

## Few women care for Beowulf

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### Écrire un espace alternatif

*Amorcé par Simone de Beauvoir qu'on se rappelle la femme est l'autre, la question de la "nature" féminine (y-a-t-il une essence de la femme?) soulève actuellement aux États-Unis tout un débat. L'article de Christine Jackman offre une introduction à ce questionnement encore méconnu au Québec.*

*"Peu de femmes aiment "Beowulf" écrit George K. Anderson dans un livre consacré à la littérature anglaise du moyen âge. Il prétend, par ailleurs, que "Beowulf" plaît tant aux romantiques qu'aux intellectuelles. Les suppositions ici faites par Anderson concernant la nature de la femme et sa place comme l'autre démontrent la démarche de l'essentialisme traditionnaliste. Cependant il y a aussi une pensée essentialiste féministe, et cela est encore plus difficile à identifier et à combattre. Définir la femme est redoutable; car c'est la limiter. Il devrait y avoir, dans l'espace du mot "femme," de la place pour toutes sortes de femmes y compris pour celles qui changent d'un jour à l'autre. Les définitions de la femme, parce qu'elles sont idéologiques et motivées, jouent un rôle important dans la lutte politique. La meilleure approche serait un refus de définir la femme en définissant pragmatiquement le féminisme comme l'adversaire de l'ordre patriarcal duquel dérive l'oppression des femmes. En discours avec l'essentialisme on peut créer une troisième position qui "déconstruit" les définitions essentielles de la femme et qui garantit une place pour ces femmes parmi nous, romantiques et intellectuelles, qui aiment "Beowulf."*

So writes George K. Anderson in *Old and Middle English Literature From the Beginnings to 1485*. He further writes that the muscular, the voracious, and the ferocious – "the stuff of the horrible" (27) – appeal "to the romantically simple and the sophisticated intellectual alike" (27). Anderson's statements are offensive. First of all, I am

female and I like *Beowulf*. What, pray tell, does this say about me, or any woman who likes this poem? Are we, am I, alien, warped, masculine, maladjusted? Is there cause for worry? Second, are women excluded from the romantically simple and the intellectually sophisticated? If so, where do women reside – half-way between, perhaps, or somewhere else entirely? Anderson's off-handed remarks demonstrate the full flowering of essentialism and the assumption of woman as other – the non-masculine.

Anderson's attitude angers and frustrates me. But he and others like him are familiar enemies. In the last two decades, feminists have indentified the Andersons of the world. Although they still exist and must continually be undermined, their force has been lessened. However, in spite of the successes of feminism, there is much within its discourse that also angers and frustrates me. And feminists are not familiar enemies. I am a feminist. And although there never has been solidarity within the women's movement, I still feel a desire for what may not be possible.

My anger is directed mostly towards essentialism and both its individual and political ramifications. Individually, essentialism is autocratic and restrictive. Definitions of the feminine, in fact any definitions, are exclusive. In the very act of defining the masculine and the feminine, we exclude ways of being from each other and make them unavailable generally. Thus, any call for real, authentic, feminine experience in literature and the fear and denial of the "masculine" activities of theorizing and analytical thinking make me extremely apprehensive.

Toril Moi, in *Sexual/Textual Politics*, takes many of the Anglo-American feminists to task for their humanistic and authoritarian approach of defining or asking for authentic feminine experience and characters in literature. Moi demonstrates how the humanist approach "has the unfortunate effect of drawing [Showalter and others] perilously close to the male critical hierarchy whose patriarchal values [they] oppose" (77). Moi states that the problem arises from the failure to see texts as "signifying processes" (78). To see texts thusly disallows their authority and allows readers to resist interpretation toward a closure of meaning and definition. Moi also asks, in response to Showalter's fear of theorizing "what 'knowledge' is ever uninformed by theoretical assumptions" (77). So far so good.

Yet Moi herself falls into an essentialist trap. In her critique of

Annette Kolodny, *Moi* seems to take offense at Kolodny's use of "somewhat masculinist-sounding adjectives 'vigorous' and 'rigorous' " (72). My apprehensions return. Why are 'vigorous' and 'rigorous' necessarily masculine? Are these adjectives, then to be prescribed as not feminine and unavailable to women? Do the vigorous and the rigorous not belong in the same "masculine" category as the muscular, the voracious and the ferocious? If they do, then I am placed in the same alienated place allotted to me by Anderson. Obviously my real authentic experience differs from that of real authentic women. It is not difficult to imagine the Anglo-American feminists, and perhaps even *Moi*, saying that few women care for *Beowulf*. And, in some ways, they are worse than Anderson, because the assumption of something essentially feminine seems to also demand that women shouldn't care for it. So, not only is there something wrong with me, I am also sinful in my relation to the authentic sisterhood.

Definitions have tyrannizing power collectively as well as individually. Politically there are two struggles for women. One is to gain power within the phallogocentric order, to continue the fight for equality. Women, along with other oppressed people cannot wait for the old order to topple. The other is the struggle to overthrow established order. Definitions of Woman play an enormous part in the political struggle because they are ideological and not unmotivated.

Kenneth Burke in *A Grammar of Motives*, outlines the contradictions of definition. The contradictions centre around what he identifies as the "paradox of substance" (21). "Through slidings and transformations of definition, quite opposite motivations can be realized. Definitions of Woman are available and highly susceptible to shifting motivation because of the threat they pose to established order. Feminists must be careful not to provide definitions which can, and will be manipulated.

Contextual definition, according to Burke, arises from the paradox of substance. And it is an important consideration for feminists, as is the entire business of definition. Burke writes:

To tell what a thing is, you place it in terms of something else. This idea of locating, or placement, is implicit in our very word for definition itself: to *define*, or *determine* a thing, is to mark its boundaries, hence to use terms that possess...contextual reference. (24)

Both Toril Moi and Juliet Mitchell raise the issue of contextual definitions of feminism. Moi raises the question in her discussion of Myra Jehlen. Jehlen sees the need for a feminist conceptual world which defines itself in relation to the “‘male ground’” (81). Moi writes that this is

a central paradox of feminism: given that there is no space *outside* patriarchy from which women can speak, how do we explain the existence of a feminist, anti-patriarchal discourse at all? (81)

Yet there is feminist discourse. What is its context? What are the dangers of assigning it a context? Can we, should we, define feminism without defining Woman?

Burke discusses the fluctuations and dangers of contextual definition. I will paraphrase him to make my point. To define or locate feminism in the terms of patriarchy is to dissolve feminism into patriarchy (26). Additionally, to define or locate Woman in the terms of man is to dissolve woman into man (26). The outcome of this is to open oneself to the charge of failing to discuss Woman in herself, or feminism in itself. At this point, I propose a separation in the act of defining. I feel that feminism, in order to succeed, must at least define itself operationally, an activity inherent in the setting of strategy and goals. However, I wish to resist defining Woman beyond the acknowledgement that she is female and oppressed, as I hope to have shown how alienating this can be.

Defining feminism is risky business. And I again take Burke's ideas to illuminate the dangers. Burke talks of some terms as “compensatory rather than consistent” (54), such as the philosophical term “utilitarianism”. The name is hortatory, a plea for utilitarianism to be accepted, rather than a statement of its existence. This idea also applies to feminism and its demands for the end of the oppression of women. In the sixties, feminism was a term used to denote what was wanted, not what was already present. However, by locating feminism on male ground as its context we have enabled the patriarchy to, as Burke says, “make a world that departs from it” (54). Women now have, supposedly, equal rights. Feminism has become a consistent term. And we see daily the reactionary moves to depart from it.

Juliet Mitchell, in her essay “Femininity, Narrative and Psychoanalysis,” discusses contextual concerns about the semiotic and

disruptive. Her ideas apply also to the problems of the placement of feminism and its dissolution into the patriarchal ground:

If you think that the heterogeneous pre-Oedipal polyvalent world is a separate structure in its own right, then the law is disruptable, the carnival can be held on the church steps. But if this is not the case, if the carnival and the church do not exist independently of each other, ...then the only way you can challenge the church, ...is from within an *alternative symbolic universe*(428).

For feminism to successfully challenge the church of patriarchy, it must take as the contextual ground of its own definition a place outside patriarchy. Feminism must establish itself as a protagonist, an other that disrupts from without.

Although Burke cites the dangers of this position, I think it is preferable to being subsumed. Burke relates the case of anti-fascists forced uncomfortably to adopt many fascist measures to successfully counter Fascism. However, even if feminism must take on attributes of phallogocentrism in order to achieve its goals, it is a double-edged sword. Patriarchy must adopt feminist measures to protect itself. This is what happened during the sixties and seventies when feminism was more militant. As the patriarchal order assumed a more feminist face, feminism was lulled away from its agonal position and is still in danger of being dissolved.

Mitchell makes further remarks which have a bearing both on the definition of woman and the definition of feminism. She writes that the carnival cannot

also be the area of the feminine..., [for] it is just what the patriarchal universe defines as the feminine, the intuitive, the religious, the mystical, the playful...(428).

I find justification here for the pragmatic definition of feminism and the refusal to define woman. If women accept the patriarchal definition of themselves as intuitive, irrational, chaotic and passive, and take it to be their essence, then what have they gained? Again my apprehensions surface. Do we alienate women who neither want to, nor can be this way? There should be room in the space of woman for all kinds of women and for women who want to act sometimes one way sometimes another.

Additionally, in Mitchell's remarks I see the force and necessity for

women to act in ways opposite to the traditional definition. The necessity is to act, to be active and make active decisions. Although not included in Mitchell's list of the patriarchally defined attributes of woman, one of the most important is the passive. Indeed, to allow oneself to be defined is to stand still and accept a status, to become a state rather than an acting agent. Burke's dramatist pentad and investigation of "the actus-status pair" (41) provide another starting point from which to discuss the politics of defining feminism and women.

Burke discusses the transformation from active to static of "the Greek word for *virtue* (*arete*), and the corresponding Latin, *virtus* (42). Although he uses the transformation of this particular word as a demonstration of a slide, both the concept of virtue and the slide itself are important for a discussion of women. *Virtue*, in its older sense, "had intensely active meanings" (42). One was not virtuous, one did virtue. However, "gradually the concept of virtue came to place less stress upon action per se, and more stress upon the *potentialities* of action" (42). In this way, virtues "may become in the end purely states of mind; or proper attitudes toward God, things, and people; or *not* killing, *not* stealing, *not* coveting" (42).

Women have become, within the patriarchal system, passive, non-masculine, non-active; they have become a state of mind – a state of the phallogocentric mind. Thus, many images of woman (such as Dante's Beatrice) depict her as the passive state of potentialities, the scenic ground of the male, from which he explicitly acts. It is necessary to this system that women remain passive. They must have the proper attitude to God (ultimate transcendental signified), men (privileged sons of the signified) and things. They must not kill, steal, covet, speak, write or demand sexual pleasure. They must be the context out of which these actions spring.

With these ideas of actus-status, agent-state and active-passive in mind, I propose a more formal relationship between feminism and women. Feminism can be considered a status, a state, in which as Burke writes, "there are implicit possibilities" (43). We can carefully and practically define feminism as agonal to patriarchal order, derived from it as the oppression of women is derived from it. Thus the context of feminism is the oppression of women, but it grounds itself outside the church and remains a compensatory, rather than a consistent term. Women, then, can take feminism as a ground and can be and act as agents to actualize the possibilities of non-oppression

and the overthrow of patriarchal order. One benefit is that women need not limit and restrict themselves with essentialist definitions at all and certainly not before they can act. Another benefit is that feminism can also be a context for men as well.

The context of feminism provides the place from which all kinds of actions towards non-oppression can arise – economic action, political action, literary action. Conflicts between different actions need not necessarily be settled before a discourse is created. Women must write and write and write, before, during and after and attempt to establish norms and goals for that writing, especially literary writing. And feminist critics must continue to write and criticize and theorize. Action is important and discourse may just be the most important arena.

Which leads me to a contradiction that I am not sure can be resolved. I agree wholeheartedly with Julia Kristeva's project, what Toril Moi praises as "her commitment to thorough theoretical investigation of the problems of marginality and subversion, her radical deconstruction of the identity of the subject" (172). I do not think it necessary for Kristeva to be political in ways other than her theoretical concerns with language. At the same time I value Moi's criticism of Kristeva and other feminist writers. Additionally, I like neither Cixous' feminine essentializing, nor the authoritative humanist stance of Showalter. But in spite of my apprehensions about real authentic feminine experience and definitions, I think it important for their writing to exist. I just do not know where and if a line can be drawn, or if one should be. When does writing cease to be from the context of feminism and cross into the area of anti-feminist and anti-women?

To demonstrate the importance of writing and reading, I want to modify something I said above. I no longer feel alienated in an outside place allotted to me by the essentialism of some feminists. I am still opposed to the definitions which they espouse. But I must first digress.

Hélène Cixous, in "The Laugh of Medusa," wants women to write from the experience of the body, which is fine. However, she describes female bodily experience in the same terms which have always been used in male discourse about women. Cixous describes the female libidinal economy as one that is giving and receptive, but not hoarding of its drives. Additionally, she describes the female libido as not centralized, not regionalized, but rather diffuse and cosmic (137). She

believes that the "desire to write" (318) comes from the body in the same way as "the gestation drive...a desire for the swollen belly, for blood" (318). Gestation? Blood? Is this the same writer who says, "each body distributes in its own special way, without model or norm, the noninfinite and changing totality of its desires" (318)? Might not some bodies choose to be regionalized, centralized and not at all giving? Is it not one ages-old definition of female libido as motherly, diffuse and non-demanding which has privileged male sexual activity and tried to either spiritualize or legislate female libido out of existence? I do not agree at all with Cixous about this. But writing from the body is an option. It is just not a definition of woman nor her only, nor necessarily best, mode of writing.

Back to reading and writing and what this encounter with Cixous demonstrates. In reading Cixous, I am reading my own unconscious and discovering what is to be read in her. We have between us created a third position, an other (perhaps also an Other). Shoshana Felman, in her book *Jacques Lacan and the Adventure of Insight*, discusses one aspect of Lacan's view of the unconscious; it is both "that which must be read...and perhaps primarily that which reads" (21-22). Although about psychoanalytic practice, Felman's insight is important for and applicable to reading and writing within the context of feminism. Discourse is the active vehicle through which feminists can create the "alternative symbolic universe" (428) Juliet Mitchell sees as necessary.

Initially the contextual agonal stance I proposed for feminism is a rhetorical one. Feminists, male and female, cannot position themselves within an alternative symbolic universe before one is created. But I believe that we are creating that universe with and through our discourse. We are becoming feminists by speaking our desires, reading our desires and thereby articulating new symbolic signifiers of feminism and feminist subjects. Felman quotes Lacan: "Desire emerges at the moment of its incarnation into speech – it is coincident with the emergence of symbolism" (129); "In naming it [desire], the subject creates, gives rise to something new, makes something new present in the world" (131). Feminism, like psychoanalysis, is the ground out of which we perform our discourse which becomes in turn a new symbolic with which we can undermine the old.

Mitchell sees earlier women's writing as "the discourse of the hysteric" (427) in that the "'subject in process'" (426) is engaged in "simultaneous acceptance and refusal of the organisation of sexuality under



patriarchal capitalism" (427). The simultaneous acceptance and refusal of the organisation of sexuality relates directly to the two struggles I discussed above—the struggle for equality within the system and the struggle to overthrow that system. All feminists, to some extent, participate in this dual struggle. However, it is not just a female fight. Men also fight the same battles – simultaneous acceptance and rejection of sexual organisation. That is why we should include male discourse within the context of feminism. Mitchell criticizes "Kristeva and her colleagues [for choosing] exclusively masculine texts" (428). But the texts which Kristeva and Cixous choose are male texts rather than masculine texts. The writings of Céline and Genêt, for example, are pertinent precisely because they undermine patriarchal order in language.

We should also, as "subjects in process," not mute or refuse the writings of the men whom Showalter calls "'white fathers'" (334). Feminists do not have to pay "homage" (334) to them. Rather, in discourse with them, feminists create a new discourse which produces an alternative symbolic universe. A refusal to speak phallogocentric language is a refusal to speak. But through speaking feminist masculine language, rather than Mitchell's "woman's masculine language" (427), men and women can create a new language. Mitchell asks, "what are we in the process of becoming" (430)? The answer is, I think, that we do not know. We can have goals and plans and alternative political and economic systems in mind. But, until we write a new symbolic into existence, we cannot know what it will be. And as a ground it will only form a temporary context of further becoming.

Is it possible to alter phallogocentric order, to overthrow it? Is it possible to establish a rhetorical context of feminism out of which we can act to build a new place on which to stand? Is it possible to refuse to define woman or man while welcoming any discourse that does just that? Is it possible to effect change from outside?

Lacan's discourse has been a positive resource for feminism, as an occasion both for agreement and for contradiction. However, Lacan's personal history is also a source of example and answer. Lacan's excommunication from the IPA is a good analogy for feminism. He, being neither within nor entirely without, produced a new discourse from his discourse with Freud. It was not acceptable to the dominant order. Yet while in exile, Lacan at least helped to create a new language for literary criticism, among other things. Not only did Lacan

create a new set of signifiers for the world outside psychoanalysis, I suspect that his discourse has also altered the world within. It seems likely that such people as Juliet Mitchell and Julia Kristeva, being well versed in Lacanian discourse and trained as psychoanalysts, will alter the world.

So, change is possible, as is the refusal to define Woman and its corollary of patriarchal or matriarchal sexual organization. I am still angered by the essentialism of Anderson and some feminists. But expressed essentialism is better than mute and naturalized essentialism. In discourse with its expression, we can create a third position which deconstructs such definition and can ensure a place for those of us who like *Beowulf*.

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