

Of Lacan, Derrida and Women

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Introduction

Lacanian psychoanalysis occupies an ambivalent position within gender studies. Although, Lacan is deemed responsible for offering some of the most remarkable insights into the construction of a subject's sexual identity, he is also accused of phallogentrism - the representation of *two* sexes by a single, masculine model. On the side of his positive contribution to gender studies, Lacan denies any attempt to root sex, sexuality and gender identity in a pre-given nature or set of libidinal drives. There is no biologically based gender identity and, correspondingly, no normal, mature sexuality that can be understood as the culmination of the proper development of the libidinal drives. Also, Lacan offers a non-naturalistic account of gender hierarchy as a system which sustains and legitimates the oppression of women by giving a seeming "reality" to fantasy projections of femininity. Lacan understands male superiority as a "sham", meaning that is not mandated by nature, but instead rests on a fantasy identification (i.e. that having the penis is having the phallus). Lacanian theory is considered useful for an adequate understanding of the way in which the projection of stereotypes of gender identity inform our dreams and fantasies, including our dreams of political change.

Yet, in spite of his recognition that gender as a social construction determines sex and sexuality and not the other way around, Lacan's analysis emphasizes the way in which the law of this division is self-replicating. Thus, even though he understands the situation of women within patriarchal culture and society as an unnecessary subjugation—if by unnecessary we mean not by nature—he still sees change in the gender structure as impossible. According to Lacan, our identity as "men" and "women" seems to be frozen into the "symbolic", which is the register of language, social exchange and radical intersubjectivity. Thus, gender is understood as a cultural imperative imposed by a system that perpetuates itself through the child's ascent to the world of conventional meaning, a world which is ultimately founded on the significance of the phallus. Derrida

undermines Lacan's political pessimism by arguing that if gender hierarchy is constituted, as Lacan himself claims, through language, it cannot protect itself against the slippage of meaning inherent in linguistic structures. As a result, there can always be new interpretations of gender identity. The very idea of gender is itself shifting, because there can never be any end to divergent interpretations of it; there is no "accurate" description of sex or sexuality. If such reinterpretations were not possible, we could not reaffirm the feminine within sexual difference other than as the imposed structures of femininity we associate with the patriarchal stereotypes of Woman.

Lacan and Feminism

But let us see in some detail how Lacan reaches the above politically pessimistic conclusions. According to Lacan, children of both sexes enter into the world of culture and, more specifically, the signifying system we know as language only by suffering a severe wound to their own narcissism. This wound is the result of the recognition by the child that its mother is other to itself. This primordial moment of separation is experienced by the infant both as a loss, and as a gaining of identity. With this recognition comes the inevitable question, "Who does Mommy want if she does not want me?" The answer, in a society governed by patriarchal conventions, and which, correspondingly, heterosexuality has been institutionalized as the norm, is "Daddy". Yet, Lacan is careful to note that it is not the real Daddy but the phallus¹ that causes the mother's desire².

1. For Lacan, the *phallus* has two meanings. In the first place (chronologically and logically) the phallus does not refer to a biological organ but to an imaginary organ, the detachable penis, the penis that the child believes the mother possesses. The phallus is thus the effect of an imaginary fantasy of bodily completion, represented by the mother, against which the child compares itself. In the second place, as a result of the castration complex and the child's acknowledgement of the mother's castration, the phallus is no longer a detachable organ, but a signifier which makes an absence present. As the key signifier of the law of the father, and as the threshold term for the child's access to the symbolic order, it can be conceived in three closely related ways. Firstly, it is the "signifier of desire," the "object" to which the other's desire is directed: it is insofar as he *has* the phallus that man is the object of woman's desire; and it is insofar as she *is* the phallus that a woman is a man's object of desire. In this sense, the phallus is the heir to the primordial lost object (the mother). Secondly, as a signifier it is the pivotal term in the child's acceptance of the law and name of the father, the term with reference to which the child positions itself as male or not-male (i.e. female); thirdly, it represents the exchange of immediate pleasures for a place as a speaking being. It is thus the "signifier of signifiers", the emblem of the law of language itself, the term which guides the child to its place as an "I" within the symbolic (see Lacan, *The Signification of the Phallus*, 1993, 281-91).

2. For Lacan, desire is always marked by the desire of the Other. It is an ontological lack which stems from the separation of the subject from the immediacy of its natural and social environment, and the impulse of that subject to fill in this space through, in the first instance, the desire of the (m)other; and in the second, through its access to language and systems of meaning. Desire is the excess or residue left unsatisfied through the gratification of need or instinct, and left unspoken by the articulation of demand (see Lacan, *The Direction of the Treatment and the Principles of its Power*, 1993, 226-80).

The implicit recognition that the desire of the mother is directed to what she does not have, the phallus, destroys the illusion that the mother is complete in herself, omnipotent and, therefore, always able to meet the child's needs. Lacan refers to this imaginary figure as the Phallic Mother. Her apparent lack becomes now a threat to the child's security. It is the break-up of this idealized symbiotic unity that forces the child to speak in order to articulate his or her desires. But the most profound desire, the desire to be one with the mother again, cannot be spoken because of the intervention of the symbolic father. Given the incest taboo, the child cannot actually have the mother. As a result the Phallic Mother is repressed into the unconscious as the idealized, if often feared, Woman.

Although, on the basis of what has already been said, it would seem that both sexes are castrated by their separation from the Phallic Mother, Lacan, however, goes further, and appropriates signification in general to the masculine. Despite the fact that he maintains the difference between the penis and the phallus (the phallus represents lack in both sexes), it remains the case that because the penis can visibly represent the lack, the penis can appear to stand in for the "would-be neutral phallus". As Lacan writes in "The Signification of the Phallus":

The phallus is the privileged signifier of that mark in which the role of the logos is joined with the advent of desire.

It can be said that this signifier is chosen because it is the most tangible element in the real of sexual copulation, and also the most symbolic in the literal (typographical) sense of the term, since it is equivalent there to the (logical) copula. It might also be said that, by virtue of its turgidity, it is the image of the vital flow as it is transmitted in generation. (Lacan 1993, 287)

The phallus, as the transcendental signifier, cannot be totally separated from its representation by the penis, even if it is an illusion that the two are identified, an illusion only maintained by the symbolic. This illusion is the basis of a masculine subjectivity that is rooted in the *fantasy* that to have a penis is to "have" the phallus and, therefore, to be able to satisfy the mother's desire. The masculine child "sees" his mother's lack, which gains significance as her castration. As a result, the fantasy that she is the Phallic Mother and, therefore, capable of self-fulfillment, is destroyed.

Clinical experience has shown us that this test of the desire of the Other is decisive not in the sense that the subject learns by it whether or not he has a real phallus, but in the sense that he learns that the mother does not have it. This is the moment of experience without which no symptomatic consequence (phobia) or structural consequence (Penisneid) relating to the castration complex can take effect. Here is signed the conjunction of desire, in that the phallic signifier is its mark, with the threat or nostalgia of lacking it. (Lacan 1993, 289)

Sexual difference is based on the significance that this experience of “sighting” comes to have in the symbolic. To have the penis is identified with being potent, able to satisfy the mother’s desire. This fantasy identification explains why, for Lacan, the symbolic is never fully separated from the masculine imaginary, in which the masculine subject invests in the illusion that he can regain what he lost, namely, he can bring his “mommy” back to him. In this sense, there is no “real” masculine superiority in Lacan. Male privilege is based on a fantasy identification that to have the penis is to have the phallus. Anatomy plays a role, but ultimately as a “sham” (Rose 1982, 11). But if the penis, at least on the level of fantasy, is identified with the phallus, the Woman, who lacks the penis, is also seen as lacking the affirmative qualities associated with the phallus. The result for women is that they are left in the state of the castrated Other which means that they cannot positively represent their relationship to the mother and, thus, to their own “sex”. Woman, as a result, is identified only by her lack of the phallus. She is difference *from* the phallus. Again, to quote Lacan:

But one may, simply by reference to the function of the phallus, indicate the structures that will govern the relations between the sexes. Let us say that these relations will turn around a “to be” and a “to have”, which, by referring to a signifier, the phallus, have the opposed effect, on the one hand, of giving reality to the subject in this signifier, and, on the other, of derealising the relations to be signified. (Lacan 1993, 289)

The man has the illusion of *having* the phallus, in the sense of the potency to keep the woman. The woman “is” for him the phallus, his object of desire. She signifies for him. It is this significance that woman gives him that mirrors his identity. But the phallus that splits the man from fulfillment of his desire is also the basis for the psychical fantasy of Woman. This fantasy is the divide of the Woman of desire into either the “good” or the “bad” Phallic Mother, and, of course, it lies at the basis of the more conventional split of the wife/mistress. The Woman of desire signifies the lost paradise, which, at the same time, is a threat to masculine identity. The “bad” woman, the seductress, symbolizes the danger of desire itself. But no matter how the Woman is projected —wife/mistress, whore/saint— she “is” only as fantasy. She is presented as the basis of the symbolic, but as fantasy.

As a result, women can know themselves only as this difference, as this lack, the “being” that has no being other than as a “men’s” fantasy. As Lacan remarks in “God and the Jouissance of The Woman”:

There is woman only as excluded by the nature of things which is the nature of words, and it has to be said that if there is one thing they themselves are complaining about enough at the moment, it is well and truly that — only they don’t know what they are saying, which is all the difference between them and me. (Lacan 1982a, 144)

There is no “she” there, other than as she is spoken and written by men. But it is because Woman “is” only as written, and, indeed, as fantasy, that Lacan’s famous position is technically anti-essentialist. This is the basis for Lacan’s infamous assertion that Woman does not exist, which is just another way of saying that the phallic mother and our repressed relationship to her cannot be adequately represented.

The woman can only be written with The crossed through. There is no such thing as The woman, where the definite article stands for the universal. There is no such thing as The woman since of her essence —having already risked the term, why think twice about it?— of her essence, she is not all. (Lacan 1982a, 144)

This is also a way of insisting that women cannot tell of the experience of Woman, with a capital “W”, because it is exactly this experience as universal which is beyond representation. Lacan, in other words, seems to undermine all attempts on the part of the feminists or anti-feminists to tell us what Woman, with a capital “W” is. At the same time, the Woman or the feminine is “there” in her absence as the lack that marks the ultimate object of desire in all subjects. Hence, to say that she is unknowable is not to argue that her lack is not felt. Indeed, Woman as lack is constitutive of genderized subjectivity. Even so, Woman does not exist as a “reality” present to the subject, but as a loss.

As a result, Lacan explains some of the great myths of the quest in which masculine identity seeks to ground itself as quests for Her. The feminine becomes the “Holy Grail”. Within Lacan’s framework, the myths of Woman are about this quest to ground masculine subjectivity. Because they tell us about masculine subjectivity, and not about Woman, they cannot serve as clues to unlocking her mystery.

In this way, women are cut off from the myths that could give the feminine meaning and therefore, in Lacan’s sense, women are silenced before the mystery of the ground of their own identity, of their own origin. The “feminine” is given meaning in the *symbolic order* that belies her very existence, as the Other in their myths and fantasies of that order. Woman “is” imaginary. But it is important to note here that feminine *jouissance*³ remains as the sexuality that escapes from its place as established by the phallic order. The symbolic is not the whole truth. To quote Lacan:

It none the less remains that if she is excluded by the nature of things, it is precisely that in being not all, she has, in relation to what the phallic function designates of jouissance, a supplementary jouissance. (Lacan 1982a, 144)

3. *Jouissance* is a term which, as used by Lacan, lacks direct translation. In contemporary philosophical and psychoanalytic discourse, it is often taken to refer to women’s specifically feminine, total sexual pleasure. However, *jouissance* is not limited either to sexual pleasure, which Lacan includes in the phrase “a jouissance of the body,” (Lacan 1982, 145) or to women. *Jouissance* also refers to the experience of perfect completion with the Other (*ibid.*, 137-48), the lack of which is the source of desire (*ibid.*, 116-17,120).

Yet, women cannot knowingly engage the feminine in order to develop a non-phallic orientation to, or contact with, other women, in spite of their lived *jouissance* which might seemingly unite them. Women are instead appropriated by the imaginary feminine as it informs male fantasy. She “is” the phallus, the signifier of his desire. As a result, women are divided from one another, competing for them. Every woman is a threat to every other, as the one who can take away the man by signifying his desire more graphically than the one before. Thus, their definition within the symbolic renders solidarity between women almost impossible.

Derrida Contra Lacan

Derrida’s deconstructive reading of Lacan attempts to undermine the latter’s conclusion that the problem of Woman is “insoluble” because her definition as lack is continually reinforced given the meaning of sexual difference in our current structures of gender identity. Even if Lacan recognizes the fantasy dimension of sexual difference, he emphasizes the power of gender structure to give significance to the reality that women do not have a penis. Derrida, on the other hand, emphasizes the political and ethical significance of the way in which lived sexuality never perfectly matches the imposition of gender identity. He does so first by demonstrating how Lacan fails to take notice of the implications of his own insight into the constitutive force of language. Second, he offers another interpretation of Lacan’s statement “Woman does not exist”, which, within Lacan’s own framework, means that the libidinal relationship to the Phallic Mother cannot be represented precisely because it has been repressed into the unconscious.

Derrida reinterprets Lacan’s insight into what is perceived as the inability to separate the truth of Woman from the fictions in which she is represented and through which she portrays herself. Lacan teaches us that any concept of sexuality cannot be separated from what shifts in language, what he calls *significance*⁴. For Lacan, there is no outside referent in which the process of interpretation of sexuality comes to an end, such as nature or biology, or even conventional gender structures. As a result, we can never discover the “true”, authentic ground of female identity in order to oppose it to the masculine erasure of the feminine. For Derrida, Lacan’s insight into the linguistic code of the unconscious undermines his own pessimistic political conclusions. As Derrida insists, this linguistic code cannot be frozen because of the slippage of meaning inherent in the metaphorical aspect of language. Deconstruction demonstrates that within the Lacanian understanding of the linguistic structure of gender identity, Woman cannot just be

4. Throughout his work, Lacan uses the term *significance* to refer to that “movement in language against, or away from, the positions of coherence which language simultaneously constructs” (Jacqueline Rose 1982, 51-2). As Rose goes on to explain, “[t]he concept of *jouissance* (what escapes in sexuality) and the concept of *significance* (what shifts in language) are inseparable” (*ibid.*, 52).

reduced to lack because the metaphors through which she is represented produce an always-shifting reality. Against Lacan, Derrida shows us that what shifts in language, including the definition of gender identity and the designation of the feminine as the lack of the phallus, cannot definitively be stabilized. Rigid identity structures are constantly undermined by the very “iterability” that allows them to perpetuate their meaning.

Derrida also notes that the phallus takes on the significance it has for the child only as the metaphor for what the mother desires. Because the erection of the phallus as the “transcendental signifier” is based on a reading or an interpretation, the significance of the phallus can be reinterpreted⁵. Thus, the significance of the discovery of anatomical sexual difference can also be reinterpreted (if the phallus is not read through the fantasy projection of what it means to have a penis). As a result, the divide into two genders may also yield to other interpretations.

In *Signature, Event, Context*, Derrida shows how the “iterability” of language implies both sameness and difference. Words as signs are iterable, or repeatable, by any general user (Derrida 1988, 7). In other words, language is possible precisely because public standards allow intelligibility. Derrida demonstrates that the intersubjectivity of language—its capacity to function as a vehicle for the repetition of the same by different subjects—is, ironically, a vehicle for innovation. At the same time, as a language functions to repeat the same message by different subjects, it retains its capacity to be turned away by a reader or a bearer from what it meant to its issuer so that it continues to mean something, but not identically what it meant to its writer or utterer (Derrida 1988, 7-12).

Linguistic context, then, does not preclude innovation. Instead, it provides for the possibility—indeed the *inevitability*—of innovation. Unless there is an appeal to an ideal self-sameness which guarantees the exact repetition of meaning, the very *meaning* of the context itself will be constantly shifting. Our sense of the possible always changes through new interpretations.

The possibility of reinterpretation of the meaning of the feminine, as well as of the significance of the gender divide itself, is what keeps open the space for Derrida’s new “choreography” of sexual difference. Thus, the emphasis on the performative power of language, in and through which gender identity is constituted, allows for the transformation of current structures of gender identity.

5. Even Lacan, despite his otherwise universalistic claims, acknowledges at some points in his work that the chain of signifiers in which the phallus finds its context varies historically:

The phallus is not a question of a form or of an image, or of a fantasy, but rather a signifier, the signifier of desire. In Greek antiquity, the phallus is not represented by an organ but as an insignia. (Lacan quoted in E. Grosz 1990, 121)

The phallus thus distributes access to the social categories invested with various power relations. For example, in Ancient Greece, it was the phallus signified as the family insignia, which served to differentiate one class from another through the exclusion of slaves from access to the family name. In our culture, the presence and absence of penis serves to differentiate one sex from another, according to the interests of one of them (*ibid.*).

In *Glas* (1986), *The Post Card* (1987a), *Spurs* (1979), and “Choreographies” (1982b), Derrida exposes the lie of the symbolic identification of the “feminine” as the truth of castration, as the ‘hole’ that can be filled in, never understood or represented, and certainly not by women themselves, who are excluded from the value of words. For Derrida, the lack, the inevitable absence of the phallic mother, is precisely what cannot be given a proper place. Woman disrupts the very notion of a proper place, even in the Lacanian “designation” of her as the lack of the phallus. As Derrida argues in “Le facteur de la vérité”:

By determining the place of the lack, the topos of that which is lacking from its place, and in constituting it as a fixed centre, Lacan is indeed proposing, at the same time as a truth-discourse, a discourse on the truth of the purloined letter as the truth of The Purloined Letter....The link of femininity and Truth (of) castration, is the best figure of castration, because in the logic of the signifier it has always already been castrated; and Femininity ‘leaves’ something in circulating (here the letter), something detached from itself in order to have it brought back to itself, because she has never had it: whence truth comes out of the well, but only half-way. (Derrida 1987a, 441-2)

Since the Lacanian account proclaims the unshakeability of the structures of gender identity, even if it conceives them as an Imposed Law and not a pre-given nature, this implies that the symbolic is the whole of what can be represented as “reality”. In this case, then, there can be no definite locale for Woman, because she remains the Other, that which denies the masculine symbolic as totality. The feminine expresses the play of difference that cannot be wiped out. Hence, if Lacan wanted to be consistent with his argument, he would have to accept that Woman cannot be contained by any system of gender identification, including the one established by the symbolic in which she is defined as the castrated Other. Nevertheless, Lacan insists that he has grasped the truth of Woman, at least as represented by the masculine symbolic. In the symbolic, her significance is only the lack of the phallus. Despite the fact that this significance in Lacan is not real in any ontological or biological sense, however the structures of gender identity deny any expression to the difference of women because their difference cannot be identified within what can be represented and thus known.

Derrida’s first move is to deconstruct Lacan’s separation of the established truth of Woman as castration from the fictions that surround and inhabit her. Lacan was determined to show us that “truth inhabits fiction”. For Lacan, as Derrida explains:

“Truth inhabits fiction” cannot be understood in the somewhat perverse sense of a fiction more powerful than the truth which inhabits it, the truth that fiction inscribes within itself. In truth, the truth inhabits fiction as the master of the house, as the law of the house, as the economy of fiction. (Derrida 1987a, 426)

Derrida, on the other hand, reverses the order of the Lacanian relationship of “truth” to fiction, particularly, as it is informed in Lacan’s proclamation of the Truth of “Woman” as it is established by the symbolic. Lacan recognizes the “fiction” of sexual difference, but emphasizes the “truth of the economy” that allows this difference to appear as both inevitable and true, true in the sense of adequate to the gender divide as we know it. As a result, his account remains one-sided, stressing the ordering of sexual difference in the symbolic and underemphasizing the failure of fiction ever fully to make itself real except as masculine myth and fantasy.

Contrary to Lacan, Derrida emphasizes the very limits imposed on the symbolic by sexuality itself which thus fails to mean what it was supposed to mean within phallogentrism. Put it in simple words, sexuality and sexual identity always already exceed the limits imposed on them by the symbolic, thus making impossible for the symbolic to constitute itself as something definite⁶.

Yet Derrida’s emphasis on the inevitable figurative or metaphorical nature of the real itself is not meant to deny reference. Despite the symbolic reduction of every woman to Woman, the singular, the woman, remains. As Derrida says:

To say for example, “deconstruction suspends reference”, that deconstruction is a way of enclosing oneself in the sign, in the ‘signifier’, is an enormous naivety stated in that form... Not only is there reference for a text, but never was it proposed that we erase effects of reference or referents. Merely that we rethink these effects of reference. I would indeed say that the referent is textual. The referent is in the text. Yet that does not exempt us from having to describe very rigorously the necessity of those referents.
(Derrida 1985, 9)

Derrida realizes that stabilized gender representations exist and are enforced in social conventions so as to become “true”. In fact, without such stabilized representations it would not be possible to give a critical account of the treatment of the feminine and of women within society. The point is that the “truth” of feminine “reality”, once we understand its metaphorical dimension, cannot lie in properties of the object Woman or in the rigid gender divide of the *Ca*. This “truth” rests in the systems of representation that have become so stabilized that they appear unshakeable. Once we do away with the notion of a female nature that can be known, we can see that it would be a mistake to conclude that all interpretations of the feminine are equal, so that

6. Lacan himself recognizes that the Woman’s desire cannot be contained by the symbolic constructs that purport to define it, precisely because of her otherness as defined by the system of gender identity.

There is a jouissance, since we are dealing with jouissance, a jouissance of the body which is, if the expression be allowed, beyond the phallus. That would be pretty good and it would give a different substance to the WLM [Mouvement de liberation des femmes]. A jouissance beyond phallus... (Lacan 1982, 145)

competing interpretations of the feminine can be judged for their adequacy to the object Woman. Instead, the criteria for judgment must be ethical and political. We can operate through the language of the feminine —by using the feminine affirmatively— to displace the stereotypes associated with gender difference.

In relation to feminist politics, Derrida acknowledges the need to “describe” the referent Woman in a historical level as it has been trapped, oppressed and subordinated women. He completely understands the importance of bringing the dance of the maverick feminist in line with the “revolution” that seeks to end the practical “reality” of women’s subordination. As he writes in “Choreographies”:

The most serious part of the difficulty is the necessity to bring the dance and its tempo into tune with the “revolution”. The lack of place for [l’]atopie] or the madness of the dance – this bit of lack can also compromise the political chances of feminism and serve as an alibi for deserting organized, patient, laborious “feminist” struggles when brought into contact with all the forms of resistance that a dance movement cannot dispel, even though the dance is not synonymous with either powerlessness or fragility. I will not insist on this point, but you can surely see the kind of impossible and necessary compromise that I am alluding to: an incessant, daily negotiation —individual or not— sometimes microscopic, sometimes punctuated by a poker-like gamble; always deprived of insurance, whether it be in private life or within institution. Each man and each woman must commit his or her own singularity, the untranslatable factor of his or her life and death. (Derrida 1982b, 69)

Yet Derrida is careful to note that such “descriptions” are never pure explanations, as if Woman could be separated from the texts in which she has been told. Women’s oppression is not a fiction, nor is it all reality, a masculine symbolic from which escape is impossible. Yet, we cannot separate the Truth of Woman from the fictions in which she is represented and through which she portrays itself. In other words, “seeing” and “being” can never be separated. As Paul Ricoeur argues in *Time and Narrative*, we do not “see” reality directly. Instead, we “see” through language and, more specifically, through the metaphors in which “being” is given to us. Ricoeur argues that we must treat the verb “to be” as a metaphor itself and recognize in “Being-as” the correlate of “seeing-as”. “Being”, for Ricoeur, is itself a metaphor (Ricoeur 1988, 155). This means that the “being” of femininity cannot just be described as “there”. In fact, it is only through these metaphors, representations and fictions that we attempt to reach Woman. But to attempt to reach Woman is not the same as to have her. To think that man, can grasp Woman once and for all is the illusion of possessing the phallus. Woman remains veiled. Therefore, we cannot know once and for all who or what she is, because the fictions in which she is told always carry the possibility of multiple interpretations. There is no ultimate outside referent, a transcendental signified, through which this process of interpretation could come to an end, such as nature or biology or even

conventional gender structures. As a result, we cannot “discover” a *terra firma* to ground on feminine identity. However, on the other hand, Woman cannot be reduced to lack, because the metaphors of her produce an always shifting “reality”.

Derrida wants to affirm the possibility for women to dance differently. Women are not fated to simply repeat the same old dance; they can be out of step, as his “maverick feminist”, precisely because their place, their locale cannot be exactly established by the order of the symbolic. To quote Derrida:

Perhaps woman does not have a history, not so much because of any notion of the “Eternal Feminine” but because all alone she can resist and step back from a certain history (precisely in order to dance) in which revolution, or at least the “concept” of revolution, is generally inscribed. That history is one of continuous progress, despite the revolutionary break – oriented in the case of the women’s movement towards the re-appropriation of woman’s own essence, her own specific difference, oriented in short towards a notion of a “truth”. Your “maverick feminist” showed herself ready to break with the most authorized, the most dogmatic form of consensus, one that claims (and this is the most serious aspect of it) to speak out in the name of revolution and history. Perhaps she was thinking of a completely other history: a history of paradoxical laws and non-dialectical discontinuities, a history of absolutely heterogeneous pockets, irreducible particularities, of unheard of and incalculable sexual differences; a history of women who have —centuries ago— “gone further” by stepping back with their lone dance, or who are today inventing sexual idioms at a distance from the main forum of feminist activity with a kind of reserve that does not necessarily prevent them from subscribing to the movement and even, occasionally, from becoming a militant for it. (Derrida 1982b, 68)

This emphasis on the possibility of moving beyond the identification of the feminine as opposition is inherently ethical and political in Derrida. As Derrida reminds us in *Spurs: Nietzsche’s Styles*, there is always more to the story of Woman than Lacan’s identification of Woman with castration. To quote Derrida:

The feminine distance abstracts truth from itself in a suspension of the relation with castration. This relation is suspended much as one might tauten or stretch a canvas, or a relation, which nevertheless remains—suspended—in indecision. In the εἰροχή. It is with castration that this relation is suspended, not with the truth of castration—in which woman does not believe anyway—and not with the truth inasmuch as it might be castration. Nor is it the relation with truth-castration that is suspended, for that is precisely a man’s affair. That is the masculine concern, the concern of the male who has never come of age, who is never sufficiently skeptical or

dissimulating. In such an affair the male, in his credulousness and naivety (which is always sexual, pretending even at times to masterful expertise), castrates himself and from the secretion of his act fashions the snare of truth-castration. (Perhaps at this point one ought to interrogate—and “unboss”—the metaphorical full-blown sail of truth’s declamation, of the castration and phallogentrism, for example, in Lacan’s discourse). (Derrida 1979, 59-61)

Lacan, as Drucilla Cornell observes in *Transformations*, like other men who think they know Woman, participate in their own castration by imprisoning themselves in a system of gender representation that cuts off their own desire for Her and replaces it with the illusion that they have grasped Her in their fantasies. But what they know is only the content of those fantasies, not Woman (Cornell 1993, 90). It is impossible for Lacan to hold her down in his own description of the economy of sexual difference. As Derrida reminds us:

Woman (truth) will not be pinned down. In truth woman, truth will not be pinned down. That which will not be pinned down by truth is, in truth-feminine. This should not, however, be hastily mistaken for a woman’s femininity, for female sexuality, or for any other of those essentialising fetishes which still tantalize the dogmatic philosopher, the impotent artist or the inexperienced seducer who has not yet escaped his foolish hopes of capture. (Derrida 1979, 55)

Yet Derrida’s desire for the new choreography of sexual difference also makes him cautious of any attempt to introduce a new concept of representation of Woman to replace the ones we have now, because this change would again turn her into an object of knowledge, a Truth. Woman would again be normalized, her proper place established. Thus, in “Choreographies”, in a response to Christie McDonald’s question as to whether and how we can change the representation of Woman, Derrida says:

No, I do not believe that we have one [a new concept of Woman], if indeed it is possible to have such a thing or if such a thing could exist or show promise of existing. Personally, I am not sure that I feel the lack of it. Before having one that is new, are we certain of having had an old one? It is the word “concept” or “conception” that I would in turn question in its relation to any essence which is rigorously or properly identifiable. (Derrida 1982b, 72)

Derrida, in other words, does not want feminism to be another excuse for passing out “sexual identity cards” (Derrida 1982b, 69). However, in her article entitled “On Contemporary Feminist Theory”, Seyla Benhabid expresses her worry—and it is a worry frequently articulated in feminist political criticisms of deconstruction—that Derrida’s deconstruction of gender identity reinstates the patriarchal view of Woman as

the mysterious Other, without a knowable essence, substance, or identity (Benhabid 1989, 13). Some feminists have militantly rejected the so-called non-identity of Woman as one more mystification that justifies the subordination of actual women. Derrida has often been accused of paralyzing women's action through his very deconstruction of gender identity and, more particularly, of a graspable female identity which could provide women with a basis for a feminist politics. Yet, Woman does not name "indeterminacy" in Derrida's text. Instead, it underlines the fact that Woman cannot be contained by any single definition. There is no ultimate feminine concept of Woman that can be identified once and for all. But this suspicion also prevents Derrida from proclaiming the Truth of Woman as absence or more specifically as the absence of Truth. It is a mistake, then, to think that Derrida reduces Woman to the definition of lack or fundamental non-identity. Derrida is instead celebrating the potential in the feminine to refuse castration, and by so doing to allow actual women to dance differently:

"Woman"—her name made epoch— no more believes in castration's exact opposite, anti-castration, than she does in castration itself... Unable to seduce or to give vent to desire without it, "woman" is in need of castration's effect. But evidently she does not believe in it. She who, unbelieving, still plays with castration, she is "woman". (Derrida 1979, 61)

The "maverick feminist" *knows* her uncastratability. She has nothing to lose, and so she dances. The politics of her difference are the politics of the possibility to dance. She may dance differently, but that dance demands that Derrida recognizes the Other, and sexual difference. He would not recognize the feminine as difference if he reduced feminine sexual difference to non-being. This so-called non-being could only be grasped as the Other to being and therefore as not different at all. In an interview entitled "On Colleges and Philosophy", responding to a Jacqueline Rose's question concerning his critique of Lacan's concept of the symbolic, Derrida defines his approach to the problem of sexual difference as follows:

I never said that sexual difference should be deconstructed.. My point is not against sexual difference. It's against the transformation, the identification of sexual difference with sexual binary opposition. But I've nothing against sexual difference. It's also a problem of course. You have to survive it too. On the contrary—it's in the name of sexual difference that I was criticizing sexual binary opposition, because what I think (but I could not demonstrate this in such a sort time) is that the way sexual difference has been interpreted by philosophy and by psychoanalysis, transforming sexual difference into sexual opposition, leads to erasing the difference, and now we have a classical logical scheme, with Hegel for instance— as soon as you use oppositions in a dialectical way then at one moment or another you erase the difference and you enter homogeneity. I think that this can be demonstrated and that was my

point: not against opposition but beyond opposition. Sexual difference beyond opposition and beyond binary structure. (Derrida 1989, 227)

Derrida's recognition of the irreducible specificity of sexual difference is, also, manifested in his engagement with the work of Emmanuel Levinas. In Levinas' work on the ethics of alterity—an ethics based on the obligation to respond to the absolute otherness of the other—the subject is put into question in the face of the excessive alterity of the other. For unless otherness is essential and originary, there can be no ethics. In his reading of Levinas, Derrida voices his own concerns about the risky postulate of a neutral “human” subject, prior to sexual determination. Traditionally, ethics has been conceived as involving a universal position attainable for all subjects and thus independent of their sexual markings. Ethics then, involves the ability, at least for the purposes of morality, to speak of humanity in general and in language that reflects that generality:

[T]he possibility of ethics could be saved, if one takes ethics to mean that relationship to the other which amounts for no other determination or sexual characteristic in particular. What kind of an ethics would there be if belonging to one sex or another became its law or privilege? What if the universality or moral laws were modeled on or limited according to the sexes? What if their universality were not unconditional, without sexual condition in particular? (Derrida 1982b, 72)

However, this necessarily presupposed sexual neutral position of ethics is, in fact, as Derrida explains, unattainable in an always already sexually marked universe. Even in Levinas' interpretation of genesis, the man *Isch* would still come first. The danger in Levinas, as Derrida acknowledges, is that the identification of the masculine as prior, even if as “Spirit”, still puts masculinity in command. (Derrida 1982b, 72-3). Secondariness, however, would no longer be the woman. It would instead be the divide between the masculine and the feminine: “[i]t is not feminine sexuality that would be second but only the relationship to sexual difference” (*ibid.*, 73). Yet, if the divide between man and woman is the fall into sexual markings, sexual difference can only be interpreted as a “Loss”. In his essay “At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am”, Derrida, through the voice of the feminine interlocutor, questions the secondariness of sexual difference, as the desire for the erasure of *feminine* sexual difference in the supposed neutrality of the “il”:

The other as feminine (me), far from being derived or secondary, would become the other of the Saying of the wholly other, of this one in any case; ... then the Work, apparently signed by the Pronoun He, would be dictated, aspired and inspired by the desire to make She secondary, therefore by She [Elle]. (Derrida 1991, 433-4)

For Derrida, an “answer” to the question of “Who we are sexually” —if indeed it should even be risked— cannot even be approached if the standpoint of either male or female is reified so that the author speaks and writes from a unified position:

At the approach of this shadowy area, it has always seemed to me that the voice itself had to be divided in order to say that which is given to thought or speech. No monological discourse —and by that I mean here mono-sexual discourse— can dominate with a single voice, a single tone, the space of this half-light, even if the “proffered discourse” is then signed by a sexually marked patronymic. Thus, to limit myself to one account and not to propose an example, I have felt the necessity for a chorus, for a choreographic text with polysexual signatures. (Derrida 1982b, 75-6)

Derrida often positions himself through the feminine so as to split his writing - although he knows that what he does is not the same as when a woman does it.

If I write two texts at once you will not be able to castrate me. If I delinearise, I erect. But at the same time I divide my act and my desire. I mark(s) the division, and I am always escaping you, I simulate increasingly and take my pleasure now, here. I remark(s) myself, thus, I play at coming. (Derrida 1986, 65)

However, this attempt to achieve a “choreographic text with polysexual signatures” should not be confused with an attempt to reinstate a sexually “neutral” position from which to write. Derrida argues that such a position within our system of gender identity is impossible, which is why the choreographic text still involves designatable masculine and feminine voices at the same time that it tries to blur the traits and lines of thought traditionally associated with gender opposition.

Therefore, when Derrida deliberately attempts to resexualize the supposedly “neutral” language of philosophy, and does so by using words which carry associations with the feminine body, *hymen* and *invagination*, he also hesitates before the danger that such a use of language, while recognizing the repressed feminine, nevertheless reinforces rigid gender identity. Derrida acknowledges that one can never know for sure whether any attempt to shift the boundaries of meaning and representation through a reinvention of language is complicit with or breaks with existing ideology. The use of words associated with the feminine body could only too easily reinstate phallogocentric discourse by perpetuating myths of what that body is from the masculine viewpoint. Derrida believes he has chosen his words carefully to disrupt traditional associations that would seem to be determinate of the feminine. The introduction of such language carries a performative aspect that can never be totally assessed, but which unmasks the pretence of neutrality and at the same time questions the current line of cleavage between the

sexes that would rigidly designate, “this is masculine”, or “this is feminine”. The *hymen* “is” between male and female, but as what gives way “in love”. To quote Derrida:

One could say quite accurately that the hymen does not exist. Anything constituting the value of existence is foreign to the “hymen”. And if there were hymen —I am not saying if the hymen existed— property value would be no more appropriate to it for reasons that I have stressed in the texts to which you refer. How can one then attribute the existence of the hymen properly to woman? Not that it is any more the distinguishing feature of man or, for that matter, of the human creature. I would say the same for the term “invagination” which has, moreover, always reinscribed in a chiasmus, one doubly folded, redoubled and inversed, etc. (Derrida 1982b, 75)

The link between the Other, Woman, as the more of a given state of affairs is the threshold. We are constantly invited to cross through the essentialist conceptions of sexual difference, which in turn creates the opening for new interpretations. This link, evoked as the hymen, is both the invitation to cross over and yet also a barrier to a full accessibility. The hymen, however, even though inseparable from the feminine, it cannot just be reduced to a property of the female body.

Deconstructive Utopianism

In *Transformations*, Drucilla Cornell finds in Derrida’s allegorical reading of the feminine an “unerasable trace of utopianism” in that it refuses the so-called realism of castration. However, this “unerasable utopianism” is neither a chronological *moment* to be surpassed, nor a projection of utopia: “this is what it would be like”, our dream world. In both *Spurs* and *Glas*, Woman is the very figure of the constitutive power of the “not yet”, the beyond to Lacan’s Symbolic. As Cornell points out:

The play of difference does exactly the opposite of what it is thought to do; it does not make Utopian thinking impossible, it makes it absolutely necessary, because the meaning of Woman and of sexual difference, is displaced into the future. (Cornell 1993, 93).

Derridian *différance*⁷ can be understood as the impossibility for “Being” to be presented in an all-encompassing ontology of the “here” and “now”. Temporalisation

7. *Différance* is a neologism that Derrida coined in order to suggest how meaning is at once “differential” and “deferred”, the product of a restless play within language that cannot be fixed or pinned down for the purposes of conceptual definition.

disrupts the very pretence of full presence of both the present and the past at the very moment that it makes presentation and representation possible. In this sense, temporalisation disrupts the idea of an origin which we can just discover. The origin has never been simply present, because we have always already begun once there is a “reality” that has been “presented”. *Différance* subverts the claim that “This is all there is!” The trace of Otherness remains. As a result, *différance* undermines the legitimacy of the attempt to *establish* any particular *context*, including the masculine symbolic, as a kingdom which has an absolute authority over us.⁸ In this sense, any established context is thus associated with force and politics. The denial of new possibilities yet to be articulated is exposed as political, not as inevitable and, more importantly, as unethical and ultimately unjust.

Derrida’s “utopianism”, however, is often interpreted to mean that he is not a “feminist”. But this is a seriously mistaken reading. Derrida is very careful to make a distinction between the dream of a new choreography of sexual difference that has not been and cannot be erased in spite of the oppressiveness of our current system of gender representation, and the reality of the oppression of women. Of course, Derrida is for political and social reforms that would eliminate any form of abuse against women, but these reforms cannot ultimately touch the deeper underlying problem of sexual difference as it has become expressed in rigid gender identities. Feminism, if it is conceived as a struggle of women for political power - and this definition is of course only one definition of feminism —cannot reach the “underlying” problem of why sexual difference has taken the limited— and oppressive, because limited-form it has. Put simply, feminism, on this definition, copies the dichotomous structure of gender hierarchy, even if it also seeks to put women on top. It is this definition of feminism that Derrida has in mind when he says in *Spurs* that:

Feminism is nothing but the operation of a woman who aspires to be like a man. And in order to resemble the masculine dogmatic philosopher this woman lays claim —just as much claim as he— to truth, science and objectivity in all their castrated delusions of virility. Feminism too seeks to castrate. It wants a castrated woman. Gone the style. (Derrida 1979, 65)

Therefore, there must be a “beyond” to feminism *so conceived* if we are to realize

8. In his essay “Différance” Derrida writes:

First consequence: différence is not. It is not a present being, however excellent, unique, principled, or transcendent. It governs nothing, reigns over nothing, and nowhere exercises any authority. It is not announced by any capital letter. Not only is there no kingdom of différence, but différence instigates the subversion of every kingdom. Which makes it obviously threatening and infallibly dreaded by everything within us that desires a kingdom, the past or future presence of a kingdom. And it is always in the name of a kingdom that one may reproach différence with wishing to reign, believing that one sees it aggrandize itself with a capital letter. (Derrida, 1982b, 21-2).

the dream of a new choreography of sexual difference. In other words, we must do something more than build a supplementarity; we have to re-think the very structures that we are working with. Yet, since these two “kinds” or tendencies of feminism — “re-active feminism” versus “maverick feminism” — “which are absolutely irreconcilable even if we live them simultaneously and reconcile them in an obscure economy” — are absolutely necessary for women’s politics, the question of choosing between them becomes irrelevant. In “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences”, Derrida claims: “I do not believe that today there is any question of *choosing* — in the first place because here we are in a region (let us say, provisionally, a region of historicity) where the category of choice seems particularly trivial” (Derrida 1978, 293). Feminism confronts the double necessity of developing a deep, long-term critique of the structures of the patriarchal injustice, while at the same time battling in an immediate way against the products of this injustice. Effective action for social change requires, for example, opposing lies with truth in political situations. It also requires complicity with the very patriarchal structures that must be dismantled for equality to be even possible. Women have to be active in electoral campaigns, legislative bodies, and universities. But without adapting a deconstructive strategy to the task of calling into question these activities even as they perform them, the very activities necessary for equal rights are guaranteed, in spite of immediate, specific victories, to plunge women deeper in structures of inequality. In an interview entitled “Women in the Beehive: A Seminar with Jacques Derrida” and related to the establishment of “Women’s Studies” departments in universities, Derrida argues as follows:

This may not answer the question, but one way of dealing with these problems, not necessarily within women’s studies, but on the whole, is to try to do things at the same time, to occupy two places, both places. That is why deconstruction is often accused of being conservative and [...] not conservative. And both are true! We have to negotiate. To maintain, for instance, Women’s Studies as a classical program, a now classical program, and at the same time to ask radical questions which may endanger the program itself. And what is the measure? You must check everyday what is the measure. One thing may be the good measure at Brown, but perhaps it would be the worst at Yale for instance. There is no general device. In some situations you have to behave in a very conservative way, in tough conservative ways, to maintain, and at the same time, or the day after to do exactly the contrary. (Derrida 1990, 202)

Or in another interview, discussing this time the teaching of philosophy at higher education, Derrida maintains:

You have to train people to become doctors or engineers or professors, and at the same time to train them in questioning all that — not only in a critical

way, but I would say in a deconstructive way. This is a double responsibility: two responsibilities which sometimes are not compatible. In my own teaching, in my own responsibilities, I think I have to make two gestures simultaneously: to train people, to teach them, to give them a content, to be a good pedagogue, to train teachers, to give them a profession; and at the same time to make them as conscious as possible of the problems of professionalisation. (Derrida 1987b, 17)

Conclusion

To summarize, Derrida's intervention into Lacan's work demonstrates that no reality can perfectly totalize itself. Reality, including the reality of male domination, is constituted, as Lacan himself acknowledges, in and through language, in which institutionalized meaning can never be fully protected from slippage and reinterpretation. As Derrida demonstrates, the feminine, as the repressed Other, is irreducible to that which it supposedly is designated to be, the lack that signifies woman within the Symbolic. Derrida shows us that the phallus only takes up its privileged position through an interpretation that is dependent on a chain of signifiers inseparable from the meaning of patriarchy, which reinforces the illusion that by itself the phallus generates and engenders gender hierarchy through patriarchal lineage. But what is interpreted can always be reinterpreted. Derrida exhibits how the very slippage of meaning inherent in language breaks up the coherence of the gender hierarchy and allows for resignifying the phallus. Deconstruction challenges the inevitability of the reestablishment of the patriarchal order which would reduce the feminine "sex" to the castrated other. This irreducibility of the feminine also results from what Derrida calls the "logic of parergonality", by which he argues that the very frame that designates social reality always implies "more" because our reality is necessarily enframed (See J. Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*). Indeed, it is precisely because the feminine, as its lived, can never be reduced to its current definitions that Derrida can advocate an ethical and political affirmation and thus, re-evaluation of the feminine within sexual difference.

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Ο Λακάν, ο Ντεριντά και η έννοια “γυναίκα”

ΓΕΡΑΣΙΜΟΣ ΚΑΚΟΛΥΡΗΣ

Η λακανική ψυχανάλυση καταλαμβάνει μια αμφιλεγόμενη θέση στις σπουδές του φύλου (gender studies). Παρόλο που ο Ζακ Λακάν είναι υπεύθυνος για μια σειρά από βαθυστόχαστες μελέτες πάνω στη συγκρότηση της έμφυλης ταυτότητας του υποκειμένου, έχει κατηγορηθεί πολλάκις για φαλλοκεντρισμό — την αναπαράσταση των δύο φύλων μέσα από μια μοναδική, αμετάβλητη, ανδροκεντρική οπτική. Αν και εκθέτει με μεγάλη ενάργεια τη «φυσιοκρατική πλάνη» (“naturalistic fallacy”), δηλαδή την προσπάθεια δικαιολόγησης της δεσπόζουσας ιεραρχίας των φύλων ως αποτελέσματος βιολογικών λειτουργιών, αφιερώνει σημαντικό μέρος της ανάλυσής του στην κατάδειξη του γεγονότος ότι το υπάρχον σύστημα του φύλου δεν μπορεί να αλλάξει ή να αντικατασταθεί, εφόσον η ταυτότητά μας ως «άνδρες» ή «γυναίκες» βρίσκεται ακινητοποιημένη στις γλωσσικές δομές του Συμβολικού. Με αυτόν τον τρόπο, αν και το φύλο κατανοείται ως μιας πολιτισμική προσταγή, μπορεί να επιβάλλεται από ένα σύστημα το οποίο διαιώνίζει τον εαυτό του στο διηνεκές μέσω της εισόδου του νηπίου σε ένα κόσμο κατεστημένων σημασιών που χαρακτηρίζεται από την αδιασάλευτη κυριαρχία του φαλλού.

Η παρέμβαση του Ζακ Ντεριντά δείχνει ότι η κατανόηση από τον ίδιο τον Λακάν της ταυτότητας του φύλου, όπως αυτή συγκροτείται μέσα και μέσω των γλωσσικών δομών του Συμβολικού — των συμβατικών σημασιών που αποδίδονται στο φύλο από την πατριαρχία — μπορεί να στραφεί εναντίον των πολιτικών συμπερασμάτων του ίδιου του Λακάν. Ο Ντεριντά καθιστά εμφανές ότι ο φαλλός παίζει την προνομιούχο του θέση μέσω μιας ανάγνωσης που εξαρτάται από μια σειρά από σημαίνοντα που είναι αδιαχώριστα από τη σημασία της πατριαρχίας. Όμως, η μεταβλητότητα της σημασίας ως εγγενούς στοιχείου της γλώσσας διαρρηγνύει τη συνοχή της συγκρότησης της ιεραρχίας του φύλου και καθιστά εφικτή την επανασημασιοδότηση του φαλλού. Η αποδόμηση του Ντεριντά αμφισβητεί το αναπόφευκτο της διαίωσης της πατριαρχικής τάξης που περιορίζει το γυναικείο «φύλο» στη θέση του ευνουχισμένου Άλλου.