This chapter suggests that Barbara Köhler’s *Niemands Frau* seeks to spring language free from the logic of sameness and identity that has governed western discourse and its (archetypically male) subject, and to release a relational language capable of articulating many different modes of speaking and being. In so doing, Köhler’s work resonates productively with that of contemporary feminist thinkers Luce Irigaray and Adriana Cavarero, while at the same time offering a different response to the question of (sexuate) difference and an alternative route out of the exclusionary structures that have all too often characterised western thought.

‘die große Form des Lebens [hat] sich immer auf der Seite der unbe-
denklichsten πολύτροποι gezeigt.’

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, §344

To approach the *Odyssey* as a female reader is to be immediately confronted with its opening word – *andra* – which is coupled with an appeal to the Muse. In Lattimore’s translation, the line runs: ‘Tell me, Muse, of the man of many ways’ (*Andra moi ennepe, Mousa, polytropon*).

The tale to be told is that of a much-wandering man, unlike any other; the feminine role – assigned to the daughters of Mnemosyne, goddess of memory – is to inspire the telling.

To approach this text not just as a female reader, but a female writer, is thus doubly alienating. If the feminine role is to inspire, the telling implicitly seems to be the work of a man, as reflected in the western literary tradition that ascribes the *Odyssey* to Homer, the individual male author, and – according to Horkheimer and Adorno – makes Odysseus the archetype of the individual subject.

But it is that place of doubled exclusion – ‘meine doppelte stelle’ – that Barbara Köhler mobilises to reclaim a place for an ‘I’ that is a she and to open the text up to its multiple, heterogeneous possibilities. After all, the *Odyssey*, like its hero, is *polytropon*, full of twists and turns and
unexpected transformations: of goddesses disguised as men and men turned into swine, not to mention a blind seer who has been both man and woman, and whose story reminds us of the risks of coming to a decisive answer in questions of sexual difference. So why could the author not be a woman?

And yet, as the opening poem of Niemands Frau shows, if ‘she’ inserts herself as writer rather than Muse, this insertion sets off a series of questions and transformations that disrupt the logic of the text and its writing:

Sage mir muse wer Es ist was Er wer Homer & warum ist Es wichtig & Es zu wissen sag mir wer du bist was Ich ist [...] Mir sage muse wer sagt dass Er sei Homer sei gewesen ein sie sei nicht einer sei ein e mehrzahl wenn er ist bin ich dann muse sage mir seine: worte für: mich

(‘MUSE : POLYTROP’, p.10)

If Homer is a ‘he’, then the position of the (female) I who is writing (and written into being by) this text is called into question (‘bin ich dann’). It is impossible to tell if ‘she’ is then the Muse (‘bin ich dann muse’) or is continuing her questioning by addressing the Muse (‘muse sage mir’). In any case, if He is (the one, the author), she seems to be his (‘seine’) and appeals to the Muse to tell of his words for her. At the same time, these lines turn language back on itself to register the possibility of an authoring I who might be a she (‘ein sie sei’), of a feminine one who is also a multiplicity (‘ein / e mehrzahl’). By inserting herself as a questioning ‘I’, Köhler opens the text to multiple dislocations: to the many ways in which language might speak, and the many speaking subjects that might be articulated.

Köhler herself foregrounds the significance of the opening line of the Odyssey, writing in the first section of the ‘NACHWORT, VORLÄUFIG’ of ‘sein erstes wort andra’, on which she expands one line later: ‘Ein wort: ein mann, ein alpha-exemplar, von dem und der die geschichte erzählt’ (1 (/22), p. 76). In the same text, she names this man as: ‘Odysseus, jenen wendigen, vielgewandten mann, anér polýtropos’ (p. 75). This chapter will suggest that Köhler’s Niemands Frau undertakes to separate and reclaim the ‘many ways’ – of being, of speaking, of travelling between places, people, and words – from ‘the man’: the one who is the subject and hero of the story, the ‘One’ who, in western discourse and culture, will come to occupy the place of the subject to