

Women in French or the politics of representation

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This collection of papers comes out of a conference held in Ilkley in May 1994, the third conference of the Women Teaching French network.¹ While the conference had no specific title, and while speakers were deliberately invited to represent a broad spectrum of areas of interest within French Studies, it struck us retrospectively that all of the papers were concerned in one way or another with the politics of representation itself. This is explicit in papers on recent debates on the issue of parity within political institutions, and on the record of political discussion programmes on television in terms of participation of women politicians. But the politics of representation also underpins analyses of public perceptions of women writers and filmstars, as well as constructions of fictional women in both novels and films. Finally, optimistic explorations of *non*-representational writing and art as positive embodiments of women's actual or potential experience stand alongside a controversial conjecture—that the projection of a female divine might lead women to represent themselves to themselves in ways that would be both psychically and socially liberating.²

This obsession with issues of representation is less surprising if we pause to reflect upon the superficially paradoxical situation which motivated our desire to establish a women's network in the first place. This was the alarming imbalance between the over-representation of women within the undergraduate population of polytechnic and university departments of French, and the traditional under-representation on the staff of these same departments, not to mention their almost total non-representation in senior or managerial posts.

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- 1 We should like to thank the University of Nottingham for the generous subvention that has enabled us to publish these papers, and the Association for the Study of Modern and Contemporary France for some further financial assistance.
 - 2 Alison Martin was unable to deliver her paper on Irigaray, and we are particularly pleased to reproduce it here. We are also glad to include a paper by Carrie Tarr, a first version of which was given at a conference on women in the French cinema at the University of Birmingham. Papers by Eleanore Kofman ('Women and the Far Right') and by Jennifer Birkett ('Language and power in Germaine de Staël's *Corinne*') were unfortunately promised for publication elsewhere.

'Teaching Women/Women Teaching French', the somewhat clumsy title that we originally invented for ourselves, was intended to reflect our desire to address these opposing extremes of representativeness within a common framework. Thus an early preoccupation was with the most obvious point of contact between the few female lecturers and their many female students, namely the content of our teaching. On the one hand, we alerted ourselves to the unthinking perpetuation of gender stereotypes through the use of implicitly (or even explicitly) sexist language-teaching material; on the other hand, we began to share information about courses on women's history or women's writing which a few of us were at last beginning to teach. The curriculum was perhaps one factor contributing to the process whereby generations of female students had written themselves out of the competition for postgraduate grants and academic posts, while those isolated women who found themselves so thinly represented on the staff of French departments allowed their male colleagues to share out the senior posts amongst themselves and to perpetuate the reign of male-dominated syllabuses.

The institutional resistance (or, at best, the irony) that many women encountered at a local level in trying to set up courses on women's writing in the late 1980s, was but one of the negative influences that we began to identify. If it was obvious that the typical content of undergraduate syllabuses related to dominant trends in research—after all, the desire to set up women-based courses arose from our own newly developed research interests—we became aware, too, of the extent to which the content of our research, and our success as female researchers, were controlled by the academic conferences and journals that legitimatise research within the institution of French Studies. The public dissemination of research is of course a crucial function of the supposedly democratic professional organisations of which many of us were and remain members. For this reason the representativeness of the profession's oldest and most traditional society, the Society for French Studies, has been a particular focus of criticism, optimism and renewed frustration.

Indeed the story of Women Teaching French really starts in 1985 when, one dark evening in the bar at the Bristol French Studies conference, some women grumbled into their drinks about how few papers had been given by women. No use just moaning, we said, let's point it out to the committee and

ask for a session of our own next year. And lo, the next conference not only welcomed our own sectional meeting on feminist readings, but even had *Hélène Cixous* as a plenary speaker. How silly of us not to have asked before: the system was so amenable and easy to change. But the next conference slipped easily and comfortably back to the starting point (a striking imbalance in the representation of men and women), and it was then that the grumblers in the bar decided that a separatist network might lead to more consistent and therefore more effective pressure for real change. Along the way, of course, it would provide a non-competitive academic context in which to meet new colleagues, to consolidate old friendships, and to make feminist political struggle enjoyable by promoting and sharing the research that interested us.

Since that time (March 1987) there have been day meetings in central London, Ealing, Wolverhampton, Reading, Loughborough, Birmingham, Oxford and Nottingham, as well as three weekend conferences in Ilkley. There have also been a series of meetings deliberately parasitical upon the national, 'unisex' organisations to which most of us remain ambivalently loyal. For as individual researchers and teachers of French we have a range of diverse interests and go to our separate conferences on, say, French History, French Language, Critical Theory, or Caribbean and African Literature in French. But the activities of Women Teaching French have been grounded in the view that we are interested in a variety of areas outside our specialisms, where they touch on issues concerning women. This is not just the result of a self-conscious self-identification as women, though we remain committed to this as a political strategy. Over the years we have developed a communal interest in and knowledge of each other's research and, since our one early and failed attempt to run parallel papers at a day conference (everyone wanted to hear both speakers), we have fostered the almost spontaneous interdisciplinarity of our activities as an important academic goal. At a time when French Studies in the UK have been anxiously debating their identity and future shape—which disciplinary strands will attract the funding? which traditionally studied areas of French culture will fall into oblivion?—we might point to our own ethos of inclusiveness as a model. Moreover, while the 'new' and 'old' universities in which we work engage similarly in a power struggle for funding and prestige, we should defend the collaboration and shared concerns which have encour-

aged us to ignore this competitive institutional divide, just as we have tried to break down, at our meetings, any hierarchical distinctions between postgraduates and well-established members of the profession. It is in recognition of this ongoing desire for maximum fluidity and inclusiveness that our name was changed, at the business meeting of the last conference, to Women in French. Thus, insofar as Women in French stands for female teachers and researchers working within French in the UK higher education system, that 'standing for' is a shifting, metonymic relation: the group consists simply of any women in that category (or who want to be in that category) who ask to be on the mailing list.³ There have never been any elected chairs or presidents, and all events have been co-organised, usually on the basis of cross-institutional collaboration.

Yet this is the third publication that we have produced for ourselves, which suggests a degree of continuity and consolidation.⁴ In seeking to encourage different representations of women (in all senses of the term representation) we have increased our self-confidence both as individuals and as a recognised, if informal, professional body. Individual initiatives, whether in teaching, research or job applications, are encouraged by the practical and moral support of a peer-group network. Thus, courses on women's writing and women's history can now be found on many a university syllabus, women are now somewhat better represented on conference platforms and the committees of professional organisations, and women are at last making perceptible inroads into the decision-making ranks of our institutions. The newly formed Humanities Research Board has set up a working party to look into ways of protecting women's interests as researchers, and Women in French (along with parallel feminist groupings based in other Arts subjects) has been consulted about our main areas of concern.

3 To be placed on the mailing list contact Maggie Allison, Modern Languages Centre, University of Bradford, W. Yorkshire BD7 1DP.

4 Past Women Teaching French publications are available as follows: *Women Teaching French: Five Papers on Language and Theory*, edited by Andrea Cady, Studies in European Culture and Society V, 1991 (from the European Research Centre, Loughborough University, Leicestershire LE11 3TU); *Women Teaching French Papers 2: Women's Space and Identity*, edited by Maggie Allison, 1994 (from Modern Languages Centre, University of Bradford, W. Yorkshire BD7 1DP).

This latter development is particularly timely in that our own institution, for example, whose generosity and open-mindedness in funding this volume we gratefully acknowledge, has nevertheless recently established a prestigious set of committees to promote and oversee research within the University, and has failed to notice that women have been almost totally excluded from this vital area of policy making. And although the activities of Women Teaching French may have created the illusory impression that women play an important role in the dissemination of research at a national level, a glance at the inside cover of the January 1995 issue of *French Studies* still reveals (behind its use of unisex initials instead of first names) an editorial board made up of three women and nine men, and an advisory board of eleven men. Meanwhile *Modern and Contemporary France*, considered more progressive than *French Studies* at the time of our original investigations in 1987, has reasonably equal representation on its editorial and advisory boards, yet the journal is overseen by a male executive editor and his three male associate editors. Not surprisingly, perhaps, women are represented in its January 1995 issue as follows: one out of four articles, one out of six review articles, and eleven out of thirty six reviews.

In fact it was the Loughborough conference of the Association for the Study of Modern and Contemporary France that provided the stimulus for what has been one of our most important and ongoing concerns: the development of assertiveness in academic contexts. On this memorable occasion a considerable number of us listened to a distinguished male intellectual historian discussing intellectuals in France since the war without mentioning a single woman in the space of his hour-long talk. Our reaction was to exchange irritated glances with each other, to pass sarcastic notes, and to explode with anger once outside the lecture room. Yet not one of us voiced their view to the speaker in the ritual space for questions and comments. At the fringe meeting that followed the conference we vowed to take action to train ourselves out of such moral and physical cowardice, and the highlight of an assertiveness-training workshop at a subsequent meeting was our role-played, literal reenactment of this shameful event. While this retrospectively comic tale has become part of the collective mythology of Women Teaching French, it stands as a graphic reminder of one of the main difficulties that impedes our

representation as women, whether as students in seminars, respondents to conference papers, or as participants in decision-making meetings of professional bodies or of our own academic institutions. What Woman in French, whatever her relative and carefully acquired aura of self-confidence, has not recognised herself in Cixous's graphic account of the bodily distress that marks women's attempts to speak in public arenas: 'le coeur qui bat à se rompre, parfois la chute dans la perte de langage, le sol, la langue se dérochant, tant parler est pour la femme—je dirais même: ouvrir la bouche—en public, une témérité, une transgression. (...) Ecoute parler une femme dans une assemblée (...): elle ne "parle" pas, elle lance dans l'air son corps tremblant'.⁵ Yet, for Cixous, this inability of women to represent what they want to say other than through minor hysterical embodiments can be positively recuperated from a feminist point of view: 'D'une certaine manière elle *inscrit* ce qu'elle dit, parce qu'elle ne refuse pas à la pulsion sa part indisciplinable et passionnée à sa parole. Son discours, même "théorique" ou politique, n'est jamais simple ou linéaire, ou "objectif" généralisé: elle entraîne dans l'histoire son histoire' (44). Doubtless those of us who still cannot control the pounding heart, the rush of blood to the face, and the sudden high tones in which we utter what suddenly seems like nonsense, would prefer to perfect a more self-confident and disembodied public discourse. Yet to record in writing this small part of the history (and folk history) of Women Teaching French—the Loughborough episode and our attempts to master it through a controlled representation of the original situation (a simulation that reactivated all our original bodily distress)—does, as Cixous suggests of her hysterical speaker, inscribe us in a wider women's history. It is a history that determines the interrelated issues of representation that concern the contributors to this volume, and which explains why those of us interested in parity campaigns or the representation of political women on television can be equally interested in the potential of *écriture féminine* to enact a utopian transformation of representation as we currently know it.

5 Hélène Cixous, 'Le rire de la Méduse', *L'Arc* LXI, 1975, 39-54 (43-4).