

REVIEWS

Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis

Edited by Teresa Brennan

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'No femininity please, we're British.' This, suggests Rachel Bowlby in her contribution to this collection, is perhaps a particularly English line of development in discussions of psychoanalysis and feminism. Bowlby considers the affair between psychoanalysis and feminism since their coincidental appearance in a supplement to the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1906, and pays particular attention to the status of the feminine in both discourses. The urgent question, 'your place or mine?', remains endlessly undecidable in their relations because the predicament both face is identifying each other's sex, because the place where neither wants to be is the place of the feminine. Both are caught in the dynamics of repudiation: psychoanalysis arguing that she must repudiate femininity in order to accede to womanhood, she repudiating his repudiation of her. If Bowlby is right, then the irony of this

'affair' is that the 'place' of endless undecideability is the 'place' of the feminine (and a horizon towards which much contemporary European theory has been heading). Through a series of intricate unravellings, Bowlby unconceals three different words which Stratchey has translated as 'repudiate': *verfen* – to discard; *ablehnen* – to decline, refuse, remove; and *weisen* – to exile, expel or banish. Bowlby asks whether now, many fraught repudiations later, we might not find a way out of this impasse of femininity – *die Verwerfung* also means a geological fault. Substitute this for the 'bedrock of femininity' and we get, not repudiation, but the faulting of femininity, the leaving open, the slide between the strata. It is perhaps from this fault, this slide, that many of the texts in this collection emerge.

Teresa Brennan argues in her introduction that between psychoanalysis and feminism lies an open space without anachronistic boundaries where basic premises are being rethought. Jane Gallop in the opening paper wonders whether we are moving backwards or forwards in that space. She reads Juliet Mitchell as allying herself with the Lacanian attack on the biologism of much

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psychoanalytic theory. For Mitchell and Lacan, the human becomes human at the moment of castration, a severance, or cut, from biology. This split is emblematic of the division between the human and the natural sciences – a border Mitchell wants psychoanalysis to patrol. This suggests that perhaps we are still at work on those anachronistic boundaries. Gallop now rejects her own alliance with this adversarial position and seriously questions the insistence on the 'split' or division in models of the human subject. Feminism, she argues, can still reject humanism without jettisoning biology.

Many of the papers which follow Gallop engage with what have seemed like entrenched debates about the body, essentialism and sexual difference. It seems symptomatic of what Bowlby has described as the British neurosis about femininity that Luce Irigaray is the focal point for the section in the book about essentialism. Both Rosi Braidotti and Margaret Whitford are charged with the task of refuting the British reception of Irigaray's work. Whitford argues that what is problematic for readers of Irigaray is not some biological essentialism (she does not propose a fixed female essence) but rather, her vast erudition. Irigaray is a practising psychoanalyst, a philosopher and a poet. She has been engaged in linguistic research into gender and schizophrenic discourse. That she is lesbian may have something to do with the extraordinary reception which one of the first of her theoretical papers to have been translated received: 'When our lips speak together' seems to have been read as a rather aberrant lesbian love poem; likewise, 'The Mechanics of Fluids' from her book *Speculum of the Other Woman*. The former challenges the structuralist theory of the universality of language and Lacan's insistence on woman's negative entry into the symbolic order. For Lacan,

woman does not exist in language. His theory of female sexuality is predicated on this negative entry into the symbolic. Irigaray is quite clear that female sexuality cannot articulate itself within an Aristotelian type of logic. Her specificity is repressed within this framework. But it is not immutable; why can one not speak otherwise? It is perhaps, learning from Bowlby, more extraordinary that she has been heard at all than it is that she has been repudiated in this country – No Irigaray please, we're British!

In her own paper, Irigaray discusses the significance of gesture in psychoanalysis. She discusses the therapeutic significance of 'lying on the couch' (to be removed from the scene of representation, to be deprived in the present of the power to produce meaningful discourse) and suggests that it has different implications for men and women. In a satisfying corollary to the Freud/Lacan/Derrida appropriations of baby Ernst's *fort/da* game of symbolizing his mother's absence, Irigaray insists that this pre-verbal gesture is already sexual difference in play. She argues that the little girl could never objectify her mother in this way (a spool of thread which the boy throws forwards and backwards is seen as mother coming and going). The mother's sex is the same as hers and therefore cannot have the status of a reel. She describes a range of reactions which the girl might have. She might play. Or she might be overcome by distress and neither speak nor eat. When she plays, with a doll, or in a dance, she constructs a vital subjective space for herself in relation to her mother. 'The girl has the mother, in some sense, in her skin, in the humidity of her mucous membranes, in the intimacy of her most intimate parts, in the mystery of her relation to gestation, birth . . . she does not want to master the mother, but to create herself' (pp. 134–5). It is difficult, for women in this culture, to re-member mother

in this way but the implications of being unable to symbolize this relation are dire, e.g., an inability to mourn (her loss), or to perform certain operations of sublimation.

According to Margaret Whitford in her paper in this collection, Irigaray argues that the need for the phallus which is imputed to the little girl is an *a posteriori* justification of the obligation which is placed on her to be legal mother and wife. She goes on to argue that there are two reasons for Freud's insistence that the little girl's relation to her mother is phallic rather than feminine: firstly, that Freud's imaginary (which is also the imaginary of western representation) is anal, that is, it does not recognize sexual difference: for Freud the little girl is a little man, as in the sexual theories or fantasies of children; secondly, that on a more global level it is based on a metaphysics of presence: 'what you see (presence) is privileged over what you cannot see (absence) and seeing guarantees being, thus the penis is elevated to the position of phallus: nothing to be seen is equivalent to having no thing, no being, no truth'. Penis envy, or penis as access to the mother, or baby as substitute for penis is essentialist. To argue that the little girl can have a feminine, rather than a phallic, relation to her mother is not. I believe that we must unravel the fear and understandable mistrust of essentialist theories from structures of resistance and denial.

For Irigaray and many of the other contributors to this collection, a central theoretical problem is the inability to separate 'mother' and the 'woman'. In clinical theory, as in metaphysics, there is only the place of the mother, of the maternal. Within the Oedipal scenario then there is the imbalance masculinity/phallus/Law of the Father and an unsexed Maternal. The status of the daughter is vital here. In psychoanalytic discourses, the daughter's desire is characterized as inevitably phallic, rather than feminine. She

thus occupies the site of a struggle for a place for 'woman' (which Bowlby reminds us necessitates a repudiation of femininity). Whitford argues on behalf of Irigaray that if mother is not also woman, then there is no real other – presumably because if she is unique (unsexed maternal) she can be incorporated, eaten whole, as it were, her otherness, 'the difference within', camouflaged by the maternal function, guaranteed only by the 'threat' of castration.

Lesbianism, a woman taking an other woman as lover, can be read as the site of a resistance to the symbolic repression of what Gayatri Spivak calls 'the name of the mother' (Spivak 1983). Many of these papers stress the necessity for an articulation of the heterogenous mother/woman daughter/woman relations within the symbolic.

Alice Jardine takes up the mother/daughter paradigm in a different but none the less equally pertinent way in her discussion of the different generations of women caught in the web of different historical transferences (an earlier generation in transference to psychoanalysis, then later, another to feminism and this present generation in transference to both discourses and both previous generations). In a marvellous unravelling, threads of which include discussions of women who have written of their analysis, she argues for a radically different understanding of these transferences through a thinking in the time of future anterior: 'moving from an individual to a collective analytic perspective, the future anterior incorporates the possibility of understanding the history/story we are, through and from the perspective of the generation before us, in so far as that perspective becomes or is now our own and is realised in the future' – or, in Lacan's words, 'what I shall have been for what I am in the process of becoming'. This mode changes our linear conception

of time and does away with the concept of 'generation' altogether.

The difficulties and dangers inherent in the possibility of inscribing woman in the symbolic are not underestimated – but none of them develop ideas on the basis of a self evident female nature, or essence. If there is a consensus, then it is that we could never possibly reach the definitive 'woman'. But as Rosi Braidotti argues, 'I do not have to define the signifier woman in order to assert it as the speaking subject of my discourse'.

Gayatri Spivak in her paper outlines some of the difficulties of the feminist/psychoanalytic epistemological project through which men and women understand their ontology in terms of sexual difference, male and female subjects construing themselves as knowable objects. She identifies a crucial distinction between ontology (which is about essence, what am I?) and axiology (which is about value, who am I?). For the philosopher, there is an irreducible difference between the subject (woman) of the psychoanalytic epistemology and the subject (feminist) of axiology. She retraces the relation between the concept 'woman' (a catachresis, a metaphor without literal referent), deconstruction and the post-colonial disenfranchised woman. Ultimately, she repositions herself in relation to deconstructive theory and argues for the (philosophical) integrity of naming that disenfranchised woman 'whom we strictly, historically, geopolitically cannot imagine' as literal referent. We must, as an élite complicit with the culture of imperialism, acknowledge that we participated in obliterating the trace of *her* production, we must stage the scene of effacing her biography, in the hope that the possibility for that name will finally be erased. For Spivak, if we must think the relationship between the subject of ontology and the subject of axiology, then the name woman will refer to

the 'gendered subaltern' of decolonized space. It is ironic, if not a little frightening, that Braidotti should read this as Spivak reproducing an 'essential woman'.

Lisa Jardine, Toril Moi, Elizabeth Wright, Naomi Segal and Joan Copjec also contribute to this anthology with ideas about epistemophilia, 'the real' and the death drive and so on but within the context of this special issue, I would like to bring attention to last paper in the collection: 'Of female bondage' by Parveen Adams.

Teresa Brennan, in her introduction, argues that this 'path-breaking' paper contributes to our understanding of the 'relations between the psychical and the social' by 'studying a new sexuality': lesbian sado-masochism. Adams herself informs us that she hopes to contribute to the debate on sexual politics by 'showing that psychoanalysis can theorize new phenomena without transforming itself into sociology or psychology'. Her main thesis is that, psychoanalytically speaking, while lesbian sado-masochism remains a perversion, it is not pathological and that 'entities which are perverse but not pathological demonstrate that psychical processes do not of themselves determine sexualities and their "normal" or pathological status'.

One might well welcome such a reading into debates on sexual politics were it not for the fact that in constructing this thesis, Adams finds herself obliged, firstly, to establish an equivalence between female heterosexuality and nonsado-masochistic lesbian sexuality and, secondly, to situate them both as pathological ('within the forms of womanly pathology organized within the phallic field'). What this ultimately presents is a twofold theory of female sexuality: the heterosexual woman and the non SM lesbian on one side, not perverse but 'normally' and inevitably pathological and the SM lesbian on the

other side, perverse but not pathological. In Adam's narrative, the dividing line or 'cut' is the (Lacanian) phallus. Adams is enabled to decide who signifies whose desire for whom by assessing positions taken up in relation to the paternal phallus: 'in the feminine heterosexual position the woman finds the signifier of her desire in the body of a man; within the masculinity complex the heterosexual woman who has made a virile identification with the father wants the man to recognize her virility and the homosexual woman is in the same way enabled to offer that which she does not have' (p. 263). Adams's explanation for this exciting and radical new found freedom which only SM lesbians have acquired is complex, if not a little tortuous, and very little of it has to do with a distinction between SM lesbian praxis 'non' SM lesbian praxis. Briefly, it hinges on two points. Firstly, on a distinction between the SM lesbian and the clinical male heterosexual masochist and secondly, on 'aspects of reality which press forward [on the SM lesbian] and make possible a change in the balance of unconscious life which produce a possible but unpredictable materialisation of unconscious life' (p. 261). The clinical male masochist, while disavowing the sexual difference of the parents (or more precisely the absence of a maternal phallus), necessarily remains within a heterosexual framework, his practice is compulsive and genitality is 'disturbed' whereas the lesbian sadomasochist, although also disavowing the absence of the maternal phallus, constructs a sexuality among women, experiences choice and mobility and genital satisfaction is one among many pleasures: 'she constructs fetishes and substitutes them, one for another, she multiplies fantasies and tries them on like costumes . . . a proliferation of bodily pleasures, a transgressive excitement, a play with identity, a play with genitality' (pp. 262-3). What 'aspects of reality'

'press forward' on the SM lesbian and not on other women, whether lesbian or otherwise, are not at all discussed and this seems to me a tantalising omission.

I wonder who exactly Adams is appealing to in this debate? Are not the real protagonists in the story of female bondage which unfolds in this paper the 'virile' heterosexual women (intellectuals) and vanilla lesbians who remain forever tied up in phallic knots? Furthermore, this curious assimilation of 'straight' lesbianism into a general theory of female heterosexuality is not generally reflected in psychoanalytic discourse or in its institutional practices (in principle, heterosexual women can train with the Institute of Psychoanalysis in this country while women who are lesbian cannot, so she could not be expecting to contribute to change there - unless, of course she believes that the 'new' status (i.e. non pathological) she affords her 'new' sexuality (lesbian sadomasochism) is likely to see the doors of the Institute flung open to SM dykes . . .).

Much work needs to be done (if not undone) on these questions and I believe that what this paper clearly identifies is the frustration of thinking through issues of female sexuality outside of a critique of the metaphysics of presence on which Lacanian theory is predicated.

Denise O'Connor

Reference

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