues that agonistic action is connected with the patriarchal symbolic order because it is an inherently masculine activity that reinforces the confinement of women to the private space. Arendt's valorisation of agonistic political action is therefore, from Cavarero's point of view, complicit with the subordination and marginalisation of women. In this sense, Cavarero's position is similar to those of early feminist critics of Arendt like Adrienne Rich (1979) and Mary O'Brien (1981), who argue that Arendt's political theory is a classic example of patriarchal ideology that has use only as a cautionary example for feminist politics (cf. Allen 1999).

As an alternative to Arendt's patriarchal notion of the political, Cavarero proposes that women withdraw into spaces of seclusion. She thus inverts Arendt's distinction between public action and private labour. However, she does so without simplistically valorising the traditional domain of 'women's work.' Instead, she transforms private labour from a 'place' of subordination into a secluded 'space' in which women can create a genuinely independent form of existence. This amounts to an investment in what Arendt would call the intimate space (Arendt 1998, pp. 38-39, 45-46, 52). In Arendt's work, the intimate space is a marginal space that exists among friends, lovers and small groups of people, and provides seclusion from normalisation encountered in the public space. The intimate space is notably distinct from the private space. As Arendt understands it, the private space is focussed on the activity of labour, which maintains the biological element of human life. The form of community that exists in the private space is therefore based on biological similarity, which entails conformity,

and exists for the purpose of fulfilling bodily needs, which entails the hierarchy and obedience required for maximally efficient labour. The private space therefore provides no refuge from patriarchal oppression. The intimate space, by contrast, allows people to effectively disconnect themselves from society and create a more 'humane' way of life (Arendt 1998, p. 52). Arendt, however, would disagree with Cavarero's strategy of using the intimate space as means of escaping patriarchal oppression. Rather than disconnecting ourselves from society, she would advocate direct confrontation in the public space. Arendt expresses her antipathy toward the intimate space in her discussion of the *petit bonheur* in *The Human Condition*:

> What the public realm considers irrelevant can have such an extraordinary and infectious charm that a whole people may adopt it as their way of life, without for that reason changing its essentially private character. Modern enchantment with "small things," though preached by early twentieth-century poetry in almost all European tongues, has found its classical presentation in the *petit bonheur* of the French people. Since the decay of their once great and glorious public realm, the French have become masters in the art of being happy among "small things," within the space of their own four walls, between chest and bed, table and chair, dog and cat and flowerpot, extending to these things a care and tenderness which, in a world where rapid industrialization constantly kills off the things of yesterday to produce today's objects, may even appear to be the world's last, purely humane corner. This enlargement of the private, the enchantment, as it were, of a whole people, does not make it public, does not constitute a public realm, but, on the contrary means only that the public realm has almost completely receded, so that greatness has given way to charm everywhere. (Arendt 1998, p. 52)

Although Arendt understands very clearly why people would seek seclusion, there is no doubt that she disapproves of such investment in the intimate space at the expense of public participation. The 'anti-political' tendency expressed by those who attempt to disconnect themselves from public life is, from her staunchly political point of view, fundamentally irresponsible. Only through participation in public life can we avoid the totalitarian leanings inherent in modern forms of government and hold onto the shared concern for the world that is so important to our collective fate. Furthermore, discourse in the public space is the most important determinant of identities and relationships, so it is unclear, at least from Arendt's point of view and without Cavarero's notion of a matriarchal symbolic order, how any way of life can be

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constructed in the intimate space without simply reproducing the inequalities that are prevalent in public. Arendt would therefore argue that the intimate space does not offer a genuine and sustainable alternative to the wider society. This is all in addition to the fact that Arendt accords action an existential significance that is not shared by any other human activity, and thus implies that one cannot be a human being in the fullest sense of the word outside the public space. However, Cavarero responds to these potential objections by arguing that an intimate space, organised on the basis of a matriarchal symbolic order, can provide a legitimate alternative to the political. This is the key difference between her position and those of critics such as Rich and O'Brien: rather than rejecting Arendt's political theory outright, she attempts to 'decenter' it by using the concept of intimacy as an alternative to concept of agonistic action in a central public space.

However, in order to carry off her appropriation of the concept of intimacy and effectively decenter Arendt's political theory, Cavarero must provide a basis for a new symbolic order. To do this, she must modify another of Arendt's key concepts: the human condition of plurality. In Arendt's work, plurality means the simultaneous equality and difference of people (Arendt 1998, pp. 175-176). Every person is different from every other person (hence the need for us to communicate) but, at the same time, we are all equally human (hence we can relate to one another). The human condition of plurality gives rise to the public space, which people enter into on the basis of their equality but in which difference is disclosed through speech and action. As we have seen, Cavarero's work is a challenge to Arendt's concept of plurality because it regards plurality as linked to an inherently patriarchal notion of the political. However, Cavarero is not suggesting that we reject plurality *tout court* and live entirely in the private space. As I have argued, the private space is given to an authoritarian and conformist form of community, and therefore offers no room for questioning the norms and roles given to women, and certainly no way of creating a form of existence that is independent of the patriarchal order. As an alternative, Cavarero proposes the creation of a new kind of plurality in the intimate space. This new plurality can ground an alternative form of existence, and thus provides a basis

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on which Cavarero can argue that communities in the intimate space are genuinely independent of the patriarchal symbolic order. This new plurality is therefore also indicative of the nature of the matriarchal symbolic order proposed by Cavarero.

Although Cavarero does not provide much conceptual detail, we can infer five key facts about this new plurality. First, it establishes communities that are localised, intimate and manifold, rather than a single community that occupies a central space of appearance. It thus leads to a 'decentered' political theory and a particularistic approach to feminist action. Second, despite being modelled on Arendt's concept of plurality, this new plurality does not produce localised versions of the political space of appearance. If it did, the intimate spaces anticipated by Cavarero would simply reproduce the ontological structure of the patriarchal order rather than offer a new form of existence. This leads us to the third point: Cavarero's reconstructed plurality grounds a form of community that is focussed on labour rather than political action (Cavarero 1995, pp. 22-30). As far as Arendt is concerned, the form of community associated with labour is less than fully human – it is the domain of the human animal; the *animal laborans*. However, Cavarero inverts Arendt's distinction between public action and private labour and thus comes to valorise labour in the form of the great many 'menial' tasks that are traditionally allocated to women. This is evident both in her romantic description of Penelope's weaving and her constant celebration of embodiment as an inescapable aspect of human existence. The fourth point to note is that, where plurality for Arendt entails conflict and contestation, the way of being together proper to Cavarero's new plurality is characterised by harmony and cooperation, especially in the form of cooperative labour (Cavarero 1995, p. 30). This is the case because Cavarero's inversion of Arendt's distinction between public action and private labour entails the privileging of harmony over contestation. Her matriarchal symbolic order thus elevates the traditionally feminine characteristics of cooperation and harmony over the masculine pursuit of agonistic action. Finally, Cavarero reinforces her argument by suggesting that the 'who' of identity, which Arendt holds to be intrinsically linked to the political, can also be disclosed through a corporeal connection with others participating in the intimate space. This form of

identity is disclosed when a participant in the intimate space recognises a fundamental similarity between herself and another participant: "this life shared in a common horizon allows every woman to recognise herself in another woman" (Cavarero 1995, p. 30). She suggests that this connection is especially strong when people are brought together in cooperative labour, of the kind undertaken in Penelope's weaving room. Cavarero thus attempts to translate Arendt's notion of 'who' one is into a context where individuation is not accomplished through political action. This provides a way for her to argue that the intimate space is not existentially empty in the way Arendt believes it to be. These are the key characteristics of the appropriated concept of plurality put forward by Cavarero in her reading of *The Odyssey*. By embracing this new plurality, with the example of Penelope to guide them, women can form small communities and create a new, matriarchal symbolic order as a way of remaining independent, in an ontological sense, from the patriarchal order.

So, although Cavarero does not explicitly situate her own project with respect to other academic work, her critique of Arendt's concept of plurality and her aim of creating spaces for new relationships and new identities make it clear that she is engaging with the tradition of feminist separatism and trying to give that tradition a conceptual foundation, using Arendt to represent the patriarchal symbolic order that separatism struggles against. At the same time, however, she attempts to remedy the patriarchal leanings of Arendt's political theory by rejecting its exclusive emphasis on agonistic political action and mobilising the notions of intimacy and plurality as tools for the feminist subversion of patriarchy. In doing so, she shows an underlying respect for Arendt as a philosophical innovator. The result is a small-community model of action based on a strategy of seclusion, wherein women seek a new plurality in the intimate space as means of resistance to the oppression they experience under the patriarchal order.

However, we must return to the problems raised by the discrepancy between Homer and Cavarero's versions of the story of Penelope. As I argued earlier, this discrepancy reveals a romanticised notion of community among women in Cavarero's work.

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Penelope and her maidservants live together in quiet harmony, chatting amicably as they carry out their newly dignified manual labour, and as a result of this typically feminine capacity for harmonious cooperation, remain free from the betrayal that ruins Penelope's scheme in Homer's version of the story. As I have demonstrated, this romanticised notion of community among women is more than a superficial rhetorical device. It is incorporated into Cavarero's work in so far as she proposes a matriarchal symbolic order that privileges labour over action and harmony over contestation. Cavarero's critique of Arendt thus relies on a notion of community among women as grounded in a specifically feminine social harmony to provide an antidote to Arendt's supposedly masculine notion of the political. This approach is symptomatic of what Mary G. Dietz (1995) and Bonnie Honig (1995) refer to as the 'gendering' of Arendt's concept of agonistic action. Exemplified by Rich and O'Brien's critiques, the gendering of Arendt's concept of agonistic action involves mapping the masculine-feminine binary onto Arendt's categories of action and labour. Agonistic political action thus comes to be understood as intrinsically masculine in character, and is rejected on this basis in favour of more feminine forms of agency. Cavarero's critique of Arendt is based on this line of reasoning. However, as Deitz and Honig contend, there are several problems with gendering Arendt's concept of action. First, it constitutes an incorrect interpretation of Arendt. Arendt certainly genders the categories of work and labour (as masculine and feminine respectively) but action itself is not connected with any particular gender identity. Much the opposite – action, for Arendt, involves the production and contestation of identity, so the subject of action is neither intrinsically masculine nor intrinsically feminine (Dietz 1995, pp. 29-32). Second, the gendering of Arendt's concept of action leads to an identity politics that distinguishes between characteristically feminine and masculine forms of agency and community. Feminist action thus becomes the confirmation rather than the subversion of gender identities. Honig is critical of Seyla Benhabib's attempt to decenter Arendt's political theory on these grounds, and would presumably take the same line with regards to Cavarero (Benhabib 1995; Honig 1995, p. 156-160). The notion of feminist action as producing a specifically feminine form of community, brought together in feminine activities and purged of agonistic action, seems at best

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an ineffective way of contesting the concretised gender identities that support patriarchal oppression, and at worst an endorsement of the patriarchal symbolic order's definition of the nature and place of women. It is worth noting that this criticism applies to Cavarero's work even if we take the most charitable approach and interpret the matriarchal symbolic order as a cultural construct rather than as grounded in the universal nature of woman. In either case, community among women and forms of agency adopted by women are understood as the expression of a homogeneous identity. Additionally, it should be noted that Cavarero's use of identity politics cancels out the benefits inherent in her particularistic 'small-community' model of action – by positing a form of community grounded in the matriarchal symbolic order, she institutes homogeneity where we might have expected to find a diverse range of new social structures and identities. Finally, gendering Arendt's concept of political action as masculine and rejecting it on this basis means throwing away the possibility of drawing on agonistic political action as a resource for feminism. As Honig argues, a thoroughly agonistic feminism would conceptualise feminist action not only as the subversion of gender identities and patriarchal social structures, but also as disclosure of the unique 'who' of the actor's identity (Honig 1995). This approach would offer a release from identity politics and make the fullest possible use of the conceptual resources offered by Arendt. Cavarero's notion that the 'who' of identity can be disclosed in other ways than through political action tempers Honig's argument to an extent, but this notion is not clearly fleshed out in Cavarero's work, nor does it seem capable of ameliorating the strictly identarian character of her notion of community among women. Therefore, although Cavarero's critique cleverly modifies some of Arendt's key ideas, her gendering of the concept of political action leads her to conceptualise the strategy of seclusion as creating a specifically feminine social harmony, and thus to propose a flawed solution to the problem of how feminist action might create a community that is truly independent of the patriarchal order.

However, Cavarero's critique of Arendt can be defended to an extent. It may be untenable to argue that Arendt's concept of agonistic political action is inherently patriarchal, but Cavarero is nonetheless correct in arguing that the public space is

inherently patriarchal – not on an *a priori* basis, but simply because it is traditionally organised in such a way as to deny women entry. Accordingly, Cavarero is still justified in arguing that Arendt's political theory is somewhat hostile to feminism. By maintaining an exclusive focus on political action in a world where the public space is a predominantly male domain, Arendt arrives at a model of action that would lead us to underestimate the opportunities available to women. Therefore, despite its advantages, Arendt's political theory must be modified if we wish to use it in conceptualising feminist action. This is a slightly weaker argument, and does not support the way in which Cavarero inverts the distinctions of Arendt's political theory to arrive at the notion of a matriarchal symbolic order, but it is still enough to support Cavarero's central thesis: that feminism might benefit from a strategy of seclusion that appropriates Arendt's concepts of intimacy and plurality to conceptualise a genuine alternative to the wider society. Indeed, even Honig, a key defender of Arendt's concept of agonistic political action, seems sympathetic to this critique when she argues that we should reject Arendt's exclusive emphasis on the public space as the locus of action (Honig 1993, p. 124). Therefore, although Cavarero's reading of *The Odyssey* suffers from some problems with regards to her interpretation of Arendt's concept of political action, it presents a legitimate complaint regarding Arendt's focus on the public space and persuasively proposes the creation of communities in the intimate space as an alternative. This notion that we can modify Arendt's political theory by introducing a small-community model of action is an original and significant contribution in two respects. First, a small-community model provides a decentered, particularistic approach to action that can reinforce Arendt's political theory against her critics, feminist and otherwise. Second, in the broader scheme of things, such a model can also unsettle the traditional dichotomy between models of action that locate action within a central, public space and models that construe action as the individualistic transgression of social norms. A small-community model of action can thus allow us to reconcile an account of the potential of relationships to facilitate social change with a particularistic respect for diversity. Therefore, although Cavarero's critique of Arendt fails to overcome identity politics, it nonetheless constitutes a useful contribution to both Arendt scholarship and political theory more

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generally.

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