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The Sex or the Death of the Author? Rethinking the Relevance of "Maleness" to (Feminist) Literature and Literary Criticism

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Abstract

The relevance/irrelevance of the sex of the author to textual analysis remains one of the most controversial debates within contemporary literary theory, in general, and feminist literary criticism, in particular. On the one hand, the relevance of knowledge about the author to knowledge about the text has been diminished repeatedly in the twentieth century by formalist, Marxist, and poststructuralist scholarship. On the other hand, other (feminist) scholars have insisted that the sex of the author cannot be ignored, as it helps account for the text's content and/or style. After presenting the two sides of the argument, the paper highlights some of the dangers of "de-gendering" literature, showing the relevance of the sex of the author to textual criticism. Nevertheless, it argues that it is neither possible nor desirable to lump all (male) writers into one single category, as male fiction is far from static and monolithic, constituting a varied, changing, complex and often contradictory (fictional) gender construct. The paper thus concludes underlining the feminist potential of a number of male-authored texts, ranging from Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* to Henry James's *The Bostonians*, among others.

The relevance/irrelevance of the sex of the author to textual analysis remains one of the most controversial debates within contemporary literary theory, in general, and feminist literary criticism, in particular. On the one hand, the relevance of knowledge about the author to knowledge about the text has been diminished repeatedly in the twentieth century. The role of the author in literary criticism was questioned, for example, by several formalist perspectives of the first

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half and middle of the twentieth century, although it was Roland Barthes who famously proclaimed "The Death of the Author" in his 1968 essay. Moreover, both Marxist and poststructuralist studies have tended to play down the importance of the individual author. Marxist historians have argued, for example, how the subjectivities of "individuals" are always shaped and constructed by social and political circumstances, claiming that individualism is itself a specific historical phenomenon. Poststructuralist thinkers have also insisted on the dangers of treating "experience" as an unmediated category, the absolute possession of the autonomous and sovereign individual. As Ben Knights has concluded, "at the end of the day, any account of the texts as a wave of codes, or as the product of linguistic and cultural practices, is bound to diminish the significance of the individual author" (1999: 136).

Nevertheless, a number of scholars have insisted that the sex of the (male) author cannot be ignored. For example, some critics have argued that the fact that a novel is written by a man matters because the fact itself explains features of the text's content and/or style. For instance, in analyzing a number of male-authored works such as Henry James's *The Lesson of the Master*, James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, or D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, Ben Knights himself stresses the importance of taking gender into consideration in what might otherwise become "an ostensibly gender-neutral discussion about art and 'the artist'" (1999: 50). Insisting further, Knights argues that, in terms of content, these texts cannot conceal their "masculinity," as we find in masculine narrative a common "ambivalence" towards the figure of the male artist, who is at once envied for his direct contact with a sublime domain, and also despised as not altogether a man (1999: 50-51).

On the other hand, some critics have referred to stylistic features which are (at least supposedly) distinctly masculine. In *Writing Men* (2000), Berthold Schoene, for instance, argues that a major concern among many contemporary British male writers is their self-conscious envisioning of an *écriture masculine* that would question their predecessors' often stereotyped and profoundly patriarchal conceptions of masculinity (2000: xiii). Similarly, in *Phallic Critiques*, Peter Schwenger insists that "there *is* such a thing as a masculine style" (1984: 12). Just as Virginia Woolf defended her belief in the feminine sentence, and just as

Hélène Cixous posited the existence of *écriture feminine*, Schwenger claims that "the time has come [...] for the question of a masculine mode to be taken seriously" (1984: 7). In Schwenger's view, the masculine style is characterized by several features. First of all, any attempt to define a woman's style or a man's style depends to some degree on content. In his own words, "masculine or feminine subject matter, then, will influence the effect of any style" (1984: 11). Second, "feminine" and "masculine" styles need not be defined strictly by sex. Thus, a man's style is not limited to men:

> It certainly is not one that is written by all men. It is not a style 'natural' to men, but one that is artificially created. Moreover, its nature as a masculine style is not absolute but relative. Because of the elusiveness of both style and sex, it will never be possible to pinpoint objectively the 'masculinity' of a piece of writing. (1984: 12)[1]

Although Schwenger qualifies that *écriture masculine* is not the same as male writing, which would leave him immune to the charge of essentialism, he keeps using the terms "male" and "masculine" style quite interchangeably throughout his work. Moreover, his theory of a "masculine" style is fraught with several other problems and contradictions. For example, one wonders about the very existence, and critical usefulness, of a category which is not possible "to pinpoint objectively." And even if you can tell by careful reading whether a text is written in a "masculine" style or not, what happens to this case?

> Does it not become circular? What about those stereotyped, stylised genres –Restoration Comedy, some forms of journalism, or romantic fiction are examples- where the genre itself is so formulaic that

[1] Obviously, Schwenger (1984) relies heavily on Hélène Cixous (1976) for his defence of an *écriture masculine*. As is known, Cixous also insisted that *écriture feminine* is not confined to female writers and, indeed, she mentioned several male authors, for example James Joyce, as examples of such a practice. Moreover, she argued that "it is impossible to define a feminist practice of writing and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded -which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist" (1976: 883).

> any one might learn to do it? There seems to be a dead end here. (Knights, 1999: 137)

Finally, because Schwenger (1984) insists that a "man's style" largely depends on content, the notion can very easily fall prey to sexual stereotyping. After all, it is often the case that stereotypical female attributes like emotions and passivity get labeled as "feminine," while stereotypical male attributes such as strength and aggressiveness are defined as "masculine." Since Schwenger (1984) argues that form depends a lot on content, it is highly likely, then, that the literary representation of stereotypical male and female attributes will be defined as "masculine" and "feminine" styles, respectively.

Similar critical comments have been made in relation to *écriture feminine*. Certainly, the *écriture feminine* of the French feminists has provided several innovative insights and has helped to undermine a phallocentric ideology in a number of ways. Nevertheless, to define a language that is playful, open, disruptive, non-hierarchical, and anti-theoretical as "feminine," and one that is logical, closed, rigid, hierarchical, and theoretical as "masculine," seems to keep the very binary oppositions a Cixous or an Irigaray try to dismantle.[2] Moreover, this attribution of traits to gender, as Laura Claridge and Elizabeth Langland (1990: 5-6) elaborate, makes easier the appropriation of language for political means. Certain gender-identified constructions (e.g., a text trying to close itself is *male*, whereas a text striving to remain open is *female*) can be viewed as political strategies whereby certain marginalized forms are appropriated by certain marginalized readers as the prototypical genres of their own voices. After all, "male-traditional" has usually been equated with the technological rationality that has been a target of social critics from the early Romantics to the Frankfurt School. Similarly, the term "feminist," as Gerald Graff (1987: 137) reminds us, is often equated with the world view which has been named "contextualism" or "historicism" and may be exemplified in such philosophical trends as modern pragmatism, existentialism, and post-structuralism.

From what has been suggested, it would appear, then, that neither content nor form can help us determine the sex of the author. Thus, one may be tempted to proclaim the "death of the author," at

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[2] That is, indeed, the view held by Toril Moi (1985) and Donna Stanton (1986).

least insofar as his/her actual biological sex is concerned. Nevertheless, it is my contention that as long as patriarchy continues to exist, it does *not* seem ethically advisable to ignore knowledge about the sex of the author.[3] Indeed, knowledge about the sex of the author –and, by extension, about his/her ethnic, class, and/or sexual specificities– becomes absolutely essential to continue the work begun in the 1970s by feminist scholars, who have long been working not only to recuperate silenced women authors, but also to redefine the curriculum both in higher education and in schools so as to present a higher amount of women's texts. Knowledge of the author has been central to this enterprise, and the perseverance of women authors and scholars struggling against patriarchal oppression should be taken as "a role model for women readers and students –and in turn for a new generation of women writers" (Knights, 1999: 137).[4]

Moreover, the project of "degendering" literature often ends up privileging male fiction. For example, the formalist tendency of the 1940s and 1950s to ignore (the sex of) the author often favored men's texts over women's literature. The fatal flaw of the formalist position (at least as adopted in mainstream Anglo-American literary criticism in the 1940s and 1950s) was its naïveté about its own critical assumptions. As Ben Knights elaborates:

> Curiously, the impersonality of the author and the priority accorded to the words on the page almost always favoured texts by men, and went along with a canon whose advocates unabashedly overlooked the implicit theories upon which it rested. (1999: 136)

Finally, one should bear in mind that our knowledge about an author (however minimal or impressionistic) always influences how we read. And since one of the first things that we want to know about people is their sex, that knowledge (with all the attached assumptions

[3] This does not mean, though, that the abolition of patriarchy would necessarily entail the "death of the author" or his/her sex. *Equality* should not be mistaken for *sameness*. It is both possible and desirable, as Michael Kimmel (2000: 266) reminds us, to be equal and yet be able to keep our (sex) differences.

[4] For a deeper analysis of the close relationship between sexuality, authorship, and representations of masculinity in (nineteenth-century British) women's literature, see Armengol (2003).

and presuppositions) becomes part of the framework within which we read. Bearing all this in mind, one must concur with Ben Knights, then, that the sex of the (male) author matters, "if for no better reason than because if the reader does not know, she or he will make it up" (1999: 137-38).

In line with these arguments, then, I believe that the sex of the author tends to *influence* his or her literary works, although I also think that it does not (always) *determine* them. It does not seem fair to lump all male (and female) writers into the same category. Just as not all women writers can be considered feminist, there is the exemplary feminism of various male writers who managed to move away from patriarchal representations of women and gender. It is probably true, as Sally Robinson (2000) notes, that white male novelists -like black, women, and/or gay writers- have been lumped into one category in post-sixties American culture. As she explains:

> While white male novelists […] might have until recently been read simply as "novelists," many might now find themselves categorically defined *as* white male novelists: they might find themselves *marked*, not read for their expression of a personal, individualized vision but, like women writers or African American writers, habitually read as the exemplars of a particularized -gender and racialized- perspective. (2000: 16)

The analysis of white male authors as a specific gendered and racialized group can certainly play a fundamental role in questioning universalizing conceptions of white men and their (literary) works as representatives of a universal hu*man* experience. Nevertheless, one should also bear in mind that white masculinity, as the latest poststructuralist theorizing about gender and masculinity has shown, is far from static and monolithic.[5] White male fiction is equally complex and varied, providing conservative but also innovative and revisionary perspectives on gender and masculinities. While it is no doubt necessary to start re-reading white male authors as representative of a specific rather than universal gender perspective, it becomes equally important

[5] See, for example, Knights (1999); Robinson (2000); Armengol (2003).

to remember, therefore, that (white heterosexual) men's literature is far from uniform, constituting a varied, changing, complex and often contradictory (fictional) gender construct. Even though male fiction often reveals its sexist biases, there *exist* several male authors whose works can be said to represent feminist tenets and principles. These include, among others, Samuel Richardson, whose eighteenth-century novel *Clarissa* was described by Terry Eagleton as the major feminist text of the language; Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879) and *Hedda Gabler* (1890), which represent "the frustrations and tragedy of women trapped in the conventions of a patriarchal society" (Ruthven, 1991: 11); Henry James' *The Bostonians* (1886), which Judith Fetterly defined as an excellent analysis of the power relations between men and women as social classes; or Thomas Hardy, who challenged the sexual ideology of his time by creating characters like Tess of the D'Urbervilles and Sue Bridehead, "whose failure to conform to acceptable patterns of behaviour caused social upheavals which are replicated in formal disruptions in the novels" (Ruthven, 1991: 11).

Despite the relevance of these male authors and novels to feminist theory and political practice, it is surprising to see how little work exists on male authors challenging the same patriarchal structures that women fight, especially since most literature professors teach male writers. Certainly, any struggles they fight against patriarchal culture, as Claridge and Langland (1990: 19) have concluded, are likely to prove beneficial for all of us, women and men, in the long term. Rather than identify men with an unquestioned and vague notion of patriarchy, it might thus be more helpful to strive to locate the male voice as a third or "odd term" (Boone, 1989: 166) in a gendered discourse that consists of (at least) man, woman, and the cultural ideology that we call patriarchy. In this way, we could perhaps begin to move away from the unproblematized equation of maleness with a universal patriarchy, which often proves simplistic and (at least partly) inaccurate.

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