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*Niemands Frau* as a ‘Minor Translation’ of the *Odyssey* from ‘er’ to ‘sie’

*Niemands Frau* is considered here as a ‘minor translation’ of the *Odyssey* into a form that flows linguistically, philosophically and politically from Köhler’s treatment of the pronoun ‘sie’, in contrast to what she associates with the pronoun ‘er’. The shift from ‘er’ to ‘sie’ is expressed metaphorically by Köhler in terms of the emergence of quantum physics from Newtonian physics – from an understanding of reality in which objective fact can exist and predictions made to an understanding which produces plural probability, and where finite, single truth is not possible. These contrasting systems have an ethical dimension for Köhler: she positions the ‘major’ form of (patriarchal) language as a site where hegemonic power is exercised and difference is repressed in opposition to the ‘minor’ form which has a disruptive transgressive effect of undermining the assertion of objectivity on the part of the major, and expanding the possibilities for lived reality, by articulating difference.

‘Eine andere art von übersetzung’
Barbara Köhler, *Niemands Frau*¹

‘Use the minor language to send the major language racing.’
Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*²

This chapter engages with the assertion made by Barbara Köhler in the afterword to *Niemands Frau* (2007) that the poem cycle is a form of ‘translation’ of Homer’s *Odyssey* (800 BC). The contention is that reading *Niemands Frau* as a radical, ‘minor’ translation of the *Odyssey* is a productive way of understanding the nature of Köhler’s intervention into the German literary canon and therefore into cultural hegemony that is supported by notions of what is canonical. At the heart of this ‘minor’ translation is the pronoun ‘sie’, from which Köhler derives a poetics to challenge what she situates as patriarchal political and artistic norms. Defining what her translation will be different from is part of the poetic strategy of the cycle, and Köhler sets out her opposition to the ‘major’ patriarchal politics of earlier translations, to the form of language that articulates such politics, and to translation practice that attempts to give the impression of equivalence and conceal the situated-ness of the translator’s perspective. Köhler’s ‘minor’ translation of the *Odyssey*...
acknowledges her own ‘minor’, gendered perspective, rather than assuming a ‘universal’ position, and attempts to create a form of language that she identifies metaphorically with quantum physics, as articulating an uncertain reality of plural probability.

In *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari formulate the idea that language is divided between ‘major’ and ‘minor’ forms.

Majority implies a constant, of expression or content, serving as a standard measure. [...] Let us assume that the constant or standard is the average adult-white-heterosexual-European-male. [...] Majority assumes a state of power and domination, not the other way round. [...] For the majority, insofar as it is included in the abstract standard, is never anybody, it is always Nobody – Ulysses, whereas the minority is the becoming of everybody. [...] We must distinguish between: the majoritarian as a constant and homogeneous system [...] and the minoritarian as a potential, creative and created, becoming.³

For Deleuze and Guattari, the ‘major’ and the ‘minor’ are therefore political ways of conceiving of language and, as terms, describe language as a site of power: the major silences the minor (linguistically, philosophically and politically), and the minor is a force that disrupts the apparently ‘universal’ position of the major, by revealing it to be partial, in both senses of the word. Their choice of the figure of Ulysses (Odysseus) as an expression of the ‘major’ makes clear that the *Odyssey* is a significant feature of the cultural landscape against which they formulate their ideas of major and minor. These categories are useful for consideration of Köhler’s version of the *Odyssey*, a defining characteristic of which is the opposition she creates between ‘major’ and ‘minor’ forms of language, knowledge and power. Throughout the cycle she situates a standardising use of language, and with it the claim to objective perspective represented by the figure of Odysseus, as Deleuze and Guattari do, and in dynamic opposition to her own poetics, which represent a form of the German language that can liberate ‘minoritarian’ (and often female) perspectives in the *Odyssey*. Minor languages, according to Deleuze and Guattari, ‘do not exist in themselves: they exist in relation to a major language and are also investments of that language for the purpose of making it minor’.⁴ The quality of minor language as a form that emerges from the major is important for Köhler’s understanding of language, as is made clear in *Wittgensteins Nichte* (1999): ‘Das Sprechen über Sprache findet in der Sprache statt, von der es handelt – das Objekt