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# 17 Hélène Cixous

Hélène Cixous (b. 1938) was born in Algeria and teaches at the University of Paris, Vincennes. A sophisticated literary critic in the post-structuralist mode, and the author of a major study of James Joyce which has been translated into English (*The Exile of James Joyce* [1976]), Hélène Cixous is also the author of novels and plays. These two aspects of her life and work, the critical and the creative, converge in the radical feminist writing exemplified by 'Sortes', reprinted below. Although Hélène Cixous has, on occasion, repudiated the label 'feminist', on the grounds that it perpetuates the hierarchical opposition of masculine/feminine which she is trying to deconstruct, the import of her work is consistent with that of many self-styled feminist writers.

Hélène Cixous represents a distinctively French brand of radical feminism which centres on the concept of *écriture féminine*, or feminine writing—the inscription of the female body and female difference in language and text, as Elaine Showalter defines it (see below, pp. 331–37). Though it has affinities with the criticism that arose out of the Anglo-American Women's Liberation Movement of the late 1960s and 70s, it is perhaps more directly indebted to the work of Simone de Beauvoir and the intellectual ferment generated by *les événements* of 1968 in Paris. Its emphasis is psychological rather than sociological, theoretical rather than pragmatic.

Lacan's revisionist reading of Freud, and Derrida's critique of logocentrism, are enlisted and to some extent implicated in Cixous' attack on patriarchal culture: Lacan's symbolic 'phallus' and Derrida's logocentrism are seen as two aspects of a pervasive and oppressive 'phallogocentrism'.

'Sortes', which can mean in French, escapes, departures, outcomings, as well as having the military meaning which it has in English, was originally published in *La Femme Née* ('The Newly Born Woman') in 1975. This extract, translated by Ann Liddle, is reprinted from *New French Feminisms*, edited by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (1980).

CROSS-REFERENCES: 5. Lacan

20. Showalter

26. Mitchell

COMMENTARY: Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics* (1985) [Ch. 6, 'Hélène Cixous: an imaginary utopia']

## Sortes

*Where is she?*

Activity/passivity,

Sun/Moon,

Culture/Nature,

Day/Night,

Father/Mother,

Head/heart,

Intelligible/sensitive,

Logos/Pathos.

Form, convex, step, advance, seed, progress.

Matter, concave, ground—which supports the step, receptacle.

Man

Woman

Always the same metaphor: we follow it, it transports us, in all of its forms, wherever a discourse is organized. The same thread, or double tress leads us, whether we are reading or speaking, through literature, philosophy, criticism, centuries of representation, of reflection.

Thought has always worked by opposition,

Speech/Writing

High/Low

By dual, *hierarchized* oppositions. Superior/Inferior. Myths, legends, books. Philosophical systems. Wherever an ordering intervenes, a law organizes the thinkable by (dual, irreconcilable; or mitigable, dialectical) oppositions. And all the couples of oppositions are *couples*. Does this mean something? Is the fact that logocentrism subjects thought—all of the concepts, the codes, the values—to a two-term system, related to 'the' couple man/woman?

Nature/History,

Nature/Art,

Nature/Mind,

Passion/Action.

Theory of culture, theory of society, the ensemble of symbolic systems—art, religion, family, language,—everything elaborates the same systems. And the movement by which each opposition is set up to produce meaning is the movement

by which the couple is destroyed. A universal battlefield. Each time a war breaks out. Death is always at work.

Father/son	Relationships of authority, of privilege, of force.
Logos/writing	Relationships: opposition, conflict, relief, reversion.
Master/slave	Violence. Repression.

And we perceive that the 'victory' always amounts to the same thing: it is hierarchized. The hierarchization subjects the entire conceptual organization to man. A male privilege, which can be seen in the opposition by which it sustains itself, between *activity* and *passivity*. Traditionally, the question of sexual difference is coupled with the same opposition: activity/passivity.

That goes a long way. If we examine the history of philosophy—in so far as philosophical discourse orders and reproduces all thought—we perceive<sup>2</sup> that: it is marked by an absolute constant, the orchestrator of values, which is precisely the opposition activity/passivity.

In philosophy, woman is always on the side of passivity. Every time the question comes up; when we examine kinship structures; whenever a family model is brought into play; in fact as soon as the ontological question is raised; as soon as you ask yourself what is meant by the question 'What is it?'; as soon as there is a will to say something. A will: desire, authority, you examine that, and you are led right back—to the father. You can even fail to notice that there's no place at all for women in the operational. In the extreme the world of 'being' can function to the exclusion of the mother. No need for mother—provided that there is something of the maternal: and it is the father then who acts as—is—the mother. Either the woman is passive; or she doesn't exist. What is left is unthinkable, unthought of. She does not enter into the oppositions, she is not coupled with the father (who is coupled with the son).

There is Mallarmé's<sup>3</sup> tragic dream, a father lamenting the mystery of paternity, which mourning tears out of the poet, the mourning of mournings, the death of the beloved son: this dream of a union between the father and the son—and no mother then. Man's dream is the face of death. Which always threatens him differently than it threatens woman.

'an alliance	And dream of masculine
a union, superb	filiation, dream of God the father
—and the life	emerging from himself
remaining in me	in his son,—and
I shall use it	no mother then
to—	
so no mother then?	

She does not exist, she may be nonexistent; but there must be something of her. Of woman, upon whom he no longer depends, he retains only this space, always virginal, matter subjected to the desire that he wishes to imprint.

And if you examine literary history, it's the same story. It all refers back to man

to his torment, his desire to be (at) the origin. Back to the father. There is an intrinsic bond between the philosophical and the literary (to the extent that it signifies, literature is commanded by the philosophical) and phallogocentrism. The philosophical constructs itself starting with the abasement of woman. Subordination of the feminine to the masculine order which appears to be the condition for the functioning of the machine.

The challenging of this solidarity of logocentrism and phallogocentrism has today become insistent enough—the bringing to light of the fate which has been imposed upon woman, of her burial—to threaten the stability of the masculine edifice which passed itself off as eternal/natural; by bringing forth from the world of femininity reflections, hypotheses which are necessarily ruinous for the bastion which still holds the authority. What would become of logocentrism, of the great philosophical systems, of world order in general if the rock upon which they founded their church were to crumble?

If it were to come out in a new day that the logocentric project had always been, undeniably, to *found* (fund)<sup>4</sup> phallogocentrism, to insure for masculine order a rationale equal to history itself?

Then all the stories would have to be told differently, the future would be incalculable, the historical forces would, will, change hands, bodies; another thinking as yet not thinkable will transform the functioning of all society. Well, we are living through this very period when the conceptual foundation of a millennial culture is in process of being undermined by millions of a species of mole as yet not recognized.

When they awaken from among the dead, from among the words, from among the laws. . . .

### *What does one give?*

The specific difference that has determined the movement of history as a movement of property is articulated between two economies that define themselves in relation to the problematics of giving.

The (political) economy of the masculine and of the feminine is organized by different requirements and constraints, which, when socialized and metaphorized, produce signs, relationships of power, relationships of production and of reproduction, an entire immense system of cultural inscription readable as masculine or feminine.

I am careful here to use the *qualifiers* of sexual difference, in order to avoid the confusion man/masculine, woman/feminine: for there are men who do not repress their femininity, women who more or less forcefully inscribe their masculinity. The difference is not, of course, distributed according to socially determined 'sexes.' Furthermore, when I speak of political economy and of libidinal economy, in putting the two together, I am not bringing into play the false question of origin, that tall tale sustained by male privilege. We must guard against falling complacently or blindly into the essentialist ideological interpretation, as, for example, Freud and Jones, in different ways, ventured to do; in their

quarrel over the subject of feminine sexuality, both of them, starting from opposite points of view, came to support the awesome thesis of a 'natural,' anatomical determination of sexual difference-opposition. And from there on, both implicitly support phallogocentrism's position of power.

Let us review the main points of the opposing positions: [Ernest] Jones (in *Early Feminine Sexuality*), using an ambiguous approach, attacks the Freudian theses that make of woman an imperfect man.

For Freud:

(1) the 'fatality' of the feminine situation is a result of an anatomical 'defectiveness.'

(2) there is only one libido, and its essence is male; the inscription of sexual difference begins only with a phallic phase which both boys and girls go through. Until then, the girl has been a sort of little boy: the genital organization of the infantile libido is articulated by the equivalence activity/masculinity; the vagina has not as yet been 'discovered.'

(3) the first love object being, for both sexes, the mother, it is only for the boy that love of the opposite sex is 'natural.'

For Jones: *femininity is an autonomous 'essence.'*

From the outset (starting from the age of six months) the girl has a *feminine* desire for her father; an analysis of the little girl's earliest fantasies would in fact show that, in place of the breast which is perceived as disappointing, it is the penis that is desired, or an object of the same form (by an analogical displacement). It follows, since we are already into the chain of substitutions, that in the series of partial objects, in place of the penis, would come the child—for in order to counter Freud, Jones docilely returns to the Freudian terrain. And then some. From the equation breast-penis-child, he concludes that the little girl experiences with regard to the father a primary desire. (And this would include the desire to have a child by the father as well.) And, of course, the girl also has a primary love for the opposite sex. She too, then, has a right to her Oedipal complex as a primary formation, and to the threat of mutilation by the mother. At last she is a woman, anatomically, without defect: her clitoris is not a minipenis. Clitoral masturbation is not, as Freud claims, a masculine practice. And it would seem in light of precocious fantasies that the vagina is discovered very early.

In fact, in affirming that there is a specific femininity (while in other respects preserving the theses of an orthodoxy) it is still phallogocentrism that Jones reinforces, on the pretext of taking the part of femininity (and of God, who he recalls created them male and female—!). And bisexuality vanishes into the unbridged abyss that separates the opponents here.

As for Freud, if we subscribe to what he sets forth when he identifies with Napoleon in his article of 1933 on *The Disappearance of the Oedipus Complex*:

'anatomy is destiny,' then we participate in the sentencing to death of woman. And in the completion of all History.

That the difference between the sexes may have psychic consequences is undeniable. But they are surely not reducible to those designated by a Freudian analysis. Starting with the relationship of the two sexes to the Oedipal complex, the boy and the girl are oriented toward a division of social roles so that women 'inescapably' have a lesser productivity, because they 'sublimate' less than men and because symbolic activity, hence the production of culture, is men's doing.<sup>5</sup>

Freud moreover starts from what he calls the *anatomical* difference between the sexes. And we know how that is pictured in his eyes: as the difference between having/not having the phallus. With reference to these precious parts. Starting from what will be specified, by Lacan, as the transcendental signifier.

But *sexual difference* is not determined merely by the fantasized relationship to anatomy, which is based, to a great extent, upon the point of *view*, therefore upon a strange importance accorded [by Freud and Lacan] to exteriority and to the specular in the elaboration of sexuality. A voyeur's theory, of course.

No, it is at the level of sexual pleasure [*jouissance*]<sup>6</sup> in my opinion that the difference makes itself most clearly apparent in as far as woman's libidinal economy is neither identifiable by a man nor referable to the masculine economy.

For me, the question 'What does she want?' that they ask of woman, a question that in fact woman asks herself because they ask it of her, because precisely there is so little place in society for her desire that she ends up by dint of not knowing what to do with it, no longer knowing where to put it, or if she has any, conceals the most immediate and the most urgent question: 'How do I experience sexual pleasure?' What is feminine *sexual pleasure*, where does it take place, how is it inscribed at the level of her body, of her unconscious? And then how is it put into writing?

We can go on at length about a hypothetical prehistory and about a matriarchal era. Or we can, as did Bachofen,<sup>7</sup> attempt to reconstitute a gynocentric society, and to deduce from it poetic and mythical effects that have a powerfully subversive import with regard to the family and to male power.

All the other ways of depicting the history of power, property, masculine domination, the constitution of the State, the ideological apparatus have their effectiveness. But the change taking place has nothing to do with questions of 'origin'. Phallogocentrism *is*. History has never produced, recorded anything but that. Which does not mean that this form is inevitable or natural. Phallogocentrism is the enemy. Of *everyone*. Men stand to lose by it, differently but as seriously as women. And it is time to transform. To invent the other history.

There is no such thing as 'destiny,' 'nature,' or essence, but living structures, caught up, sometimes frozen within historicocultural limits which intermingle with the historical scene to such a degree that it has long been impossible and is still difficult to think or even to imagine something else. At present, we are living through a transitional period—where the classical structure appears as if it might crack.

To predict what will happen to sexual difference—in another time (in two or three hundred years?) is impossible. But there should be no misunderstanding:

men and women are caught up in a network of millennial cultural determinations of a complexity that is practically unanalyzable: we can no more talk about 'woman' than about 'man' without getting caught up in an ideological theater where the multiplication of representations, images, reflections, myths, identifications constantly transforms, deforms, alters each person's imaginary order and in advance, renders all conceptualization null and void.<sup>8</sup>

There is no reason to exclude the possibility of radical transformations of behaviour, mentalities, roles, and political economy. The effects of these transformations on the libidinal economy are unthinkable today. Let us imagine simultaneously a *general* change in all of the structure of formation, education, framework, hence of reproduction, of ideological effects, and let us imagine a real liberation of sexuality, that is, a transformation of our relationship to our body (—and to another body), an approximation of the immense material organic sensual universe that we are, this not being possible, of course, without equally radical political transformations (imagine!). Then 'femininity,' 'masculinity,' would inscribe their effects of difference, their economy, their relationships to expenditure, to deficit, to giving, quite differently. That which appears as 'feminine' or 'masculine' today would no longer amount to the same thing. The general logic of difference would no longer fit into the opposition that still dominates. The difference would be a crowning display of new differences.

But we are still floundering about—with certain exceptions—in the Old order.

### *The masculine future:*

There are exceptions. There always have been those uncertain, poetic beings, who have not let themselves be reduced to the state of coded mannequins by the relentless repression of the homosexual component. Men or women, complex, mobile, open beings. Admitting the component of the other sex makes them at once much richer, plural, strong, and to the extent of this mobility, very fragile. We invent only on this condition: thinkers, artists, creators of new values, 'philosophers' of the mad Nietzschean sort, inventors and destroyers of concepts, of forms, the changers of life cannot but be agitated by singularities—complementary or contradictory. This does not mean that in order to create you must be homosexual. But there is no *invention* possible, whether it be philosophical or poetic, without the presence in the inventing subject of an abundance of the other, of the diverse: persons-detached, persons-thought, peoples born of the unconscious, and in each desert, suddenly animated, a springing forth of self that we did not know about—our women, our monsters, our jackals, our Arabs, our fellow-creatures, our fears? But there is no invention of other I's, no poetry, no fiction without a certain homosexuality (interplay therefore of bisexuality) making in me a crystallized work of my ultrasubjectivities.<sup>10</sup> I is this matter, personal, exuberant, lively masculine, feminine, or other in which I delights me and distresses me. And in the concert of personalizations called I, at the same time that you repress a certain homosexuality, symbolically, substitutively, it comes out through various signs—traits, compartments, manners, gestures—and it is

seen still more clearly in writing.

Thus, under the name of Jean Genet,<sup>11</sup> what is inscribed in the movement of a text which divides itself, breaks itself into bits, regroups itself, is an abundant, maternal, pederastic femininity. A phantasmatical mingling of men, of males, of messieurs, of monarchs, princes, orphans, flowers, mothers, breasts, gravitates around a marvelous 'sun of energy' love, which bombards and disintegrates these ephemeral amorous singularities so that they may recompose themselves in other bodies for new passions. . . .

### NOTES

1. The translation is faithful to Hélène Cixous's many neologisms.—Tr.
2. This is what all of Derrida's work traversing—investigating the history of philosophy—seeks to make apparent. In Plato, Hegel, Nietzsche, the same process goes on, repression, exclusion, distancing of woman. Murder which intermingles with history as a manifestation and representation of masculine power.
3. *Pour un tombeau d'Anatole* (Editions du Seuil, 1961, p. 138) tomb in which Mallarmé preserves his son, guards him, he himself the mother, from death.
4. *Fouder* in French means both 'to found' and 'to fund'.—Tr.
5. Freud's thesis is the following: when the Oedipal complex disappears the superego becomes its heir. At the moment when the boy begins to feel the threat of castration, he begins to overcome the Oedipus complex, with the help of a very severe superego. The Oedipus complex for the boy is a primary process: his first love object, as for the girl, is the mother. But the girl's development is inevitably controlled by the pressure of a less severe superego: the discovery of her castration results in a less vigorous superego. She never completely overcomes the Oedipus complex. The feminine Oedipus complex is not a primary process: the pre-Oedipal attachment to the mother entails for the girl a difficulty from which, says Freud, she never recovers: the necessity of changing objects (to love the father), in mid-stream is a painful conversion, which is accompanied by an additional renunciation: the passage from pre-Oedipal sexuality to 'normal' sexuality implies the abandonment of the clitoris in order to move on to the vagina. When this 'desire' is fulfilled, women have a reduced symbolic activity: they have nothing to lose, to gain, to defend.
6. *Jouissance* is a word used by Hélène Cixous to refer to that intense, rapturous pleasure which women know and which men fear.—Ed.
7. J. J. Bachofen (1815–1887) Swiss historian of 'gynococracy,' 'historian' of a nonhistory. His project is to demonstrate that the nations (Greek, Roman, Hebrew) went through an age of 'gynococracy,' the reign of the Mother, before arriving at a patriarchy. This epoch can only be deduced, as it has no history. Bachofen advances that this state of affairs, humiliating for men, must have been repressed, covered over by historical forgetfulness. And he attempts to create (in *Das Mutterrecht* in particular, 1861) an archeology of the matriarchal system, of great beauty, starting with a reading of the first historical texts, at the level of the symptom, of their unsaid. Gynococracy, he says, is well-ordered materialism.
8. There are coded paradigms, symptomatic of a repeated consensus, which project the man/woman robot couple as seen by contemporary societies. See the 1975 issue of UNESCO consecrated to the International Year of Woman.
9. The French here, *nos semblables, nos frangins, plays on and with the last line of Baudelaire's famous poem 'Au lecteur'* [To the reader]: 'Hypocrite lecteur,—mon semblable,—mon frère'.—Tr.
10. Hélène Cixous, *Pétions de personne* (Editions du Seuil, 1974) 'Tales of Hoffman,' p. 112, *passim*.
11. Jean Genet, French novelist and playwright, to whose writing Hélène Cixous refers when she gives examples of the inscription of pederastic femininity.—Tr.