

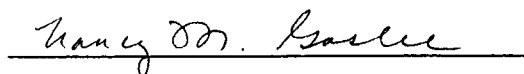
To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Sharon Elise Cline entitled "Hélène Cixous and History." I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in History.



Owen Bradley, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and
recommend its acceptance:



Accepted for the Council:



Associate Vice Chancellor and
Dean of the Graduate School

Hélène Cixous and History

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
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Sharon Elise Cline
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Abstract

This paper examines the work of Hélène Cixous and situates her thought in relation to two theoretical traditions: psychoanalysis and structuralism. Her conception of *l'écriture féminine* is fundamentally informed by psychoanalytic notions of libidinal economy and by structuralist insights into language. However, she remains critical of these traditions in important ways. *L'écriture féminine* presents a utopian challenge to traditional ways of thinking about historical processes and raises interesting issues in relation to historical work.

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I. Introduction

Like American feminism, the French feminist movement is divided internally. Various feminist groups organize and act with different priorities, different methods and different analyses of women's oppression. Attention to language, however, has come to play a central role for many French feminists because of the way that language and representation shape the realities in which we live. Compared to the American movement, French feminism is highly theoretical. American feminist criticism tends to operate within an established liberal-humanist tradition whereas French feminist critics gravitate toward psychoanalysis and post-structuralism as tools for deconstructing the categories of that humanist tradition.¹ Its difficult emphasis on theory along with delays and problems of translation contributed to a slow reception of French feminist writing in the United States.² However, in recent

¹See Toril Moi, Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory, (London: Routledge, 1985), 1-18; Elaine Marks, "Women and Literature in France," Signs 3:4 (1978), 832-842.

²One such problem is translating the French word *féminine*. Unlike English which has two adjectives for woman ('female' generally used to refer to biology and 'feminine'

years, French feminism has become increasingly well known and popular among American feminists.

The French women's movement emerged out of the highly charged atmosphere of 1968 activism. The events of May '68 cultivated an ideological awareness among women and in the public at large which helped energize feminist activism. However, women's groups were born primarily out of the experience with leftist political organizations which demonstrated that women's concerns would not be adequately addressed by predominantly male organizations, even radically oriented ones.³ The split between feminists and other leftists came to a head in a dispute over the right of feminists to meet on 26 May 1970 against the wishes of leftist activists who wanted to retain sole control of the

reserved for cultural or sociological formations), French uses *féminine* for both. Thus, feminine does not necessarily have the same connotations (e.g. soft, gentle, delicate) that it does in English. See, Marks, "Women and Literature in France," 833.

³Sandrine Garcia, "Project for a Symbolic Revolution: The Rise and Fall of the Women's Movement in France," The South Atlantic Quarterly 93:3-4 (1994), 829-830. Also Simone de Beauvoir, interview by Alice Schwarzer, July 1972, in New French Feminisms: An Anthology, eds. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, (New York: Schocken Books, 1981), 142-150.

movement. The leftists, after they blocked the feminist action, implied that the women only wanted the meeting because they had been "*mal baisées*."⁴

Shortly after this event, the French media began to refer to the united actions of a variety of feminist organizations as *Mouvement de Libération des Femmes* (MLF). In August 1970, the MLF conducted one of the first widely publicized demonstrations. Feminists gathered at the tomb of the unknown soldier at the Arc de Triomphe to place a wreath in honor of someone more anonymous than the soldier-- "the unknown wife of the soldier."⁵ This action emphasized the absence of women in the dominant discourse and challenged the underlying values of a culture which symbolically glorified war. Occasionally, during actions like these which highlighted the basic fact of women's oppression, the groups which made up the MLF presented a unified front. However, when it came to ideological questions of why women are oppressed and how to remedy this

⁴Garcia, 830.

⁵Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, eds., New French Feminisms: An Anthology, (New York: Schocken Books, 1981), 31.

situation there were and are deep divisions in the French women's movement.

These divisions concern two major issues, one theoretical and one practical.⁶ The theoretical rift is over the very nature of 'woman'. The Vincennes group comprised of differentialist feminists and dominated by Antoinette Fouque and Monique Wittig, theorized that women are essentially different from men. The egalitarians of the FMA, *Féminin Masculin Avenir*, by contrast, viewed women as an oppressed group, but not different in kind from any other oppressed group.⁷ The issue of praxis, of how to proceed, compounded this split, but it also created internal divisions within each group. The differentialists conceived of themselves as revolutionaries who wanted no part of the bourgeois social order they sought to overturn. They, for example, rejected the name 'feminist' and actions like the

⁶This differentialist-egalitarian, revolutionary-reformist categorization is from Garcia, 835 and 840-842. Claire Duchén categorizes the same splits as the 'class struggle approach', Psych et Po, and 'non-aligned feminism'. See chapter 2 of Feminism in France from May '68 to Mitterand, (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986).

⁷Garcia, 835.

'Manifesto of the 343' as being too bourgeois.⁸ On the other side of this division were the reformers: women who wanted to work with the system and maintain their legitimacy within the established legal and political framework. Gisèle Halimi, for example, thought actions too radical would jeopardize her own credibility as a member of an established political party.

Despite these deep divisions, the MLF was able to unite behind the general position that women should have access to reproductive health care, including abortion. As a result, the women's movement was successful in mobilizing wide popular support for the abortion rights campaign and in securing this right for women. However, the split of opinions over the Bobigny trial illustrates how fractionalized the MLF was. This was a trial of several women who had helped a minor procure an abortion after she became pregnant "as a result of nonconsensual intercourse."⁹ The split in the MLF revealed itself in arguments over

⁸The Manifesto was a public petition signed by well-known women who had had illegal abortions. Simone de Beauvoir was among the signatories.

⁹Garcia, 844.

strategy. Halimi and the reformists wanted to portray the girl as a victim of an unfair system whereas the revolutionaries saw this as an opportunity to advocate abortion on demand. The reformers prevailed. Even today the law in France does not guarantee abortion on demand but requires that each woman justify to her doctor the decision to terminate a pregnancy.¹⁰

After this limited success at achieving abortion rights in 1974, the ability of the MLF to come together on particular issues and mobilize widespread support among women waned. Issues like pornography and rape were more controversial and it proved impossible to develop consensus within the MLF or the public at large. In this increasingly fragmented women's movement, one group became dominant.

Psychanalyse et Politique or Psych et Po was founded in 1968 by the psychoanalyst Antoinette Fouque. Antoinette, as she is known, was analyzed by Jacques Lacan and her organization relies heavily on his psychoanalytic theories and concepts. Psych et Po is the primary differentialist group of the MLF. They believe that women are fundamentally

¹⁰Garcia, 839-845.

different from men and that the symbolic order represses this difference by silencing what is uniquely feminine. Required for liberation is an exploration, both in writing and in individual analyses, of the feminine unconscious. Psych et Po opposes actions, like voting, which they argue only make superficial changes to an utterly corrupt "capitalist, imperialist, patriarchal state."¹¹ Instead, Psych et Po seeks a position of 'otherness' outside the law.¹²

Given its analysis of the symbolic order as a repressive structure, it is somewhat ironic that Psych et Po has attempted to monopolize feminist discourse in France through its publications and through legal action. In 1974, Psych et Po founded *des femmes*, the first press in France established specifically to publish titles by and about women. To a great extent, this enabled the group to determine which feminist texts were available. *Des femmes*

¹¹A Psych et Po poster quoted by Duchon, 106. Psych et Po did advocate that women vote for Mitterand on the first ballot in the 1981 presidential election.

¹²An excerpt of Antoinette Fouque's own explanation of her position is included in Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, 117-118.

has published a wide range of titles by women, including American, German and British feminists. However, French feminists, except for those practicing *l'écriture féminine*, are largely absent from their catalog.¹³ Psych et Po also scandalously took advantage of the fact that the media looked to the charismatic Antoinette as a spokesperson for the MLF by registering MLF as a commercial trademark in 1979. This move made it virtually impossible for any other women's liberationist group to refer to its own movement without acting illegally. In addition, Psych et Po publishes a magazine in which it deceptively presents itself as **the** unified women's movement.¹⁴ Ostensibly, Psych et Po is charting the feminine as something other than the values they identify with a masculine symbolic order. However, many of their actions seem to re-inscribe the culture they seek to subvert.

Hélène Cixous's emphasis on psychoanalysis and language fits easily with the program of Psych et Po and she has long

¹³Dorothy Kaufmann-McCall, "Politics of Difference: The Women's Movement in France from May 1968 to Mitterand," Signs 9:2 (1983), 286.

¹⁴Duchen, 37.

been associated with this group. She published exclusively with *des femmes* from 1976-1982, stopped briefly for the sake of artistic freedom and resumed again in 1986.¹⁵ She is largely responsible for scholarly interest in *l'écriture féminine*, but is also well known for having co-founded the experimental University of Paris VIII at Vincennes and for having started the women's studies program there.¹⁶ Her project is both poetic and conceptual, a union of praxis and theory. With and in her writing, Cixous conceptualizes a feminine economy which actively strives to subvert the symbolic order. In this project, she forges a complex relationship with two of the main intellectual currents of the 20th century: psychoanalysis and structuralism. We will see how her position has been shaped by these theories and where she diverges from and criticizes them. We will also examine how her theoretical appropriations and her conception of the feminine challenge historical work.

¹⁵Verena Andermatt Conley, Hélène Cixous, (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), xii.

¹⁶The program has since relocated to Saint-Denis.

II. Psychoanalysis and Structuralism

Cixous appropriates from these two bodies of theory what could be called a psychoanalytic-structuralist framework--a way of thinking about knowledge that is based on symbolic relations rather than empirical data. She focuses on the way that conceptual systems are constructed, particularly on the way that such systems both constitute and are constituted by a dualistic and hierarchical conception of gender. Structuralism is central to this project.

One of the most influential structuralists in Europe was Ferdinand de Saussure. He challenged the notion that words refer directly to and derive their meaning directly from concepts which exist outside language--that language mirrors, but does not create, reality. Saussure argued instead that language--a concept which has since been extended to include a wide array of symbolic systems--is a system of interrelated signs which have no independent, inherent meaning and are arbitrarily attached to things in the world. Meaning resides in the binary relationship between signs, not between the signs and the world. For structuralists, the binary form, A/not-A, is the basis of

all meaning from the smallest phonetic differentiation to the most abstract conceptual one.¹⁷

This conception of language demands a new way of thinking about subjectivity. Where once the subject was conceived as being in control of language, able to use language to convey any meaning, structuralism reverses this by showing how language determines and limits every subject's understanding the world. All of us are bound by the systems of signification which organize and order our conceptualizations. Thus, there are linguistic limits to what it is possible to think during a particular period of time. We are bound by the conceptual systems in which we exist and we cannot stand critically on the outside: "*There is no sense in doing without the concepts We have no language--no syntax and no lexicon--which is alien to this history.*"¹⁸

¹⁷For a good introduction see Jonathan Culler, Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), 3-31; or Terence Hawkes, Structuralism and Semiotics, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 11-58.

¹⁸Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play," in The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man: The Structuralist Controversy, eds. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1970), 250. My

Post-structuralism expanded and politicized structural analysis by deconstructing language and showing how it creates and reinforces the seemingly natural power relations in society. Post-structuralist insights reveal that one term within the binaries which generate meaning is always privileged over the other. That is, the binaries of language do not just categorize and shape reality, they do so ideologically. For Cixous, the positive poles have always been associated with the masculine (man, order, culture) while the negative poles have been associated with the feminine (woman, chaos, nature). Post-structuralism recognizes that the creation of meaning is a political event.

In addition to structuralist and post-structuralist attention to language, Cixous draws on psychoanalytic theory. From it she appropriates the whole language of libidinal economy and the unconscious; concepts which are central to her thinking. Sigmund Freud theorized the drives as a fluid and malleable economy of psychic energy which is capable of expression through a variety of outlets. If one

italics.

path is blocked or repressed, the libido will seek out another. He showed that repressed desires do not disappear, but continue to return in a variety of disguised forms. Cixous uses this dynamic return of the repressed as a central metaphor for the effects of the feminine on the masculine symbolic order. The feminine is what constantly comes back to interrupt symbolic systems. In addition to this conception of libido, Freud articulated the ways that repressed ideas manifest themselves in a variety of phenomena including symptoms and dreams. These distorted forms occupy a privileged place for Cixous. She celebrates the truth of intuition, dreams, hysterical symptoms as forms of expression which are outside the symbolic.

Cixous also appropriates from Freud the idea that sexuality is constructed socially. The process of submitting to the demands of culture, of channelling libido into acceptable outlets, creates for the individual a psychic foundation which is fundamentally conflicted, torn between individual desires and social requirements. Sexuality for Freud is not a 'natural' expression of individual desire, but a creation of culture to which individuals submit.

Jacques Lacan brought psychoanalysis together with structuralism in his re-formulation of Freud's theory.¹⁹ For Lacan, psychoanalysis can only be understood linguistically. That is, the process of submitting libido to cultural demands--the process Freud theorized as the Oedipal complex--**is** the acquisition of language; language **is** the law of culture. For Lacan, it is the structure of language which precipitates desire as a fundamentally alienated aspect of the human condition. This is why he contends that the associative structure of the unconscious, the networks linking various memories and repressed desires, is best understood as being like a language. Lacan sees subjectivity as a purely linguistic phenomenon. The unified identity represented by a name or by the pronoun 'I' only

¹⁸See especially Jacques Lacan, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. by Alan Sheridan, (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1977). Structuralist insights have also been useful for other disciplines. For an overview of structuralist literary analysis see Hawkes, 59-122; or Wallace Martin, Recent Theories of Narrative, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 90-102. Claude Lévi-Strauss's appropriation of structuralist insights transformed anthropology. See, Claude Lévi-Strauss, The Savage Mind, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966).

exists in language; it does not reflect any individual's experience.

Cixous marks out a complicated position in relation to these intellectual traditions. She relies on the instability of both language and subjectivity to theorize a notion of feminine writing which simultaneously subverts the symbolic order, challenges historical conceptualizations of femininity and promises utopia. However, we will see that, although she appropriates from them, Cixous remains highly critical of these traditions.

III. The Castration Complex--Freud

Among Cixous's strongest attacks on psychoanalysis are those directed at what she perceives to be anatomically derived elements of the castration complex. Freud formulated the castration complex to explain the apparently universal existence of the incest taboo. He argued that if a prohibition against incest were biologically determined, then widespread cultural taboos would not be necessary. Freud theorized instead that prohibitions against incest must be explained as a cultural barrier erected to ward off desires which are universal and disruptive to the functioning of civil society.

So, for Freud, civilized society is made possible because libidinal energies can be and are channeled from unacceptable, infantile objects to objects which are culturally acceptable. The mechanism Freud formulated for this transformation is repression. In boys, the impetus to repress infantile sexual feelings is the threat that the father poses (real or imagined) to the boy's penis. Freud theorized that this threat creates in boys a strong narcissistic interest in repressing their desires.

Girls, by contrast perceive themselves as castrated

from the moment they become aware of the male organ. Freud argued that this gives girls less impetus to repress their infantile desires. The failure of girls to internalize the norms of society and make a clean break from their infantile desires explains for Freud why women are "more often influenced in their judgements by feelings of affection or hostility"²⁰ Freud himself recognized inadequacies in this formulation. In 1924, he wrote "in general our insight into these developmental processes in girls is unsatisfactory, incomplete and vague."²¹ However, he disavowed most attempts to revise the theory because he felt they betrayed his fundamental insights into the culturally constructed nature of subjectivity.²²

²⁰Freud, "Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes," in The Freud Reader, ed. Peter Gay (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1989), 677.

²¹Sigmund Freud, "The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex," in The Freud Reader, ed. Peter Gay, (New York: W. W. Norton and Company), 665.

²²For a good overview of these debates see Juliet Mitchell's "Introduction--I," in Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne, eds. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1982), 1-26. Hereafter cited as Feminine Sexuality.

Cixous criticizes the centrality of anatomical elements in this account. She rejects what she interprets as a tendency in Freud, despite his emphasis on cultural processes, to reduce differences between masculinity and femininity to biological differences. But Cixous does not reject psychoanalysis or the castration complex on the whole.²³ The castration complex is ambiguous enough to be read metaphorically: not as a **pre**-scription of the way women are or should be, but as a **de**-scription of the cultural construction of patriarchy.²⁴

To Cixous, one of the biggest problems with Freud's conception of female sexual development is that it depends "to a great extent on catching *sight* of something."²⁵ It is

²³In fact, Cixous retains Freud's insights into the formation of culture for her critique of phallo-logocentric law.

²⁴Juliet Mitchell, Psychoanalysis and Feminism, (New York: Random House, Inc., 1974). Yet, even Mitchell regards Freud's statement of the differences between the male and female castration complex as "untenable." See Feminine Sexuality, 15.

²⁵Hélène Cixous, "Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out Forays," in The Newly Born Woman by Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, trans. by Betsy Wing, intro. by Sandra M. Gilbert, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 82. Hereafter cited as "Sorties."

a "voyeur's theory" which, she argues, is fundamentally grounded on the false idea "of an anatomical 'defect'".²⁶ She directly rejects Freud's biologism in explicit passages like this one:

a woman . . . is what she is and with no anatomical defect: her clitoris is not a minipenis. Clitoral masturbation is not, as Freud claims, a masculine practice. And seeing the early fantasies, it would seem that the vagina is discovered extremely early.²⁷

For Cixous, then, the most problematic aspect of Freud's writing is that his account "moves perilously close to biological determinism."²⁸ Regardless of Freud's effort to work against naturalistic explanations of sexuality, Cixous sees the biologicistic tendency in his writing as having implications too detrimental to ignore. "If one subscribes [to the idea that 'anatomy is destiny'], . . . one participates in condemning woman to death. And in wrapping up all of History."²⁹ Her denunciation in these absolute terms reflects Cixous's view that the binary

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Elizabeth Grosz, Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction (New York: Routledge, 1991), 57.

²⁹Cixous, "Sorties," 82.

construction of gender, a construction based on anatomical markers, undergirds a wide range of conceptual systems which actively repress the feminine term. What she sees as Freud's reliance on an anatomically based definition of gender implicates him in this repression. Therefore, she argues, the "psychic consequences of the difference between the sexes . . . cannot be reduced to the ones that Freudian analysis designates"³⁰. Instead, she contends that differences between the sexes are inscribed at the level of *jouissance*³¹.

Cixous begins her articulation of these differences by re-interpreting the male castration complex. She focuses on the effects that castration has on the masculine libidinal economy and on relations of obligation. She argues that when the boy is saved from castration/death by his father's prohibition, he "owes his parents his life and

³⁰Ibid.

³¹*Jouissance* does not have an adequate English translation. Literally it means the experience of sexual pleasure. But it is part of a French erotic vocabulary which is neither clinical nor vulgar. See Richard Howard, "A Note on the Text," in The Pleasure of the Text, by Roland Barthes (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), v-viii.

his problem is exactly to repay them."³² The price of being allowed to live is entering into a perpetual relation of obligation to the (m)other. Every would-be gift reinscribes this relation of debt and obligation and reinscribes the threat of the castration complex.³³ For the masculine economy, then, there is only one wish, "that is hastily to return the gift, to break the circuit of an exchange that could have no end."³⁴ According to Cixous, this foundation creates a particular "difficulty in connection with love."³⁵

The impossibility of knowing how much was taken or given creates ambivalence. Not knowing how much is owed is a threat within the masculine economy because it leaves the person open to the other, indebted. Paradoxically, however, it also inspires a desire to return, to know, to be certain of the score. Cixous argues that masculine desire has

³²Hélène Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?" trans. with an intro. by Annette Kuhn, Signs 7:1 (1981), 48.

³³Cixous places in this context Nietzsche's conception of woman as seductress, giving only to take. See "The Laugh of the Medusa," 888.

³⁴Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?" 48.

³⁵Ibid.

always been written in this ambivalent logic. It is not a desire that genuinely opens up to the other because such openness would re-inscribe the original threat. Instead of an unfettered desire for the other, this is a desire that is divided between wanting the other and wanting to return to the same, to the known.

This masculine relation to the other is inscribed in such a wide range of historical events that it has become normative. For Cixous, its playing-out is the story of history. History is "dynamized by the drama of the Selfsame . . . " ³⁶, by the return to the same. It now requires an exercise of imagination to think about and theorize desire differently. This is precisely Cixous's purpose. Re-thinking the logic of the castration complex creates a space for Cixous to explore a desire that is not colored by the father's threat, a desire she calls 'feminine'. "Isn't the worst, in truth, that women aren't castrated, that they have only to stop listening to the Sirens (for the Sirens were men) for history to change its meaning?" ³⁷ But if, as she

³⁶Cixous, "Sorties," 79.

³⁷Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 885.

insists, women are not castrated, then what are they? What would this feminine desire be?

She theorizes that the feminine libidinal economy has nothing to do with lack, but is characterized, on the contrary, by its ability to give freely. Not being threatened with castration releases the feminine from any fear of desire and permits "woman . . . to deappropriate unselfishly: body without end, without appendage, without principal 'parts'."³⁸ Because this libido is not structured by debt, it does not have to worry about who owes whom and can meet the other with genuine openness. Cixous is calling on women to write this other economy, to bring into history its heterogeneity, its multiplicity, its difference. "Wherever history still unfolds as the history of death, she does not tread . . . The fact that this period extends into the present doesn't prevent woman from starting the history of life somewhere else."³⁹

Although her work is exhilarating because of its optimism and because of the way it opens up productive ways

³⁸Ibid., 889.

³⁹Ibid., 893.

of thinking, Cixous is often criticized for her tendency to rely on an essentialist notion of femininity. Like Freud, she walks a fine line between anatomy and sexuality and she risks implicating herself in the very tendencies she rejects in his writing. She would like to argue (and does so explicitly at some points) that the feminine economy generates possibilities for both men and women and is not restricted to females. But it is difficult to ignore her constant association of 'feminine' with women and 'masculine' with men. This is particularly true, as we will see, when she links *écriture féminine* and motherhood.

A second question is whether Cixous thus replicates the structure she seeks to explode. Her utopia is a celebration of difference, but her work can also be read as an indictment of what she perceives to be the masculine libidinal economy. Would her utopia affirm without limits-- a diversity which might include castrated, selfish libidos? Might there be necessary limits to a feminine economy?

IV. The Castration Complex--Lacan

Lacan's conception of the castration complex returns to Freud, but re-states the original theory in a framework of structural linguistics. Lacan argues that language is the code which pre-exists and mediates every aspect of human existence. The process of entering language, of assuming this linguistic identity, is itself, the castration complex in Lacan's version of psychoanalytic theory. In much the same way that she criticized Freud for his tendency to universalize the significance of visible and anatomical elements in his account of sexual development, Cixous criticizes Lacan for the centrality he places on one signifier, the phallus.

According to Lacan, subjectivity is fundamentally split at the moment when the child learns who it is by recognizing in its mother an other.⁴⁰ This recognition is perceived by the child as a division of its own subjectivity and, from this point forward, the desire to recover the undifferentiated unity once shared by mother and child

⁴⁰Jacques Lacan, "The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I," in Écrits (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1977), 1-7.

permeates every interaction of subject and other. The child wants to be the signifier of its mother's desire. But to enter culture, to take up a position as a signifier in language, this desire must be repressed.

For Lacan, this repression occurs through the structure of the paternal metaphor.⁴¹ It is the 'paternal' metaphor because it is the father's signifier, and the father's relation to the phallus⁴², which represents the Symbolic (language, society, culture) in and for the family. It is only in relation to the name of the father that the subject itself can be named, that the subject's signifier can be defined. To enter the Symbolic, then, the subject must repress its desire to be the 'signifier of the mother's desire' (its desire to **be** the phallus) and take up the father's relation to the phallus, that is, **having** the phallus.⁴³ Because women are in a position of not-having

⁴¹For a good discussion of the paternal metaphor see Grosz, 103-105.

⁴²Lacan explains that the phallus gains its transcendental status because of its unique ability to signify both sexual difference and (the possibility of) sexual union.

⁴³It is not that the penis **is** the phallus, but it is an object able to approximate its function, an *objet a* in

the phallus, their sexuality is defined by the other, castrated relation to the phallus, the relation of **being**. Feminine sexuality is defined by the desire to be the phallus for the other. Women are, therefore, barred from the Symbolic.

Cixous criticizes Lacan, as she criticized Freud, for regarding the threat of castration as normative. In one of her wittiest passages, she pokes fun at Lacan's conception of sexual development by turning it on its head. Instead of accepting the idea that men benefit from the renunciation of their desire while women suffer for not experiencing this deprivation, she writes:

What psychoanalysis points to as defining woman is that she lacks lack. She lacks lack? Curious to put it in so contradictory, so extremely paradoxical a manner: she lacks lack. To say she lacks lack is also, after all, to say she doesn't miss lack . . . since she doesn't miss the lack of lack. Yes, they say, but the point is "she lacks The Lack", The Lack, lack of the Phallus. And so, supposedly, she misses the great lack, so that without man she would be indefinite, indefinable, nonsexed, unable to recognize herself: outside the Symbolic. But fortunately there is man: he who comes . . . Prince Charming. And it's man who teaches woman . . . who teaches her to be aware of

lack, to be aware of absence, aware of death.⁴⁴

Here, Cixous challenges Lacan's conception of femininity by making fun of its reliance on what is for her a singularly male fear, the fear of castration. For Lacan, feminine sexuality is defined by the fact that women do not have access to the phallus or to the Symbolic. Women strive to become the phallus to gain this access from men, but this places them in a paradoxical position with regard to their femininity: to be the phallus, women must renounce exactly what is unique to femininity, they must pretend to be something they are not. Thus, what women offer in the sexual relation is precisely what they are not.⁴⁵ This is why Lacan says the sexual relation is **not** a relation; each person is seeking in the other something that the other does not have, their own lack.

Cixous argues that this conception of femininity (as masquerade, as the desire to be the phallus) is not a reflection of what femininity actually is, but what

⁴⁴Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?" 46. Cixous's ellipses.

⁴⁵Lacan, "Signification of the Phallus," Écrits: A Selection, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1977), 290.

masculinity needs it to be. It stems from the binary structuring of gender within which femininity exists only as what masculinity is not. "It's this mystery that leads man to keep overcoming, dominating, subduing, putting his manhood to the test, against the mystery he has to keep forcing back."⁴⁶ For Cixous, the desire that psychoanalysis theorizes reflects the way that the cultural construction of gender has been inscribed. But this inscription has not only taken place here, it pervades every aspect of culture. For one example she looks at a composite of common fairy tales.

Beauties slept in their woods In their beds, in their glass coffins, in their childhood forests like dead women. Beautiful, but passive; hence desirable: all mystery emanates from them

She sleeps, she is intact, eternal, absolutely powerless. He has no doubt she has been waiting for him forever. . .

She has the perfection of something finished. Or not begun. . . . Just enough life--and not too much. Then he will kiss her. So that when she opens her eyes she will see only *him*; him in place of everything, all-him.

This dream is so satisfying! Whose is it?
What desire gets something out of it?⁴⁷

⁴⁶Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?" 49.

⁴⁷Cixous, "Sorties," 66. My emphasis.

Cixous's interpretation of psychoanalysis as a theory of masculine desire leads her to insist that Freud's notorious question, "What do women want?", is purely rhetorical. This question, she argues, cannot be answered by psychoanalysis. "Old Lacan takes up the slogan . . . when he says, 'A woman cannot speak of her pleasure.' Most interesting! It's all there . . . unable to speak of pleasure = no pleasure, no desire: power, desire, speaking, pleasure, none of these is for woman."⁴⁸ The real question psychoanalysis asks about femininity is: "Without me [man], what could she want?"⁴⁹ But, regardless of what psychoanalysis theorizes, the problem facing Cixous is exactly how to articulate what women **do** want.

She approaches this as a problem of the inadequacy of the Symbolic to express feminine desire. "As soon as the question 'What is it?' is posed, from the moment a question is put, as soon as a reply is sought, we are already caught up in masculine interrogation."⁵⁰ The dilemma for woman as

⁴⁸Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?" 45. See also Jacques Lacan, "A Love Letter," in Feminine Sexuality, 152.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Ibid.

Cixous sees it is how to articulate her desire from her position outside the Symbolic? How not to fall immediately into "the work of signification: 'What is it? Where is it?'"⁵¹

Historically, as Freud first recognized, women have expressed their desire through their bodies, through the symptoms of hysteria. Cixous argues that the hysteric may be "the Absolute Woman, in culture" because "she does not make herself but she does make the other,"⁵² she masquerades, in Lacan's terms. For Cixous hysteria epitomizes "the unorganizable feminine construct"⁵³, the incarnation of a femininity which cannot be contained by the Symbolic. Hysterics, Cixous writes, wield power over the Symbolic; without them there is "no master, no analyst, no analysis!"⁵⁴ The hysteric is "the true 'mistress' of the Signifier."⁵⁵

But, expressions of femininity are, thankfully, not

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Ibid., 47.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 886.

limited to hysteria. Cixous also imagines that a different language will emerge as soon as women begin to speak, to write, to articulate their desire. She imagines that this writing will give voice to woman's body, will express in language what the hysteric expresses symptomatically. It is impossible to predict what forms this expression will take because women have thus far been silent. But Cixous is optimistic that there is everything to say. "Those who have turned their tongues 10,000 times seven times before not speaking are either dead from it or more familiar with their tongues and their mouths than anyone else."⁵⁶

⁵⁶Ibid., 887.

V. Binarism

Structuralism emphasizes the way that meaning is generated through binary relationships and shows how differences are categorized in linguistic pairs. What are actually many or multifarious differences get reduced to 'not-A', to a generalized category of 'other'. It becomes impossible to talk about what is different except by referencing what is the same. For Cixous, these effects have been particularly detrimental for 'woman' who, she argues, has been defined throughout history only as man's 'other'.

This critique of binarism belongs to a much larger field of post-structuralist criticism which has been shaped to a great degree by Jacques Derrida. For Derrida, structuralism is an essential first step toward analyzing systems of knowledge, especially philosophical knowledge, because it theorizes that such systems are based on differences or gaps (binaries), rather than fundamental principles or laws.⁵⁷ He sees this insight as initiating the moment when **everything** could be conceived of as

⁵⁷Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play," 249.

discourse. It was, for him, the 'event' which signaled the de-centering of all sorts of conceptual structures. When conceptual structures were thought to be based on fixed principles, the existence of *freeplay* among the elements was ignored. The idea that the organizing principle of language and, therefore, of all discourse, is differential, opened up a way to think of a de-centered system, of a conceptual order with an infinitely substitutable center, of a potentially infinite generation of meaning.⁵⁸

This critique has important political implications because it shows how fixed discursive meanings can be insidiously ideological.⁵⁹ Boundaries which limit the movement of a conceptual system, which limit the creation of meaning always do so in a particular way. Even when such boundaries are considered to be objective or neutral they represent certain values and not others. For Cixous, the most significant of these ideological lines are those drawn around gender. All discourse, she argues, has been shaped,

⁵⁸Ibid., 248-249.

⁵⁹The *Tel Quel* group, founded in 1960, was very influential in exploring the political implications of Derrida's metaphysical critique. See Jameson, 176-182; Culler, 241-254.

is shaped, by a binary conception of gender which privileges the masculine over the feminine. Thus, she writes: "Woman has always functioned 'within' the discourse of man, a signifier that has always referred back to the opposite signifier which annihilates its specific energy and diminishes or stifles its very different sounds" ⁶⁰

At the beginning of "Sorties", Cixous catalogues a series of binaries which, she argues, are linked metaphorically to the construction of gender.

Where is she?
Activity/passivity
Sun/Moon
Culture/Nature
Day/Night

Father/Mother
Head/Heart
Intelligible/Palpable
Logos/Pathos
Form, convex, step, advance, semen, progress.
Matter, concave, ground--where steps are taken,
holding-and dumping-ground.

Man
Woman

Speaking/Writing⁶¹

⁶⁰Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 887.

⁶¹Cixous, "Sorties", 63.

Wherever discourse develops, it is organized through a system of binary oppositions like these. And, although these pairs may begin as couples, somehow different yet equal, the process of generating (a) meaning is the process of establishing a hierarchy of value, of privileging one side over the other. That is, "the movement whereby each opposition is set up to make sense is the movement through which the couple is destroyed. . . 'victory' always comes down to the same thing: things get hierarchical."⁶² Thus, certain kinds of writing are, for Cixous, closely aligned with death, with the annihilation of the other.⁶³

The challenge as Cixous sees it is to change this way of ordering discourse, (to learn) to write and think difference differently. Derrida's concept of *différance* is helpful here. With the silent 'a', Derrida transforms the word 'difference' to illuminate two linguistic processes which structuralism presupposed. *Différance* refers at once to the binary structure of difference, the differentiation

⁶²Ibid., 64.

⁶³See Hélène Cixous, "Difficult Joys," in The Body and the Text: Hélène Cixous, Reading and Teaching, eds. Helen Wilcox, et. al., (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), 5-29.

of one word from another, and also to the temporal process in which meaning is deferred or delayed from one word onto the next, infinitely. The delay is particularly important because it shows how meaning is always generated through the existence of an 'other'. It shows that meaning is never fully present in a single sign.⁶⁴ Rather than being able to repress difference or signify one unified meaning, Derrida shows how the structure of language is such that every text always already contains its 'other'.

Cixous exploits the existence of *différance* in language. She intentionally writes in a way that blurs boundaries and frustrates univocal interpretations. She envisions a writing that is not constrained by the binary structure of difference and which actively subverts it. Instead of restricting meaning, trying to contain the text, Cixous's poetic style multiplies meanings; it opens up binaries to a potentially infinite range of associations.⁶⁵

⁶⁴See, for example, Jacques Derrida, "Differance," in Speech and Phenomena And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs, trans. with an intro. by David B. Allison, preface by Newton Garver, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 129-160.

⁶⁵Cixous admires these qualities in other writers as well. Among the authors she most respects are James Joyce,

Cixous advocates a writing, then, which actively engages the other, which explores the other rather than repressing it for the sake of (a) meaning. Likewise, she proposes re-thinking gender as an active, constructive process rather than two mutually exclusive categories. The *other bisexuality* is the term she uses to conceptualize the dynamic exchange between the masculine and feminine which is possible in sexual intercourse and certain types of writing. This, for her, is a technical term which does not simply mean being both homosexual and heterosexual. It is not a reduction of sexual difference to a neuter or neutral identity. Instead, "it consists of being with another . . . in a state of dynamic exchange which is so intense . . . that the very process of crossing toward and through the other is made possible. . . ." ⁶⁶

Franz Kafka, Clarice Lispector and Marina Tsvetayeva.

⁶⁶Hélène Cixous, "Rethinking Differences: An Interview," in Homosexualities and French Literature: Cultural Contexts/Critical Texts, eds. George Stambolian and Elaine Marks (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), 78.

VI. Phallo-logocentrism

Although Cixous appropriates Derridean concepts to re-think both writing and gender, her position is significantly different from Derrida's. For Derrida, the most important binary, the one that has definitively shaped the discourse of this epoch, is presence/absence. Cixous, by contrast, emphasizes the masculine/feminine pair. "She focuses on reading and writing from a feminine border . . . [and] attempts to displace further Derrida's 'masculine' displacement" ⁶⁷

The Derridean displacement Conley refers to consists, in part, of re-conceptualizing the place of writing. Writing, Derrida argues, has always been understood as a way of representing the spoken word. It has been considered inferior to speech because it could only represent the thing from a distance. By contrast, the spoken word has been seen as having an unmediated connection to ideas, to meaning, in the mind. Derrida challenges this construction by showing that neither spoken nor written language has an immediate

⁶⁷Verena Andermatt Conley, Hélène Cixous: Writing the Feminine, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 9.

connection to its referent; meaning is never fully present in language.⁶⁸ Derrida's term, logocentrism, refers to a whole constellation of historical circumstances which have developed as a result of the traditional conceptualization of the relationship between speech and writing, between meaning and the sign.

Cixous's work involves linking this analysis with what is for her the most important binary, the binary construction of gender. She argues that the process of making sense, of fixing meaning and value is always a process analogous with the valuation of 'man', 'masculine', 'male', and the repression of 'woman', 'feminine', 'female'.⁶⁹ This way of ordering is not automatic, natural, *de facto*, but **actively constructed** in and through symbolic systems: art, religion, language, literature, philosophy. It is nothing less than a war that requires the systematic

⁶⁸Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology, trans. by Gayatri Chakrovorty Spivak, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

⁶⁹See also Jean-Joseph Goux, Symbolic Economies: After Marx and Freud, trans. Jennifer Curtiss Gage, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

destruction of the 'other', the feminine:

Nearly the entire history of writing is confounded with the history of reason, of which it is at once the effect, the support, and one of the privileged alibis. It has been one with the phallogocentric tradition. It is indeed that same self-admiring, self-stimulating, self-congratulatory phallogocentrism.⁷⁰

Thus, for Cixous, phallogocentrism and logocentrism are actively complicit with each other. The "logocentric plan [has] always, inadmissibly, been to create a foundation for (to found and to fund) phallogocentrism, to guarantee the masculine order a rationale equal to history itself."⁷¹

Cixous theorizes that the basis for the link between phallo- and logocentrism lies with the construction of paternity. The roots are in the story of men "passing themselves off as fathers and 'repatriating' women's fruits as their own. A naming trick."⁷² She argues that the ability of men to assert authority as fathers required that the words which designate paternity assume the status of truth--a truth stronger than the truth emanating from the

⁷⁰Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 879.

⁷¹Cixous, "Sorties," 65.

⁷²Ibid., 101.

mother's body. Cixous traces the story of this patrilineal 'revolution', in a variety of cultural forms.

Following Freud, she looks to the Aeschylus's *Oresteia*.⁷³ In this story, Orestes's mother, Clytemnestra, kills his father, Agamemnon, and Orestes is forced to choose between his parents. Should he avenge his father's death despite Agamemnon's wrongs? Or should he forgive his mother who, despite her justifications, is guilty of murder? He seeks divine guidance and is directed, by Apollo, to avenge his father's death. Orestes deceives his mother to gain entry to her house and then murders her. His mother's spirit, in the form of the Furies, torments him until he is absolved by Athene and the cycle of murders in his family is put to rest. For Cixous, Orestes's story symbolizes the violent and illegitimate birth of our phallogocentric epoch.

Orestes's act inscribes wrongs made right by wrenching, torts by torsion. Orestes, . . . under the pretext of a duty to avenge (a legitimate duty--brought about with the help of methods contrary to the warrior's head-on, open ethic--); under disguise and deviously hidden-hiding-disclosing . . . the shifty brother sets time

⁷³Cixous quotes a passage of Moses and Monotheism in which Freud wrote that an echo of the revolution which replaced matriarchal society with a patriarchal one could be heard in the Oresteia. Quoted in Cixous, "Sorties," 100.

ticking and explodes the feminine nucleus. All the energy still jammed into this end of the after-Medean afternoon, at the twilight of matriarchy, is set free once and for all. Matriarchal shrapnel scatters. The scene soaks up blood diverted from its ancient matrilinear circulation. Orestes . . . signs the end of the great reign of mothers. Dawn of phallogentrism.⁷⁴

According to Cixous, the alliance between phallo- and logocentrism is established when Orestes chooses, with the divine support of Apollo, to sever the bond of blood with his mother. With this choice, the marriage contract which Clytemnestra betrayed, a bond of words, is judged to be more significant than the bond of blood and body which her son destroyed. "The link to mother loosens. The link to word tightens. . . .From now on legality is to come to the assistance of the fathers's order. A new relationship between body and justice will have to be instituted."⁷⁵

Cixous argues that from this mythical point forward, the association of phallo- and logocentrism has shaped the construction of knowledge. In philosophy, she argues that woman's association with body, with matter, removes her from questions of 'being'. "As soon as the question of ontology

⁷⁴Cixous, "Sorties," 104-5.

⁷⁵Cixous, "Sorties," 104.

raises its head, as soon as one asks oneself 'what is it?', as soon as there is intended meaning you are led right back . . . to the father."⁷⁶ The mother has remained passive (the unthought) or wholly outside (the unthinkable). "It is even possible not to notice that there is no place whatsoever for woman in the calculations the world of 'being' can function while precluding the mother. No need for a mother, as long as there is some motherliness: and it is the father, then who acts the part, who is the mother."⁷⁷ For Cixous, this link of 'being' and masculinity explains "man's dream when faced with death" (with non-being, with woman): the Biblical dream "of God the father issuing from himself in his son--and no mother then."⁷⁸

In psychoanalysis, the same phallo- logocentric association is inscribed by the Oedipal scenario. In this scene, the mother/child dyad is destroyed by the intervention of the father. This destruction signals both

⁷⁶Cixous, "Sorties," 64. The first ellipsis is mine, the second Cixous's.

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸Ibid., 65. This is Cixous's transcription of a few lines from Mallarmé's poem "For Anatole's Tomb."

the end of the mother's authority, a metaphoric matricide, and the birth, by the father, of the child's subjectivity, a metaphoric appropriation of motherhood by the father. Cixous rejects this scenario as a "phallic mystification" of an other-wise good relationship between mother and child.⁷⁹ She insists that the mother is never divorced from the child, particularly the female child, because "there always remains in woman that force which produces/is produced by the other . . . the other woman."⁸⁰

Thus, Cixous argues that the complicity between logocentric and phallogocentric discourse has actively shaped our myths, our philosophy, religion and psychology. It has shaped and continues to shape every conceptual system. Bringing to light these links is an essential part of her project. It is necessary, she argues, "to show in what ways, culturally, knowledge is the accomplice of power:

⁷⁹Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa", 881. For an interesting discussion of the links between feminine, feminine writing and the pre-Oedipal in some recent feminist theory see Jane Gallop, "Reading the Mother Tongue: Psychoanalytic Feminist Criticism," Critical Inquiry 13:2 (Winter 1987), 314-329.

⁸⁰Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 881. This notion of motherhood or pregnancy as a privileged connection to the 'other' is a problematic one. See '*Écriture Feminine*'.

that whoever stands in the place of knowledge is always getting a dividend of power: show how all thinking until now has been ruled by this dividend, this surplus value of power that comes back to **him** who knows."⁸¹

Although Cixous focuses on the way that phallogocentrism has contributed to the repression of the feminine, she sees it as having limited the exploration of masculinity as well. "What they [men] have said so far, for the most part, stems from the opposition activity/passivity, from the power relation between a fantasized **obligatory** virility meant to invade, to colonize, and the consequential phantasm of woman as a 'dark continent' to penetrate and to 'pacify'."⁸² And in another, more colorful passage:

By virtue of affirming the primacy of the phallus and of bringing it into play, phallocratic ideology has claimed more than one victim. As a woman, I've been clouded over by the great shadow of the scepter and been told: idolize it . . . But at the same time, man has been handed that grotesque and scarcely enviable destiny (just imagine) of being reduced to a single idol with clay balls. And consumed, as Freud and his

⁸¹Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?" 51. My emphasis.

⁸²Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 877. My emphasis.

followers note, by a fear of being a woman!⁸³

Thus, for Cixous, the process of revealing and rethinking the phallogocentric structure of conceptual systems is an endeavor which will ultimately open possibilities for everyone.

⁸³Ibid., 884.

VII. The Law

So, Cixous argues that the illegitimate origin of all conceptual systems which urgently needs to be revealed is a mythical matricide. Since the phallogocentric law which was legitimated through this matricide is instituted in and through symbolic discourse, she strives to subvert its authority there, in language.

In Kafka's story, "Vor dem Gesetz"⁸⁴, she finds a possibility for resistance. In this story, a man from the country arrives in the city seeking entry into the Law. He goes to where a doorkeeper stands before the law and asks for entrance. The doorkeeper opens the door for the man, steps aside and tells the man he cannot enter. Since he does not have permission, the man waits. He waits at the side of the open door until he has grown old and decrepit. Finally, when his life is nearing its end, he calls the doorkeeper to ask him the one question in which his whole life is condensed: "Everyone strives to attain the Law, . . . how does it come about, then, that in all these years no one has come seeking admittance but me?" The doorkeeper

⁸⁴In Franz Kafka, The Complete Stories, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer, (New York: Schocken Books, 1971).

replies, "No one but you could gain admittance through this door, since this door was intended only for you. Now I am going to shut it."⁸⁵

This short story reveals for Cixous the elusive and paradoxical nature of the symbolic law. The naive man comes to spend his life before the law because he believes that the law exists and that he is outside it. But, over the course of the years he spends there--which she reads as a return to childhood, "an inverse description of the Oedipal enigma"⁸⁶--the man begins to have doubts. He begins to wonder. "If there is only I, then I am wrong because truth is universal. But where could the error be? In the door, in the moment, in the keeper?"⁸⁷ For Cixous, the man's error is his misperception of the nature of the law itself. The man mistakes it for something outside himself when its force comes from the fact that he has already internalized

⁸⁵Kafka as quoted by Cixous, "Sorties," 101-102.

⁸⁶In other words, as a return to the moment of subjection to the law. Hélène Cixous, Readings: The Poetics of Blanchot, Joyce, Kafka, Kleist, Lispector, and Tsvetayeva, ed., trans., intro., by Verena Andermatt Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 16. Hereafter cited as Readings.

⁸⁷Ibid., 17.

it.

The law is the man's hesitation. Instead of entering the open door, he questions his own desire: "I can go in and out of all the doors but am I sure that I want to?"⁸⁸ This doubt reveals the paradox that the man can only be 'before the law' if he has not accepted its strictures. "The law is in the man so how can he enter the law? The law is the divided desire inside him."⁸⁹ For Cixous, the secret hidden in this formulation, the secret which the law itself prevents the man from discovering, is that the law does not exist **except** inside him.

The law isn't within [the door], it has no place, it has no place other than the gullible man's body that comes to rot in front of the door, which has always been in the L--, and the L-- has only existed to the extent that it appears before what he doesn't see it is behind, around before, *inside him* that it is nothing without him, that its apparently absolute power is inexhaustible, because like Moses's God, it doesn't exist; it is invisible; it doesn't have a place to take place; it doesn't have anything.⁹⁰

Kafka's story is important for Cixous because he "asked

⁸⁸Ibid., 18.

⁸⁹Ibid.

⁹⁰Cixous, "Sorties," 102.

the real question of a law that was only for him."⁹¹ He entertained the possibility that there may be more than one law. In her reading, this becomes the possibility of a feminine law, a possibility prohibited in phallogocentric discourse.

For Cixous, the Oedipal scene, the metaphoric matricide, represents the intolerable fear of absence that the law must defend against by instituting itself as an absolute prohibition. The law, above all, must prevent the discovery of the absence upon which it is founded. "The entire force of the law consists in producing this scene so that it be respected. How? The police force is concrete and we are on the side of the state."⁹²

The phallogocentric law, inscribed throughout the Symbolic as objective knowledge, as truth, is enforced with concrete power. Cixous uses a Chinese story to show how submission to the law can be a matter of life and death. General Sun Tse, who claimed to be able to teach soldiery to anyone, was ordered by his king to train the king's 180

⁹¹Cixous, Readings, 24.

⁹²Ibid., 18.

wives. He lined the women up, beat the drum and showed them how to march. But, instead of following orders, instead of learning the code, "the ladies started laughing and chattering and paying no attention to the lesson."⁹³ Sun Tse sentenced all 180 to death for their mutinous behavior. However, the king balked at killing so many wives and, as a result, only the two commanders were actually beheaded. These commanders were replaced "and the exercise started again, and as if they had never done anything except practice the art of war, the women turned right, left and about in silence and with never a single mistake."⁹⁴

Cixous interprets this story as a parable of the way that the feminine has (been) submitted to a phallogocentric Law throughout history. It depicts a relationship between masculine and feminine economies that, Cixous argues, has been universally inculcated, inscribed to the point that we now ask such elementary questions as: "Is there any such thing as woman?"⁹⁵ This masculine order

⁹³Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?" 42.

⁹⁴Ibid.

⁹⁵Ibid.

works by education, "an education that consists of trying to make a soldier of the feminine by force, the force history keeps reserved for woman, the 'capital' force that is effectively decapitation if [women] don't actually lose their heads by the sword, *they only keep them on condition that they lose them--lose them, that is to silence, turned into automatons.*"⁹⁶ The force of the Law is the power of the Symbolic, to silence or repress the uniquely feminine.

These circumstances have been constructed illegitimately. "History began before us with the law. We are inside the narrative of the law and we cannot help it. The law tells us a story. Is there an author? That is the question. Given a masculine consensus, I have to say that the author of the law, transmitted from father to son, is 'they'."⁹⁷ Rejecting the authority of the law, then, is not a decision in favor of delinquency, but an overdue political decision to criticize our inherited cultural and metaphysical structures. "We are not hysterical, or mad, or

⁹⁶Ibid.

⁹⁷Cixous, Readings, 25.

anything at all, if we do not legitimate the system of moral laws that is in reality already a system of political laws upon which civilization, as Freud had described it, is founded. One has a choice between the moral law, the asylum, or being asocial. Or one can have recourse to another logic altogether. . . ."⁹⁸

One other logic is the feminine. Cixous theorizes that the feminine is not governed by a fear of 'nothing', of absence, of death. Instead, the law of the feminine is an embrace of life, of otherness, of difference. For her, moral and ethical dilemmas go back to the "old question of libidinal economies."⁹⁹ What remains problematic for Cixous and for postmodernism more generally, is how to move beyond the essentially binary structures which continue to inform conceptual systems? Upon what positive basis could a feminine law be founded?

⁹⁸Ibid., 26.

⁹⁹Ibid.

VIII. Écriture féminine

As the site of the phallogocentric law, language is the location of Cixous's politics. Writing, she argues, has the potential to be an explosive act, to disrupt the law exactly where it is constituted. Thus, she advocates and practices a kind of writing, *écriture féminine*, which challenges the limits of the symbolic order. She locates the source of this writing in a difficult and potentially hazardous space between the female body and the feminine economy.

Écriture féminine is writing which strives to subvert 'the phallogocentric law by puncturing it with the repressed feminine. The absolute necessity of this project is reflected in her metaphors: it is a 'war', a 'battlefield'; the symbolic order is a 'bastion', 'the palace of magistrates'; women's writing will be a 'revolution', 'explosive', a 'shattering entry', 'utterly destructive', 'staggering'; it will 'blow up the law', 'shatter the framework', 'break up the 'truth'.¹⁰⁰

Now it has become rather urgent to question this solidarity between logocentrism and phallocentrism--bringing to light the fate dealt to woman, her burial--to threaten the stability of

¹⁰⁰All from "The Laugh of the Medusa."

the masculine structure that passed itself off as eternal-natural, by conjuring up from femininity the reflections and hypotheses that are necessarily ruinous for the stronghold still in possession of authority.¹⁰¹

Thus, the transformation of the symbolic is absolutely imperative, but not just any writing will effect the change she imagines. Cixous rejects the sort of writing which has perpetuated and constituted the law throughout history. She insists, for instance, that she has never had "any relation of obligation to the law of legibility"¹⁰² because legibility is, for her, inextricably bound up with the history of logocentric ordering. Her reliance on humor, puns, multiple meanings, neologisms, metaphor, unconventional syntax, autobiography, dreams and repetition is part of her effort to unearth the ways of knowing which have been repressed. If phallogentric language is structured to repress the feminine then *écriture féminine*, to give it voice, must incorporate the elements which are muted in that tradition.

Cixous is particularly fond of poetry because, she

¹⁰¹Cixous, "Sorties," 65.

¹⁰²Cixous, "Interview with Hélène Cixous," by Christine Makward, Sub-stance: A Review of Theory and Literary Criticism 13 (1976), 31.

claims, it requires an openness to the 'other', an ability to imagine outside the law. This imagination is missing from "the novelists, allies of representationalism."¹⁰³ A representational text, by definition, re-presents something; it re-produces what is already known. Poetry and *écriture féminine*, by contrast, actively explore what is 'other'; they seek out and imagine what is different. It is this exploration which defines 'writing' for Cixous.

Writing is precisely the working (in) the inbetween, inspecting the process of the same and of the other without which nothing can live, undoing the work of death--to admit this is first to want the two, as well as the both, the ensemble of the one and the other, not fixed in sequences of struggle and expulsion or some other form of death but infinitely dynamized by an incessant process of exchange from one subject to another.¹⁰⁴

Cixous imagines in writing a fundamentally different way of approaching the 'other'. Opposed to the type of language that would assert one meaning over and at the expense of all others, she theorizes the possibility of a mutually enriching exchange in language. And the utopian potential of this interchange, of this non-dialectical

¹⁰³Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 879.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., 883.

relation, extends beyond and outside the words written on a page. This relation is also, for Cixous, a way of re-thinking the process of history: as a process which is "infinitely dynamized" by exchange with an 'other' that remains other. It is a process which does not struggle to sublimate, repress, expel what is other, which does not close off meaning or signify death. Writing is, for her, historic change. It is "*the very possibility of change . . . the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures.*"¹⁰⁵

What characterizes feminine writing, then, is its openness to the other, its ability to give, to begin "an endless circulation of desire from one body to another,"¹⁰⁶ an endless exchange between text, reader and writer. The exchange is the 'writing' whose form, because it involves the other, cannot be anticipated. It "takes the metaphorical form of wandering, excess, risk of the unreckonable: no reckoning, a feminine text can't be predicted, isn't predictable, isn't knowable and is

¹⁰⁵Ibid., 886.

¹⁰⁶Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?" 53.

therefore very disturbing."¹⁰⁷

Cixous locates the capacity to give in this way, to open onto the other through language, within the body of the writer. She theorizes that the castration complex transforms every writer's originally bisexual nature by repressing what is other, by socializing bisexuality into either masculinity or femininity. But, since women do not experience the definitive threat that men do, Cixous contends that they remain more nearly bisexual than men do. The structure of the feminine libidinal economy means that women have a privileged relationship to otherness.

Cixous also theorizes that women have a unique relation to the other because of their ability to give birth. They not only gestate the other in their own bodies, but birthing the other, is for Cixous "the work of the breath in which the notion of 'mastery' is annulled . . . the woman follows herself, meets herself, marries herself. She is there. Entirely."¹⁰⁸ Giving birth is a reflexive process for

¹⁰⁷Ibid.

¹⁰⁸Hélène Cixous, "Coming to Writing," in 'Coming to Writing' and Other Essays, with an intro. by Susan Rubin Suleiman, ed. Deborah Jenson, trans. Sarah Cornell, et. al., (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 30.

Cixous: women birth the other, but they simultaneously birth themselves. For Cixous, pregnancy is an opportunity for women to "break the old circuits . . . to render obsolete the former relationship and all its consequences, to consider the launching of a brand-new subject. . . ." ¹⁰⁹

This connection between the female body, feminine libido and feminine writing is problematic because it is unclear whether or not it presupposes an essentialist notion of femininity. At certain points, Cixous clearly disconnects gender constructions from physical bodies. She states, for example, that sexuality "derives from the body, from the anatomical, the biological differences, from a whole system of drives which are radically different for women than for men" and that these biological differences are always "already spoken" in the symbolic, in culture. ¹¹⁰ Cixous also maintains that "you can sometimes find

¹⁰⁹Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 890.

¹¹⁰Cixous as quoted by Vivian Kogen, "'I Want Vulva'! Cixous and the Poetics of the Body," L'Esprit Créateur 25:2 (Summer 1985), 74. This notion that there can be no 'natural' experience of the body helps to explain the significance of the unconscious for Cixous.

femininity in writings signed by men: it does happen."¹¹¹

At other places, however, sexuality and subjectivity are very closely connected to physicality. When she talks about pregnancy and birth, for example, she seems to suggest that these are universal and somehow uncontaminated experiences for women. But, how could pregnancy have a 'natural' meaning that no other experience of the body can? Her discussions of female masturbation also seem premised on some sort of universal, physical truth.

Despite this danger of essentializing what it means to be feminine, Cixous's *écriture féminine*, both her own work and its utopian promise, is uplifting. The 'feminine' represents nothing less than the possibility of re-inventing every relation and, thereby, transforming history.

¹¹¹Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?" 52.

IX. History

Cixous's work raises interesting questions for historical work. First, as we have seen, she problematizes writing by focusing attention on the politics of linguistic styles and of language itself. Attention to the ways that knowledge is constructed has become an especially productive way for feminists and feminist historians to criticize received 'truths' about women and to understand more fully the complexities facing women and feminism in contemporary life.¹¹² But, attention to the constructedness of knowledge is not only important for feminist scholars. History in general will benefit from an awareness of the ways that its accounts of the past are influenced by and contribute to contemporary discursive realities, to particular conceptions of truth. As many scholars have documented, ideological constructions cannot be separated either from other levels

¹¹²Judith Walkowitz, for example, argues that our contemporary discourse about violence against women inherited many of its paradoxical formulations from the highly contested discourses on sexuality which emerged in the 1880s and shaped cultural interpretations of the Ripper murders. See Judith R. Walkowitz, City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London, with a foreword by Catherine R. Stimpson, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

of historical existence in the past, eg. economic, political, legal,¹¹³ or from the historian's own work in the present.

The form that knowledge has taken--the remarkable absence or subordination of women in the narratives of the 'rise of civilization'. . . indicates a politics that sets and enforces priorities The discipline of history, through its practices **produces** (rather than gathers or reflects) knowledge about the past generally and, inevitably, about sexual difference as well.¹¹⁴

Questioning the politics of creating historical knowledge necessarily raises the related issue of narrative, of the role that the form of historical knowledge takes. Cixous's work shows how narrative is not simply a neutral medium for the presentation of historical facts, but is itself an ideological component of the construction of

¹¹³Numerous studies of industrialization show how conceptions of gender effected the meaning of various kinds of 'work' and shaped the material opportunities available to women and men. See, for example, Sonya O. Rose, Limited Livelihoods: Gender and Class in Nineteenth-Century England, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Deborah Valenze, The First Industrial Woman, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

¹¹⁴Joan Scott, Gender and the Politics of History, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 9. My emphasis.

knowledge.¹¹⁵ Narrative is one way that the present of the historian informs the creation of the text and shapes the encounter with the past. As de Certeau observed, "history tells of its own work and, simultaneously, of the work which can be read in a past time."¹¹⁶ Cixous advocates an approach to writing, including historical writing, that illuminates the work of the present, that reveals the interaction of same and other, rather than effacing it.¹¹⁷ This approach refuses to reduce the other to something familiar.¹¹⁸

Cixous's appropriation of a psychoanalytic-

¹¹⁵See, for example, Hayden White, "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory," History and Theory 23:1 (1984), 1-33.

¹¹⁶Michel de Certeau, The Writing of History, trans. Tom Conley, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 43.

¹¹⁷An example of a history which reveals its own work is the Dora case; Sigmund Freud, "Fragment on an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria," vol. 19, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974).

¹¹⁸The issue of the 'otherness' of the past is particularly weighty for some historians. See discussions in Ian Kershaw, The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation, third edition, (New York: Edward Arnold, 1993), 1-16; Alice Yeager Kaplan, Reproductions of Banality: Fascism, Literature, and French Intellectual Life, foreword by Russell Berman, (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 41-55.

structuralist framework also suggest a need to re-think conventional notions of objectivity and causal explanation. She shows how all subjects are bound by the systems of signification which organize and order their lives. What we are able to know or think about history is both made possible and limited by the linguistic structures of a particular temporal envelope. It is the structure that speaks us, even unconsciously, rather than the other way around. The unconscious transforms the greater part of the self into something radically inaccessible which, nevertheless, influences conscious life through phenomena like transference. The effects of the unconscious challenge the ability of historians to recount "the past purely in its own terms and for its own sake."¹¹⁹

Both structuralism and psychoanalysis also problematize causal explanation by challenging the reliability of the surface narrative and demanding instead attention to underlying configurations of meaning. Psychoanalysis shows how elements in any narrative can be

¹¹⁹Dominick LaCapra, "History and Psychoanalysis," Soundings in Critical Theory, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 39.

displaced or overdetermined, but it also reveals the capacity of the mind for *Nachträglichkeit* or delayed action. An event that had no apparent importance when it occurred may become traumatic when it is remembered in a different context. *Nachträglichkeit* blurs the line differentiating cause from effect and thereby problematizes the determination of an event's significance. The complexity which faces the analyst trying to make sense of an individual's history is potentially compounded for the historian trying to make sense of a collective past.

Structuralism's emphasis on synchronic relationships permits an intricate and rigorous analysis of meanings within a particular system, but it cannot explain what makes structures change over time.¹²⁰ Any account of change over time must rely on the conceptual models of the historian's episteme. "Real diachrony, therefore, real history, falls outside the mind . . . [and is] unattainable directly: time becomes an unknowable."¹²¹ What we are able to explain about history is not 'history' itself, but what is amenable to the

¹²⁰Culler, 255.

¹²¹Greimas's position as described by Jameson, 188.

hermeneutics of a particular temporal envelope.

Cixous's work places her within the recent, paradoxical intellectual trend of post-modernism. She is highly critical of the faith in 'progress' that underlay the modernist celebration of the 'new'. For her, all of history has moved forward through a dialectical process which has re-inscribed the annihilation of the other in numerous symbolic forms, but which also manifests itself as genocide, imperialism, slavery, racism.¹²² Cixous rejects the modernist celebration of the 'new' because, for her, "we are still living under the Empire of the Selfsame"¹²³--i.e., nothing is truly 'new' because the underlying process of history has not changed. What appears to be progress is actually repetition: "Always the same, with other clothes."¹²⁴.

In History, of course, what is called 'other' is an alterity . . . that falls into the dialectical circle There has to be some 'other'--no master without a slave, no economico-political power without exploitation, no dominant class without cattle under the yoke, no 'Frenchmen'

¹²²Cixous, "Sorties," 70-1.

¹²³Ibid., 79.

¹²⁴Ibid.

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