another and inhabit a different position in relation to the 'center' (the stage or platform which all the seats face), and each seat gives you a different perspective on or experience of the center – but all the seats are fixed, and it doesn't matter which individual subject occupies which seat. In poststructuralist literary theory, some of the seats or subject positions in language have specific designations, such as *author* and *reader*, but these positions or seats are no different from any other subject position within the structure of language (what Lacan calls the *Symbolic Order*).

Texts, as microcosms of language, as subsystems created by and with the same structure as language, also produce subject positions; these are the positions which the text opens for readers to position themselves in relation to the text. An example of a subject position might be when a text addresses the reader directly, using 'you' (as I've done in this book). 'You' is a signifier that denotes the position any possible reader may occupy. Texts also designate readerly subject positions through devices like point of view; such positioning governs a subject's range of interpretation, just as the structure of language governs a subject's possible speech.

Subject positions vary from text to text. A reader's ability to occupy the subject positions made available by a text also varies, depending on what kind of subject the text is asking for. A reader's subject position is determined by a variety of factors: the 'seat' you occupy in the classroom or auditorium depends to some degree on your age, race, gender, social position, educational level, and other markers of difference. While all 'selves,' in the humanist tradition, may be created equal, and considered as identical because all selves share the same essential characteristics, such as reason and free will, no two 'subjects' are alike. Indeed, like any element in a structure, a subject's specific positioning within the structure will be based at least in part on its differences from all the other subject positions within the structure.

CHAPTER 6

FEMINISM

Lacan pointed out that the entry into the Symbolic Order, the structure of language, is different for boys and girls; gender is yet another element that determines subject position. Poststructuralist feminist theories examine how gender is socially constructed, rather than natural, innate, or essential; they also see gender as the product of, or an illusion created by, the same structures of language that create the illusion of the 'I'dentity.

Theories examining gender existed long before poststructuralist thought. Gender is a cultural universal: all societies mark gender distinctions in some way, though of course all societies make those markings differently. Feminists since the Middle Ages have been asking whether gender is biological or cultural, whether it is innate and natural and God-given, or whether it is socially constructed and therefore mutable. Is anatomy destiny, as Freud asserted, so that genetics, biology, morphology, physiology, and brain chemistry determine social roles for men and women, so that what is biologically male is by definition inalterably masculine, and what is biologically female is by definition feminine? Or – and most feminists favor this answer – is gender socially constructed, therefore variable, mutable, and not necessarily tied to anatomical or genetic determinants?

It's worth noting, in passing, that scientific studies about gender in relation to genetics and chemistry and brain structure tend to say that gender is both: it's enormously mutable, but there does seem to be something that might be essential. This topic is worth investigating further.

Poststructuralist cultural theorists of gender, on the other hand, say that gender is a set of signifiers attached to sexually dimorphic

bodies, and that these signifiers work to divide social practices and relations into the binary oppositions of male/female and masculine/feminine. You might think here about high heels as a signifier: generally, a foot in a high-heeled shoe signifies that there's a vagina and breasts attached to the wearer, because in our culture high heels are a signifier of femaleness and femininity. But anyone *can* wear high heels – and will be seen as 'feminine' because of it. You might also think about recent studies concerning the variety of sex markers: genetics and physiology allow for several different ways of determining sex, including chromosomal sex, presence of external genitalia (penis or clitoris), presence of internal reproductive organs (testes or ovaries), hormonal sex (predominance of testosterone or estrogen), muscular and skeletal structure, and brain structure. It's possible for any individual to have some of the markers for one sex and some of the markers for the other sex, thus deconstructing the binary opposition of male/female on which Western cultural constructions of sex and gender identity rely. This is why Western medicine, when it encounters a newborn with ambiguous or multiple sex or gender markings, works to eliminate the anomalous ones through surgery or hormonal treatment, in order to assign each newborn to one of the two binary categories that our culture recognizes.

From a poststructuralist viewpoint,

- 'Gender' is a relationship established between signifiers, things that signal gender, and signifieds, taken to be the physical sex of the person. Like all signifier–signified connections, this relationship is *arbitrary*.
- 'Gender' operates within Western constructs of binary opposites, so that gender signifiers always point to either a male or female body, and to masculine or feminine traits.
- Since 'gender' is constructed through arbitrary links between signifiers and signifieds, the connection between the two can be weakened, changed, or broken. Since the signifiers of gender help maintain the system of binary oppositions that shape Western thought by dividing the world into 'male' and 'female,' and valuing 'male' over 'female,' gender can be deconstructed, and the elements that constitute stable notions of gender can be put into play.

Feminist theories, examining how gender is constructed, can be found in virtually every discipline within the university, including the hard

sciences and mathematics; it's certainly a prominent part of the conversations occurring in the social sciences and humanities. Academic disciplines have embraced feminist theories in part as pure knowledge, for the same reason we embrace any kind of theory: because the theory explains something we want or need to know.

But feminist theory, like most poststructuralist theories, also has a political dimension as well. That political dimension consists, at the very least, of an awareness of the power imbalances enforced and upheld by the inequalities in the binary oppositions which structure how we think about and act in our world. Even more than just an 'awareness' of these imbalances and inequalities, feminist theories provide analyses of how these inequalities evolved, how they operate, and – perhaps most importantly and also most controversially – how they might, could, should be changed in order to create a more equitable arrangement of social power and privilege. It is this last element – the element of social change, of political advocacy – that generally makes people uncomfortable with the idea of feminist theory as an academic or intellectual pursuit.

In this chapter, we'll be looking at two strands of feminist theory which have direct ties to literary study: an Anglo-American strand that emerges from the humanist tradition, and a poststructuralist strand that questions the assumptions and premises of the humanist model.

'PRE-POSTSTRUCTURALIST' FEMINIST LITERARY THEORY

One of the books I picked up in a Boston bookstore in 1980, just when I had graduated from college, was *The Madwoman in the Attic*, by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. It examines the works of major nineteenth-century women writers, including Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, Emily Bronte, Charlotte Bronte, George Eliot, and Emily Dickinson, all women writers whose works I had studied – in my only course on women writers – in my undergraduate English major. I was eager to read it, both to expand my knowledge of these authors and the contexts in which they wrote, and to feel that self-congratulatory sense of being able to tackle, and enjoy, a work designed for professional literary scholars.

It was – and is – an exemplary text, one which in 1980 was by far the most sophisticated intellectual example of feminist literary criticism, and which today remains an important landmark in

the evolution of feminist criticism. The first section, 'Toward a Feminist Poetics,' presents a theory of women's writing which examines the difficulty the Western literary tradition has had in allowing the two words 'woman' and 'writer' to be joined together. Specifically, Gilbert and Gubar question the metaphors which have shaped the practice of writing and the idea of creativity, noting that masculine imagery has completely dominated Western thinking about authors and texts. 'Is the pen a metaphorical penis?' they ask in the book's first sentence.[1] Their feminist literary theory revolves around investigating how the equation 'pen = penis' has limited women writers. They begin by documenting exhaustively the extent of this equation in Western literary history, showing that pen = penis has been the dominant metaphor for all acts of literary creation since at least the Middle Ages. They argue that the predominance of this metaphor relies on the idea that women's bodies give birth to babies, which are mortal and limited, while men's bodies 'give birth' to immortal things, like books and art.

Exploring the reasons for this association of male bodies with immortal births, Gilbert and Gubar offer a variety of possible causes: it might be an anxious response to the male inability to know for sure that they are really the father of the children their wives have; it might be a reaction to the threat of castration (in Freudian terms) by asserting the predominance and presence of the penis as the creative organ; it might be a conscious attempt on the part of male authors deliberately to exclude women writers from membership in their exclusive club by defining the only 'good' writing as writing done by men. Gilbert and Gubar particularly read it as an attempt to reduce what Harold Bloom calls 'the anxiety of influence,' the feeling that one will never be as good as one's father, one's literary forebears.

Having documented the dominance of the idea that male bodies and male sexuality alone form the metaphoric basis for acts of creativity, including writing, in the Western cultural imagination, Gilbert and Gubar then ask, 'With what organ can females generate texts?'[2] The exclusion of women from the biologically-given tools of the trade means that women writers have had to find alternate methods and materials of writing. The rest of their excellent book examines nineteenth-century British and American women writers to find how they constructed their practices of writing, both metaphorically and literally. Did they use milk, or blood, instead of

ink, and write on bark or cloth instead of paper? Gilbert and Gubar began the feminist search for what was made invisible by the patriarchal tradition of 'pen = penis,' urging feminist scholars to look for women's writing in places, and using instruments, not usually associated with writing.

Most Anglo-American feminist literary theory – before the deluge of poststructuralist theories which flooded British and American universities in the 1980s and 1990s – followed the same kind of humanist lines of thought and inquiry epitomized in Gilbert and Gubar's germinal work. This branch of theory asks questions about how women writers were discouraged or prevented from publishing their writings, or writing at all; it seeks to explain why there are so few women writers in the Western canon of literature in English. Finding answers to these questions sparked a vitally important historical search for 'forgotten' women writers, and prompted feminist literary critics to challenge the aesthetic and political standards on which that Western canon was based. Anglo-American feminist literary theory and criticism radically rewrote the ways we think about the history of literature in English, adding countless texts by women (and by other under-represented groups) to the lists and successfully altering the standards by which literary excellence (hence canonicity) was evaluated. The result has been the development of a canon – reflected in anthologies of literature, courses in literature, and in numerous volumes of literary criticism – which has learned to value the works of women writers, and to re-evaluate the works of male writers in light of the issues raised by women writers and feminist criticism.

POSTSTRUCTURALIST FEMINIST LITERARY THEORY

The Anglo-American feminist literary critical approach, however, was limited by its humanist roots and paradigms. While Gilbert and Gubar make a new space for women writers to be celebrated as 'mothers' of texts, equal in importance to the 'fathers' of the Western tradition, they did not question the humanist ideal that the author is an original creator. Though they questioned how gender affected the practice of writing in its social and historical aspects, they did not think about whether gender shaped the structure of language itself, and the individual subject's access to that structure. It took the advent of poststructuralist thinking, particularly coming

from intellectual feminists in Paris, to spark the development of poststructuralist feminist theories of women and writing.

The other book I picked up in the bookstore on that eventful day in 1980 was *New French Feminisms*, edited by Elaine Marks and Isabel de Courtivron. It contained essays, most of them short excerpts of longer works, by theorists I'd never heard of, including Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva. I couldn't understand a word of what they were talking about. Though I prided myself on being a feminist, nothing in my humanist undergraduate English major had prepared me to comprehend feminist theory, which was based on the poststructuralist ideas of Saussure, Derrida, and Lacan – none of whom I'd ever heard of either. After trying to read a few pages, I threw the book across the room in frustration. Then I picked it up and took it with me to graduate school to see if someone there could explain it.

Poststructuralist feminist theory isn't about women. Rather, it's about 'woman' and 'man' as subject positions within the structure of language, positions that Lacan hints at in his example of the boy and girl arriving at 'Ladies' and 'Gentlemen.' Poststructuralist feminist theory sees the category or position 'woman' as part of a binary opposition, 'man/woman,' in which 'man' is the favored term; feminist theories then want to deconstruct that binary, and the other binaries which reinforce and maintain it, including masculine/feminine, good/evil, light/dark, positive/negative, culture/nature, etc. All the things on the right side of the slash are things Western culture works to control, to suppress, or to exclude, positing them as disruptive or destructive to the concepts on the left side of the slash. Poststructuralist feminist theory investigates how, and with what consequences, 'woman' is constructed as otherness, as non-being, as alterity, as something outside of and dangerous to consciousness, rationality, presence, and all those other nice things that Western humanist metaphysics values.

All of this comes from Lacan's idea that woman is 'not All' – that the position of 'woman' in the Symbolic is founded on Lack, so that 'woman' can't (mis)identify with the Phallus as the center of the Symbolic Order. 'Woman' is a subject position on the edge of the Symbolic, not firmly governed by the center, and hence there's something in that position that 'escapes discourse,' that is not fully controlled by the center and the structure of language.

It may be useful here to think again of a lecture room with fixed

seats, or an auditorium or theater. The seats are subject positions you occupy when you enter the theater. You have a ticket – a signifier or set of signifiers – that directs you to your particular seat, your particular position within the structure. Your ticket can specify a wide range of signifiers that can determine your position. For instance, your ticket may say 'woman,' and thus your seat will be at the back of the theater, away from the center, or center stage. Your ticket may say 'upper class,' in which case your seat will be closer to the center. The signifiers on your ticket can be contradictory – your ticket may say 'woman,' 'African-American,' and 'medical doctor,' in which case your seating position would be further away from the stage for the less-valued signifiers (woman, African-American) but closer to the stage for the more valued signifier (medical doctor). Your ticket can even direct you to a seat not indicated by your physical being: a biological female may hold a ticket that says 'man' or 'masculine,' and thus get to sit closer to the stage, and a biological male may hold a ticket that says 'woman' or 'feminine,' and thus sit further away.

According to poststructuralist feminist theorists, subjects who are further away from the controlling influence of the center have more play, more 'freedom' to move and to behave as they wish. The capacity to avoid, escape, or evade the structuring rules of the center of a structure or system is what Lacan and the poststructuralist feminist theorists call *jouissance* which is the French word for 'orgasm.' The word in poststructuralist terminology means a pleasure that is beyond language, beyond discourse, something that can't be expressed in words or in the structure of language, and which in fact is disruptive to that structure. This form of pleasure, or any activity or position that escapes the rules and structures held in place by the Phallus, is a specifically feminine pleasure, a feminine *jouissance* which is unrepresentable in language, and which interrupts representation, disturbs the linear flow of language, and rattles the foundations of the structure of the Symbolic. Thus *jouissance* can be considered a type of deconstruction, as it shakes up the fixity and stability of the structure of language and puts signifiers into play, making them slippery and indeterminate.

Poststructuralist feminist theory generally equates this feminine *jouissance* with the female body, with the state of 'nature' and the Real which the infant must abandon in order to enter the Symbolic Order and take up a subject position in language. In this sense, poststructuralist feminist theory is asking the same question Gilbert

and Gubar ask: Is women's writing, or women's language, somehow related to female bodies and female biology? If so, how?

HÉLÈNE CIXOUS AND 'THE LAUGH OF THE MEDUSA'

Hélène Cixous take up where Lacan left off, noting that women and men enter into the Symbolic Order in different ways, or through different doors, and that the subject positions open to either sex within the Symbolic are also different. She understands that, when Lacan calls the center of the Symbolic Order the Phallus, he highlights what a patriarchal system language is – or, more specifically, what a *phallogocentric* system it is. This word is the combination of two words and two ideas: 'phallocentric,' meaning 'centered around the phallus,' which describes Lacan's notion of the structure of language, and 'logocentric,' which is Derrida's term to describe Western culture's preference for speech over language, for logic and rationality over madness, and for all the other binary oppositions which shape our metaphysics. Cixous combines the two words to describe Western cultural structures as 'phallogocentric,' based on the primacy of the terms on the left-hand side of the slash in any array of binary opposites. A phallogocentric culture is one which aligns all the left-side terms as the valued ones, and consigns the right-side terms to the position of 'other' or undesirable.

Cixous follows Lacan's psychoanalytic paradigm, which argues that a child must separate from its mother's body – the Real – in order to enter into the Symbolic. Because of this, Cixous says, the female body in general becomes unrepresentable in language; it's what can't be spoken or written in the phallogocentric Symbolic order. Cixous here makes a leap from the maternal body to the female body in general; she also leaps from that female body to female sexuality, saying that female sexuality, female *jouissance*, is unrepresentable, unspeakable, in the phallogocentric Symbolic Order.

To understand how she makes this leap, we have to go back to what Freud says about female sexuality, and the mess he makes of it. In Freud's story of the female Oedipus Complex, girls have to make a lot of switches, from clitoris to vagina, from attraction to female bodies to attraction to male bodies, and from active ('masculine') sexuality to passive ('feminine') sexuality, in order to become 'normal' (non-incestuous reproductive heterosexual)

adults. Cixous rewrites this, via Lacan, by pointing out that 'adulthood' in Lacan's terms is the same as entry into the Symbolic Order and taking up a subject position. For a woman, becoming a linguistic subject always means having only one kind of sexuality: passive, vaginal, heterosexual, reproductive. And that sexuality, if one follows Freud to his logical extreme, is not a 'female' sexuality per se, but always a sexuality defined and described in male/masculine terms: the woman's pleasure is to come from being passively filled by a penis. So, Cixous concludes, there really isn't any such thing as female sexuality in and of itself in a phallogocentric system: it's always a sexuality defined by the presence (or absence) of a penis, and not by anything intrinsic to the female body or female sexual pleasure.

If women have to be forced away from their own bodies – first in the person of the mother's body, and then in the person of their unique sexual feelings and pleasures – in order to assume a subject position in language, is it possible, Cixous asks, for a woman to write or speak at all? Is it possible for a woman to write as a woman, or is her subject position within the Symbolic necessarily a renunciation of all that is 'woman' in favor of all that is 'man?' Does a woman who writes or speaks do so from a masculine position? If the structure of language itself is phallogocentric, and stable meaning – the seemingly firm connection between a single signifier and a single signified – is anchored and guaranteed by the Phallus, then isn't everyone who uses language taking up a position as 'male' within this structure which by definition excludes the female body?

Cixous and other poststructuralist feminists are both outraged and intrigued by the possibilities for relations between gender and writing (or language use in general) opened up by Lacan's paradigms. In 'The Laugh of the Medusa,' Cixous states that her project has two aims: to break up and destroy, and to foresee and project. She wants to destroy (or perhaps deconstruct) the phallogocentric system Lacan describes, and to project some new strategies for a new kind of relation between female bodies and language.

Lacan's description of the Symbolic, as illustrated in his drawing of the two identical doors (signfieds) attached to different signifiers, places men and women in different positions within the Symbolic in relation to the Phallus; men more easily misperceive themselves as having the Phallus, or being closer to it, whereas women, who instead of penises have 'nothing,' have 'absence,' according to Freud,

are further away from the center. Poststructuralist feminist theories argue that women are thus closer to the margins of the Symbolic order, and are not as rigidly held in place by the rule of the center, or what Lacan also calls the 'Law-of-the-Father.' Using the theater metaphor, women sit in the back row, closer to the door and further from the organizing center of the stage; from that back row, they have more freedom to behave as they choose, rather than as the center dictates. They are also closer to the Imaginary, to images and fantasies, and further from the idea of absolute fixed and stable meaning than men are.

Because women are less fixed in stable positions within the Symbolic than men, women and their language are more fluid, more flowing, more flexible than men and their language. It is worth noting here that when Cixous talks about 'women' and 'woman,' sometimes she means the terms literally, denoting the physical beings with vaginas and breasts, and sometimes she uses the terms to denote the linguistic structural position: 'woman' is a signifier in the chain of signifiers within the Symbolic, just as 'man' is (and 'chair' and 'dog' and 'computer,' for that matter). Any signifier has stable meaning – 'woman' is the signifier connected to the signified of vagina, breasts, etc. – because it is locked in place, anchored, by the center of the system, which limits play. When Cixous says that woman is more slippery, more fluid, less fixed, and more playful than man, she means both the literal woman, the person, and the signifier 'woman.' Here's where the line between biology or physiology and subject position gets blurred again. Is Cixous arguing, like Freud, that anatomy is destiny in language?

Cixous's essay, like most of those written from a poststructuralist perspective, is difficult to understand, not only because she assumes we all know Freud's and Lacan's formulations about female sexuality and the structure of language, but also because she writes on two levels at once: she is always being both metaphoric and literal, referring both to structures and to real people. When she says that 'woman must write herself,' and 'woman must write woman,' she means both that women must write themselves, tell their own stories, and that 'woman' as signifier must have a new way to be connected to the signifier 'I,' and to write the signifier of selfhood or subjecthood offered within the Symbolic Order.

Cixous also discusses writing on both a metaphoric and a literal level. She aligns writing with masturbation, something that for

women is supposed to be secret, shameful, or silly, something not quite grown-up, something that will be renounced in order to achieve full adulthood, just as clitoral stimulation has to be renounced in favor of vaginal reproductive passive adult sexuality. If men write with their penises, as Gilbert and Gubar argue, then Cixous says that before women can write they have to discover where their sexual pleasure is located.

Cixous also argues that men haven't yet discovered the relation between their sexuality and their writing, as long as they are focused on writing with the penis. 'Man must write man,' Cixous says, again focusing on 'man' as a signifier within the Symbolic, which is no more privileged that 'woman' as a signifier. Cixous explains that men's sexuality, like women's, has always been defined and circumscribed by binary oppositions (active/passive, masculine/feminine), and that heterosexual relations have been structured by a sense of otherness and fear created by these absolute binaries. As long as male sexuality is defined in these limited and limiting terms, Cixous says, men will be prisoners of a Symbolic Order which alienates them from their bodies in ways similar to (though not identical with) how women are alienated from their bodies and their sexualities. Thus, while Cixous does slam men directly for being patriarchal oppressors, she also identifies the structures which enforce gender dichotomies as being oppressive to both sexes.

She also links these oppressive binary structures to other Western cultural practices, particularly those involving racial distinctions. She follows Freud in calling women 'the dark continent,' and expands the metaphor by reference to apartheid to demonstrate that these same binary systems which structure gender also structure imperialism: women are aligned with darkness, with otherness, with Africa, against men who are aligned with lightness, with selfhood, and with Western civilization. In writing about this, Cixous refers to women as 'they,' as if women are non-speakers, non-writers, whom she is observing: 'As soon as they begin to speak, at the same time as they're taught their name, they can be taught that their territory is black.'[3] As soon as women (or any other 'other') enters the Symbolic and takes up a subject position, they are assigned a name and told the meaning of their particular position.

Cixous argues that most women do write and speak, but that they do so from a 'masculine' position; in order to speak, woman has

assumed she needs a stable system of meaning, and thus has aligned herself with the Phallus, which anchors language. There has been little or no 'feminine' writing, Cixous says. In making this statement, she insists that writing is always 'marked' within a Symbolic Order that is structured through binary oppositions, including 'masculine/feminine,' in which the feminine is always repressed. Cixous coins the term '*l'ecriture feminine*' to refer to this notion of feminine writing, with masculine writing as its phallogocentric counterpart. She sees *l'ecriture feminine* first of all as something possible only in poetry, in terms of existing literary genres, and not in realist prose. Novels, she says, are 'allies of representationalism;' they are genres, which try to speak in stable language, language where one signifier points to one signified. In poetry, however, language is set free – the chains of signifiers flow more freely, and meaning is less determinate. Poetry, according to Cixous, is closer to the unconscious, which, as Lacan describes, is structured like chains of signifiers which never rest, never attach to any signified. Being closer to the unconscious, poetry is also closer to what has been repressed into the unconscious, which is female sexuality and the female body. It is worth noting, however, that though Cixous claims poetry as a form of *l'ecriture feminine*, all the poets she cites as feminine writers are men.

Such feminine writing will serve as a rupture, or a site of transformation and change, Cixous claims. She means 'rupture' here in the same sense as Derrida, a place where the totality of the system breaks down and one can see a system as a system, rather than simply as 'the truth.' Feminine writing will show the phallogocentric structure of the Symbolic as something constructed, not as something inevitable and essential, and thus allow us to deconstruct that order.

There are two levels on which *l'ecriture feminine* will be transformative, according to Cixous, and these levels correspond again to her use of the literal and the metaphoric, or the individual and the structural. On one level, the individual woman must write herself, must discover for herself what her body feels like, and how to write about that body in language. Specifically, women must find their own sexuality, one that is rooted solely in their own bodies, and find ways to write about that pleasure, that *jouissance*. On the second level, when women speak or write their own bodies, the structure of language itself will change; as women become active subjects, not just beings passively acted upon, their position as subject in lan-

guage will shift. Women who write – if they don't merely reproduce the phallogocentric system of stable ordered meaning which already exists, and which excludes them as women – will be creating a new signifying system, which will have built into it far more play, more fluidity, than the existing rigid phallogocentric Symbolic Order. This writing will be more like poetry than prose, and its meanings will be multiple and ambiguous, rather than clear and rational, based on the attachment of signifier to signified. 'Beware, my friend,' Cixous writes toward the end of the essay, 'of the signifier that would take you back to the authority of a signified!'[4]

The woman who speaks, Cixous says, and who does not reproduce the representational stability of the Symbolic Order, will not speak in linear fasion, will not 'make sense' in any currently existing form. *L'ecriture feminine*, like feminine speech, will not be objective or objectifiable; it will erase the divisions between speech and text, between order and chaos, between sense and nonsense. In this way, *l'ecriture feminine* will be an inherently deconstructive language. Such speech/writing (and remember, this language will erase the slash) will bring users closer to the realm of the Real, back to the mother's body, to the breast, to the sense of union or non-separation. This is why Cixous uses the metaphor of 'white ink,' of writing in breast milk; she wants to convey the idea of a reunion with the maternal body, to a place where there is no lack or separation.

Cixous's description of what *l'ecriture feminine* looks like – or, better, what it sounds like, since it's not clear that this writing will 'look like' anything, as 'looking like' is at the heart of the misperception of self in the mirror stage which launches one into the Symbolic Order – flows into metaphor, which she also means literally. She wants to be careful to talk about writing in new ways, in ways that distinguish *l'ecriture feminine* from existing forms of speech or writing, and in so doing she associates feminine writing with existing non-linguistic modes. *L'ecriture feminine* is milk, it's a song, it's something with rhythm and pulse, but no words, something connected with bodies and with bodies' beats and movements, but not with representational language.

She uses these metaphors also to be 'slippery,' arguing that one can't define the practice of *l'ecriture feminine*. To define something is to pin it down, to anchor it, to limit it, to put it in its place within a stable system or structure – and Cixous says that *l'ecriture feminine* is too fluid for that; it will always resist, exceed, or escape any

definition. It can't be theorized, enclosed, encoded, or understood – which doesn't mean, she warns, that it doesn't exist. Rather, it will always be greater than the existing systems for classification and ordering of knowledge in phallogocentric Western culture. It can't be defined, but it can be 'conceived of' – another phrase which works on both literal and metaphoric levels – by subjects not subjugated to a central authority. Only those on the margins, the 'outlaws,' can 'conceive of' feminine language; those outlaws will be women, and anyone else who can resist or be distanced from the structuring central Phallus of the phallogocentric Symbolic Order.

In discussing who might exist in the position of outlaw, Cixous brings up the question of bisexuality. Again, she starts from Freud's idea that all humans are fundamentally bisexual, and that the Oedipal trajectory which steers both boys and girls into heterosexuality is an unfortunate requirement of culture. For Cixous, 'culture' is always a phallogocentric order; the entry into the Symbolic requires the division between male and female, masculine and feminine, which subordinates and represses the feminine. By erasing or deconstructing the slash between masculine and feminine, however, Cixous is not arguing for Freud's old idea of bisexuality. Rather, she wants a new bisexuality, the 'other bisexuality,' which is the 'nonexclusion either of the difference of one sex' – a refusal of self/other as a structuring dichotomy.[5] In essence, rather than taping masculine and feminine together, Cixous's bisexuality would dissolve the distinctions, so that sexuality would be from any body, any body part, at any time; it would be more like the polymorphous perversity that Freud says all infants have, but which has to be organized and disciplined in order for (phallogocentric) civilization to happen.

Without the dichotomy of self/other, all other dichotomies would start to fall apart, Cixous says; her 'other bisexuality' would thus become a deconstructive force to erase the slashes in all structuring binary oppositions. When this occurs, the Western cultural representations of female sexuality – the myths associated with womanhood – would also fall apart. Cixous focuses particularly on the myth of the Medusa, the woman with snakes for hair, whose look turns men into stone, and the myth of woman as black hole or abyss. The idea of woman as abyss is pretty easy to understand; in Freudian terms, a woman lacks a penis (positive, presence) and instead has this scary hole in which the penis disappears, and might

not come back. Freud reads the Medusa myth as part of the fear of castration, the woman whose hair is writhing with lots of penises; she's scary, not because she has no penis, but because she has too many. Cixous says those are the fears that scare men into being complicit in upholding the phallogocentric order: they're scared of losing their one penis when they see women as having either no penis (and a black hole) or too many penises. Nowhere in these myths is there a depiction of the female body in itself, without reference to the penis. If women could show men their true sexual pleasures, their real bodies, by writing them in non-representational form, in *l'ecriture feminine*, Cixous says, men would understand that female bodies, female sexuality, is not about penises at all. That's why she says we have to show them our 'sexts' – another neologism, the combination of sex and texts, the idea of female sexuality as a new form of writing.

Cixous talks about hysterics as prior examples of women who write 'sexts,' who write their bodies as texts of *l'ecriture feminine*. Again she's following Freud, whose earliest works were on female hysterics. The basic idea of hysteria, for Freud, is that a body produces a symptom, such as the paralysis of a limb, which represents a repressed idea; the body thus 'speaks' what the conscious mind cannot say, and the unconscious thoughts are written out by the body itself. *L'ecriture feminine* has a lot in common with hysteria, as you can see, in the idea of the direct connections between the unconscious and the body as a mode of 'writing.'

Cixous concludes 'The Laugh of the Medusa' by offering a critique of the Freudian nuclear family, the mother–father–baby formation, which she sees as generating the ideas of castration and lack which form the basis for ideas of the feminine in both Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis. She wants to break up these 'old circuits' so that the family formations which uphold the phallogocentric Symbolic won't be re-created every time a child is born. She argues that this family system is just as limiting and oppressive to men as to women, and that it needs to be 'demater-paternalized.'[6] Then she discusses other ways to figure pregnancy, arguing that, like all functions of the female body, pregnancy needs to be written in *l'ecriture feminine*. When pregnancy is written this way, birth can be figured as something other than as separation or as lack.

She ends with the idea of formulating desire as a desire for everything, not for something lacking or absent, as in the Lacanian

Symbolic Order. Such a new desire would strip the penis of its significance as the signifier of lack, or of fulfillment of lack, and would free people to see each other as different beings, each of whom is whole, and who are not complementary, defined by difference or tied together in a binary opposition.

LUCE IRIGARAY AND 'THIS SEX WHICH IS NOT ONE'

Luce Irigaray, like Hélène Cixous, follows the thinking of post-structuralist theorists in asking questions about the relationship between language and bodies, specifically male and female bodies and masculine and feminine language. Like Cixous, she focuses on the female body and how it has been constructed in phallogocentric systems like Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Irigaray, however, discusses the question of a female or feminine sexuality in more depth than Cixous; she wants specifically to explore the question of a feminine *jouissance* and what that might be when defined on its own terms, in reference to the female body only.

'Female sexuality has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters,' Irigaray declares in the first sentence of her essay 'This Sex Which Is Not One.' She's following Freud here, who defined all active erotic behavior as masculine, and all passive behavior as feminine; he also labeled clitoral sexual pleasure as active and masculine, and vaginal sexual pleasure as passive and feminine. Freud declared that the clitoris was literally a 'little penis,' insofar as it provided a masculine/phallic pleasure for women. Irigaray points out that, using Freud's definitions, female sexual organs and female eroticism are defined only in terms of male sex organs and male eroticism. If the female sex organ is the clitoris, then it is really a penis, and one smaller and less powerful than the male version; if the female sex organ is the vagina, then it is passive, waiting to be filled with a penis.

Note the 'if's in the above statements: if the female sex organ is the clitoris, if the female sex organ is the vagina. This, for Irigaray, is a central flaw in psychoanalytic theory and in Western cultural thought: we don't know how to talk about female sexuality, and female bodily configurations, because we are focused on finding the *one* female sexual organ. Irigaray points out that Freud has 'nothing to say' about woman and her sexual pleasure: 'nothing' because Freudian psychoanalysis defines female pleasure solely in terms of

male bodies, and 'nothing' because Freud defines female genitalia as 'nothing,' since there is 'nothing' to see, 'nothing' visibly present, in the supposedly already-castrated female.

Freudian psychoanalysis insists on each sex having only one visible and nameable sex organ, based on Freud's notion that the penis is the only male sex organ; in so doing, he claims women have no sex organ, and also ignores all the other parts, such as testicles, that are part of the male body. Irigaray asks why Freud, and Western culture in general, needs to have just sex organ for each sex. Is it because we need to have a single word, a unique signifier, to represent sexuality in one specific locus on the body? Irigaray here is questioning the basic structure of Western metaphysics, the binary opposition, which requires that there be one signifier, and only one, on each side of the slash.

For male sexuality, this has been relatively unproblematic, as Freud and Lacan both agree that 'penis' is the signifier for male sexuality, the left side of the slash. But if 'penis' is one side of a binary opposition, what's on the other side? Look at some of the possibilities:

- Penis/vagina
- Penis/clitoris
- Penis/no penis
- Penis/nothing

All of these definitions (and perhaps more) appear in psychoanalytic attempts to name *the* female sexual organ that is the counterpart of the penis. For poststructuralist feminists such as Irigaray, this list is inherently deconstructive: if you can't find one term, and one term only, to be on the right side of the slash, the opposite of 'penis,' then the whole system of binary oppositions, the phallogocentric system of Western metaphysics, starts to fall apart.

Female sexual pleasure, or *jouissance*, according to Irigaray, is of a different order, in a different economy than male sexual pleasure, because the male and female bodies are configured so differently. Man needs an instrument with which to touch himself, she argues; if his pleasure is indeed based in his penis, then something else – a hand, a vagina, a mouth, language – has to touch the penis in order to produce pleasure. The female sexual organs – and Irigaray insists that they are plural – are, by contrast, always in contact with each other; the layers of labia enfold the clitoris and provide constant

autoerotic contact. Thus female sexual pleasure needs no external object, but is complete unto itself.

From this, Irigaray posits heterosexual intercourse as a 'violation,' an interruption of female autoerotic pleasure, as the penis forces apart the labia and forces female sexuality back into a phallic order. She calls this a form of 'rape,' naming heterosexual intercourse as 'foreign to the feminine.'

Irigaray links the male desire for intercourse with the desire to return to the original union with the mother's body, which is forbidden in both Freud and Lacan's accounts of human development. In intercourse, then, the female partner's body is only a 'prop' for a male fantasy of reunion and re-merging. The female partner's desire – which, presumably, is the same as the male's desire, that is, to return to and merge with the maternal body – has no place in heterosexual intercourse, according to this model; the woman can't fantasize that she's joining with the mother's body when the man is having that fantasy while joining with her body. In fact, Irigaray claims, the man's pursuit of his own desire to merge with the mother's body, expressed as vaginal intercourse, actively interrupts the woman's communion with her own autoeroticism, with her labia constantly touching each other.

Irigaray is advocating for masturbation or lesbian sexual activity as the only means for female desire to be expressed in female terms. She argues that feminine desire, so long molded by and into masculine parameters, is like a 'lost civilization,' one which has a 'different alphabet' and a 'different language.' This lost desire, lost civilization, lost language was 'submerged by the logic which has dominated the West since the Greeks.' This logic is what Derrida discusses as logocentrism and Cixous names phallogocentrism: the preference for presence over absence, for things that are visible over things that are invisible, for things that have a definite and singular shape or form over things that have an ambiguous or fluid shape or form. Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic constructions of male and female sexual desire follow this logic, according to Irigaray, preferring the visible bounded penis to the hidden and amorphous female genitalia, which become 'nothing to see.'

Irigaray points out how dependent the phallogocentric Symbolic Order is on the register of the visible, as Lacan requires that entry into the Symbolic be preceded by the misrecognition of one's self in the mirror stage as a visual experience. The Western emphasis on

vision, which marks female genitalia as 'nothing to see,' subsumes all other sensory registers to that of vision. Touch thus belongs to the realm of the repressed, the unconscious, the realm of the maternal body and the Real which must be abandoned in order to enter the specular Symbolic Order. For Irigaray, the primary form of female desire, of female eroticism based solely on the configuration of the female body, lies in touch, not in sight, and hence female desire does not require the unity and phallomorphism which the visual dimensions of phallogocentrism demand.

Women's pleasure, their *jouissance*, comes from touch, and from the idea that woman is constantly touching herself because her 'sex,' her genitalia, are not singular but multiple. Similarly, according to Irigaray, female language – Cixous's *l'ecriture feminine* – is equally multiple and amorphous, rather than single and linear, like the penis (in psychoanalytic thought). The female body can speak from everywhere, in Irigaray's view, because the female body experiences pleasure everywhere. Like Cixous, Irigaray does not try to define or categorize this language of female erotic pleasure, noting instead that it is inherently slippery, unfixed, fluid, and doesn't make 'sense' in the way that traditional phallogocentric language does.

Irigaray's critique of the phallogocentric Symbolic Order is more radical that Cixous's critique, if only because Irigaray rejects heterosexuality as irredeemably patriarchal. She argues, in this essay and elsewhere, that the articulation and celebration of lesbian sexuality will work as a deconstructive force, shaking the foundations of patriarchal phallogocentric systems of meaning and exchange. The radical potential of non-heterosexual forms of writing and desire is an important part of queer theory, the topic of the next chapter.

NOTES

1 Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979, p. 3.
2 *Ibid.*, p. 7.
3 Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa,' in Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle, eds, *Critical Theory Since 1965*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1986, p. 310.
4 *Ibid.*, p. 319.
5 *Ibid.*, p. 314.
6 *Ibid.*, pp. 318–19.