AMAZONS AND MOTHERS? MONIQUE WITTIG, HÉLÈNE CIXOUS AND THEORIES OF WOMEN'S WRITING

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American feminists dissatisfied with the images of women prevalent in our culture have attempted to rediscover women's heritage and to shape a new women's tradition. Their efforts may mask, however, a growing ambivalence toward the central tenet of modern feminism: that the oppression of women is not based upon biological differences but is a social, therefore changeable, condition.

Ideological differences between the theories of Monique Wittig and Hélène Cixous clarify this ambivalence.¹ In an evident reference to Wittig, Adrienne Rich warns: "There can be no more simplistic formula for women than to escape into some polarization such as 'Mothers or Amazons,' 'matriarchal clan or guerilleres.' "² A polarization may be no less inevitable for being simplistic. I have chosen Wittig's images of "Amazons" and "Mothers" as metaphors for these two theories of writing to help articulate the tension between the personal need for a cultural expression of women's experience—a "room of our own"—and the political need to resist in all its forms the siren song of "women's nature."

Note on Terminology

One must be careful in choosing the terms to use when discussing Wittig's and Cixous's theories about women and writing. Wittig opposes the use of "feminist" or "women's writing," as we shall see. Cixous rejects "feminism" as too "male." She coined the term "écriture féminine," but "feminine" has connotations in English absent in the French. I am forced to sacrifice symmetry and elegance for clarity. I will use "lesbian writing" or "political writing" (with quotation marks) for Wittig, and "woman's writing" to translate "écriture féminine." The words feminine, feminist, women, and lesbian retain their ordinary English meaning when not set off by quotation marks.

Monique Wittig—Writing as Political Action

The rapport between women and language within an androcentric culture is especially problematic in the works of Monique Wittig. While she feels it is imperative to write female experience in order to bring it to consciousness and so insert it into symbolic discourse, she aims ultimately to eliminate the very notion of "woman." To create a "woman's writing" or "woman's language" would perpetuate the very duality "man/woman" which maintains women as an oppressed class. Writing as a function of a female subject's relation to language must confront the structures of masculine culture, including the very structure that defines humans in terms of two castes—"men" and "women." In so doing, "political writing" must create the means to express a new culture not founded upon sexual difference.

Wittig insists that biological differences have no meaning outside the historically determined discourse of our patriarchal culture.

The fundamental difference, any fundamental difference (including sexual difference) between categories of individuals, any difference constituting con-

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2Monique Wittig, "One is not Born a Woman," Feminist Issues 1, No. 2 (1981), pp. 47-54.
cepts of opposition, is a difference belonging to a political, economic, ideological order.\(^5\)

While feminists generally affirm this politically, Wittig notes that there is an underlying division within the movement. One group, rooted in the psychology of “difference,” insists that women are inherently different from (superior to) men. This includes those lesbian feminists who identify with “matriarchal values” such as nonviolence and maternal nurturance (“One is not Born a Woman,” p. 48). The other group refuses biological determinism, and Wittig takes this position to its logical conclusion: one must abolish the very notion of “woman.”

Lesbian is the only concept I know of which is beyond the categories of sex (woman and man), because the designated subject (lesbian) is not a woman, either economically, or politically, or ideologically. For what makes a woman is a specific social relation to a man, a relation that we have previously called servitude, . . . a relation which lesbians escape by refusing to become or to stay heterosexual. (“One is not Born a Woman,” p. 53)

The only societies to have abolished “sexage,” the oppression of women, are lesbian societies, and it is from this perspective that Wittig writes.\(^6\) Hence the terms “lesbian writing” and “political writing” describe Wittig’s practice, since they express a consciousness of the subversion inherent in a culture that abolishes the androcentric structure of sexual difference.\(^7\)

While insisting that “woman” is a political class rather than a biological entity, Wittig is conscious of the importance of the female body in the development of feminist awareness. Unlike proponents of “woman’s writing,” she never uses the body as a metaphor for the act of writing. I know of no author for whom the body is so insistently concrete. Indeed, one of the primary tasks of “lesbian writing” is to strip the female body of its heavy burden of metaphor and imagery imposed by male culture and to trace the steps necessary to restore the body intact to women.

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\(^6\)Colette Guillaumin, “The Practice of Power and Belief in Nature: Part I: The Appropriation of Women,” Feminist Issues 1, No. 2 (1981), 17–18, defines “sexage” as “the material appropriation of the class of women by the class of men.” The term is coined by analogy with “esclavage”—slavery.

\(^7\)Wittig proposed these terms in a telephone communication, June 23, 1982.
In *Les Guérillères* this process begins when the collective heroine “elles” ("the women") lists traditional metaphors for the vulva and opposes to them the “feminaries” — books containing accurate descriptions of the vulva (pp. 22-23). Symbols and myths are reinterpreted as metaphoric representations of sexual organs: The Grail is the “spherical cup containing the blood” (p. 45), the Golden Fleece pubic hair (p. 44), and so forth. The critic Hélène Wenzel points out that even at this early stage it is not the womb but the vulva that is central: the women must rescue not reproduction, but nonreproductive sexuality from mystification. The women take “proper pride in that which has for long been regarded as the emblem of fecundity” but is no longer primarily regarded as maternal (p. 31).

But the glorification of rediscovered sexuality is a temporary measure until the heroines are freed from ignorance about their sexuality. Wittig recognizes that a simple reversal from negative to positive values does not challenge the definition of woman as “the sex.” The entire body must be defetishized if sexuality is to be part of the total subject. Freed from fragmentation of the body, the “guérillères” value all physical functions equally. They are strong, violent, passionate, and always sensual. Wittig’s language is replete with colors, textures, odors, movement, and song. The fact that men continue to view them as “the sex” is turned to their advantage. Before a besieging male army, the women bare their breasts aggressively. Taking this as an act of sexual submission, the men advance close to the women and are annihilated (pp. 99-100).

The reintegration of the body called for in *Les Guérillères* becomes the main subject of *The Lesbian Body*. In the prefatory note, Wittig explains the relationship between body and writing:

The body of the text subsumes all the words of the female body. *Le Corps Lesbien* attempts to achieve the affirmation of its reality. . . . To recite one’s own body, to recite the body of the other, is to recite the words of which the book is made up. (pp. ix-x)

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8The feminine plural pronoun “elles” unfortunately has no good English equivalent. The translator uses “the women” but in light of Wittig’s antipathy toward that word, it is an awkward choice.

Interspersed between the passages of the book are lists of body parts, beginning with:


The lovers dismember and reconstruct each other in a constant flow of desire at its most physical. In one passage, the poet literally resurrects the beloved by putting together her dismembered body so lovingly that life returns (pp. 28–29).

*The Lesbian Body* has provoked marked hostility in many readers who object most often to its perceived violence. I believe the negative reactions stem from the very subversiveness of Wittig’s enterprise. Wittig has fulfilled the demand to “write the body,” and this act uncovers deep ambiguity about the female body in feminist ideology.¹⁰

First, the work, with its literal transcription and exploration of every part of the female body, attacks our “feminine” revulsion at materiality. It is ironic that women, whose lives revolve around care of the body, as Guillaumin has shown, have interiorized disgust at the body.¹¹ A lesbian writer who celebrates those parts of the body—the breast, the genitals—already acceptable in male discourse does not jar our sensibilities. Wittig’s text, by presenting every part and product of the body as desirable, creates a new discourse so radically different from previous literature that we react violently. Yet it is precisely this reaction among even lesbian feminists that indicates the value of the text. Wittig forces us to question our acceptance of male fragmentation of the body into discrete objects labeled “desirable” and “undesirable.”

Second, the text refuses metaphorization of the body. In perhaps the most subversive gesture of a subversive text, Wittig overturns the basic conventions of Western love poetry. Such poetry (generally by men about women) is shown, in comparison, to deny consistently the real body. The poet’s task is to transform via metaphor lips into rubies, eyes into jewels, breasts into snow. Implicit in such metaphor is the rejection of the actual woman as inadequately desirable. Even in rep-

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¹¹Guillaumin, pp. 12–14.
resentational fiction, the female body is either hidden behind metaphor or, more often, treated with contempt.\textsuperscript{12}

Wittig's lovers reverse this literary disembodiment. No part of the body remains unloved. Not only the breasts and genitals so dear to male writers, but the intestines, the muscles, the organs, the very bones themselves are invested with erotic power. The result is often a startlingly lyrical love poetry.

Finally, the text attacks the mystique of passivity. In the ideology of neo-femininity, passivity has become valued as "nonviolence," a quality absent from Wittig's Sapphic isles.\textsuperscript{13} Her lovers are as capable of rage as of tenderness, and no emotion is censured. Violence is present even in the insertion of the lesbian body and lesbian subject into language, an act which cannot fail to disrupt language. Wittig uses a slash in all first person pronouns ("j/e," "m/a") to represent that violence. As Marks points out:

\textit{Le corps lesbien} is a textual and cultural gamble. It is a courageous aspiration toward the creation of a linguistic behavior that would, by its very existence, prepare the way for the undomestication of women.\textsuperscript{14}

This vision of the body as a re-integrated whole also underlies Wittig's criticism of neo-femininity. She and Sande Zeig, in \textit{Lesbian Peoples}, refuse to define women by biological function. They differentiate between the "Amazons" and the "mothers":

"During the Golden Age, everyone in the terrestrial garden was called amazon. Mothers were not distinct from daughters... Then came a time when some daughters, and some mothers did not like wandering anymore in the terrestrial garden. They began to stay in the cities and most often they watched their abdomens grow. This activity brought them, it is said, great satisfaction." (p. 108)

Although borrowing this distinction from Helen Diner's classic \textit{Mothers and Amazons}, in which the Amazons represent a degeneration of a

\textsuperscript{12}Kate Millett's \textit{Sexual Politics} (New York: Avon, 1970) remains one of the best analyses of male depictions of the female body. The numerous works on pornography in recent years also demonstrate the negative view of women in male writing. See, for instance, Andrea Dworkin, \textit{Pornography: Men Possessing Women} (New York: Perigee Books, 1979).

\textsuperscript{13}Even "passivity" has been elevated to a radical virtue by the neo-feminine movement. Speaking of Marguerite Duras's work, Christiane Makward says that passivity is a militant refusal of male structures. "Structures du silence/du délire: Marguerite Duras/Hélène Cixous," \textit{Poétique} No. 35 (Sept. 1978), 317.

primitive matriarchy, Wittig and Zeig reverse the terms.\textsuperscript{15} Their Amazons retain the “original harmony” while the mothers’ cult of maternity ultimately leads to degeneration and slavery. This fall is the direct result of having defined themselves as “women”: “those who have not given birth, those who give birth, and those who will give birth.”\textsuperscript{16} The Amazons, refusing to privilege the maternal function, are forced to take up arms, to defend themselves against the mothers, and to preserve the original language and harmony:

For them the ancient name amazon had retained its full meaning. From now on it signified something more, she who guards the harmony. From then on, there were amazons in every age, on every continent, island, ice bank. To the amazons of all these times, we owe having been able to enter the Glorious Age. (p. 5)

The primary relationship in all of Wittig’s works is not that of mother and child but of “amantes” or peer lovers. The term “companion lovers” chosen by Wittig and Zeig for the English version of \textit{Lesbian Peoples} expresses the dual nature of this bond. Like the I/Thou of \textit{The Lesbian Body}, these women are lovers in the physical sense, but they are also passionate comrades in the adventure of creating a totally new form of interpersonal relationship. They live in peoples and “gather from lesbians all of the culture, the past, the inventions, the songs and the ways of life” (p. 35). For what male culture has repressed is not, as some feminists assert, biological functions of pregnancy and birth, but a tradition of autonomous female culture preserved by outlawed lesbians and now being recovered by the present-day “Amazons.”

By replacing the mother-child dyad with the tribal commune as the social unit, Wittig’s works at one stroke eliminate relations of inequality and power, expressed in psychoanalytic terms in the Oedipal conflict. The implications of this displacement have not been fully explored.


\textsuperscript{16}For reasons related to differences in French and American feminism, there are often segments left out of either the French or English version of \textit{Lesbian Peoples}. The passage cited does not appear in the English. The complete citation in French is: “Quant au mot femme qui était supposé recouvrir tout le concept de leur race, et désignait à la fois celles qui n’ont pas enfanté, celles qui enfanteront et celles qui enfanteront, il était extrêmement étrange pour les amazones, tout comme son contexte.” \textit{Brouillon}, pp. 171-72.
“Desire,” and “jouissance” or intense (sexual) pleasure, are central concepts in contemporary French thought. In many theories derived from Lacan’s reworking of Freudian concepts of access to discourse, the “symbolic order” becomes a function of the family drama expressed in the Oedipal stage. But “desire” is often determined to be desire of the “phallus,” which is for Lacan the primary signifier in the symbolic order. Even women such as Cixous who criticize this theory retain the maternal (usually heterosexual) family model to explain desire. Richman criticizes the roles of “desire,” “jouissance,” and the related notion of the “Festival” in French thought, but she nonetheless shows that Cixous’s “desire” is located in “those areas of experience systematically excluded from male discourse: the special relation to the other which for women is the involvement with the child, the depiction of women in pregnancy. . . .”

Desire and love for Wittig do not arise from or reside in the (patriarchal) family constellation. Men are almost totally absent from her work—there is no father whose “name” can control discourse, as in the Lacanian model. Mothers and daughters enjoy total autonomy and the little girls are as passionate and free as the adults. For the Amazons of Lesbian Peoples there is a relation of total reciprocity and equality:

DAUGHTER Designates a genetic bond between the companion lovers from which comes the expression “like mother, like daughter.” As a result of this relationship, daughters are their mother’s lovers and mothers are their daughters’ lovers. (p. 41)

Ironically, it is the mothers, obsessed with pregnancy and maternity, for whom “daughter” is an insult hurled at the free-roaming Amazons, reviled as “daughter, eternal child, she who does not assume her destiny” (p. 5).

Having eliminated the family, Wittig liberates female desire from its possessive, privatized forms. In the collectivities of the (plural) heroines, sexuality circulates freely, never segregated from other activities. Many of the most eloquent passages depict the diffusion of passion throughout the group. The rituals and festivals are typified as sensual, passionate, and joyous.

You are present at the ceremony of the vulvas lost and found. Newly-arrived in the island you are unfamiliar with the ritual. I make you sit on the grass

beside m/e, I try to keep you informed m/y voice barely making itself heard amidst the sound of the drums the flutes the strident voices. The vulvas are represented by blue yellow green black violet red butterflies, their bodies are the clitorises, their wings are the labia, their fluttering represents the throbbing of the vulvas. Like you m/y refund one m/y dearest the butterflies return from a long journey. (The Lesbian Body, p. 134)

"Jouissance" is not mystical and private, but concrete and shared in a cultural bonding.

The abolition of the family in favor of the lover bond has as a concomitant result the absence of the Freudian/Lacanian unconscious. "Madness," so valued by many French critics in the works of Artaud and others, holds no attraction as a revolutionary act for Wittig. Her "companion lovers" are warned that, if they have an unconscious at all, they must beware of the "traffickers of the unconscious" (Lesbian Peoples, p. 157). There is no confessional aspect to Wittig's work, no need to work through repression like a patient on a couch. Women's oppression results not from repression of the personal unconscious, but from very conscious political mechanisms which have alienated women from themselves and each other, and which have silenced women's discourse.

I propose a critical distinction between the repressed and the oppressed. Repression (in the psychological sense) implies knowledge that one has but chooses not to remember because it is too threatening to the ego. Oppression is a state in which one is prevented by others from acquiring or acting upon knowledge which one needs and wants.

Women are not repressed, but oppressed. In The Opoponax, Wittig traces the acquisition of knowledge by a young girl who can only constitute herself as a subject who says "I" after she has discovered her love for another girl. In Les Guérillères, a similar process occurs for an entire group of women. Only at the end, after absorbing the knowledge of the women, can the narrator fully integrate herself into the class of women and use the first person plural pronoun "we" (p. 144). The women must first exhort her to remember when she was free and strong, "Or, failing that, invent" (p. 89). They use the examples of the witches, the Amazons, and other heroic women to remind the narrator/reader that her oppression is unnatural. They point out that men have suppressed the texts of women to keep her in ignorance.

Hence, in her works, Wittig sets out to provide the history and traditions that will deliver us from ignorance. Writing overcomes oppression not by serving as a catharsis for individual rage and impotence, but by inspiring political action through the evocation of a cul-
tural heritage of strength and autonomy. Some critics have viewed her works as a new "mythology" for women, but Wittig rejects that idea. Rather, she presents us with a series of texts that, by compiling a body of knowledge about women's true experience, serve as antidotes to the cultural myths that have inhibited action. She is restoring a lost language which had been obscured by the oppressively loud voice of patriarchy. Thus, the names listed in Les Guérillères serve as shorthand allusions to that mythology which, when reread from a feminist position of knowledge, reveals the psychological and political mechanisms of male oppression.

If the body of "texts"—written and cultural—inherited from masculine culture is to be exposed as phallicentric and replaced with a new language and writing, Wittig must recreate the relationship of women to discourse. From the beginning, the modern feminist movement has confronted the problem of language. At risk of oversimplification, one can trace three basic positions in response to this problem. The first focuses upon women's silence. Women have been systematically excluded from public discourse, and language reflects that exclusion. Women have been quite literally "seen" as objects of male discourse, but never "heard" as subjects of a female discourse. A second view is that a women's speech characterized by specialized vocabulary and syntactic forms has developed. A variant of this is the claim that women "speak" through nonverbal forms, of which hysteria and madness are extreme examples. The third view holds that women have been forced to accept the appropriation of language by men, but have no inherent alienation from it. They have only to seize language and turn it to their own uses.

These three views seem to correspond to what the editors of Questions féministes have outlined as three stages in feminist consciousness: "femininity" which accepts women's exclusion from the world of social discourse; "feminitude" which valorizes difference and the creation of women's language; and "feminism," or reappropriation of all forms of discourse to eliminate the ghettoization of women.  


20Editors of Questions féministes, "Variations on some Common Themes,"
In Wittig’s works, one can find acknowledgment of the historical appearance of each stage. Yet she rejects the goal of creating a separate “women’s language.” Since language is the first and primary social contract through which the individual inserts herself into culture, women, she believes, cannot allow it to belong to either sex. To abandon language because it presently reflects masculinist structures is to abandon transformation of all sexist structures in favor of a marginal women’s culture. If sexual caste is to be eliminated, language must reflect a new social order.

Accordingly Wittig recognizes the present sexism of language, but rather than deplore the admittedly masculine structures of French, she uses latent structures within it to create her new language. Her works, while extremely daring in form, are very lucid, controlled, and correct in grammar and vocabulary. She rarely indulges in the puns, wordplay, and neologisms characteristic of writers trying to create a new language. Her nonfiction is a model of almost classical essay style and clarity.

Yet, while eschewing surface violation of the language, her style presents profound transformations within the language. “Lesbian writing” restructures the meanings of words and of literary forms because it is written from a social position in which masculinist thought has been nullified.

One important concept of Wittig’s is that of the “lacunae” that explain women’s historical silence and indicate the way to form a new language. Masculine language has become distorted because it leaves out women’s experience. The insertion of women into the “gaps” must radically alter the relationships that create meaning in language. In the final poem of Les Guérillères, she writes: “LACUAE LACUAE / AGAINST TEXTS / AGAINST MEANING / WHICH IS TO WRITE VIOLENCE / OUTSIDE THE TEXT / IN ANOTHER WRITING / . . . ACTION OVERTHROW” (p. 143). The definition of “dictionary” in the dictionary that is Lesbian Peoples gives further weight to this concept.

The arrangement of the dictionary allows us to eliminate those elements which have distorted our history during the dark ages, from the Iron Age to the Glorious Age. This arrangement could be called lacunary. [It also permits utilization of the lacunae as litotes in a sentence where one says the least to say the most.] The assemblage of words, what dictated their choice, the fiction of the fables also constitute lacunae and therefore are acting upon reality.

Feminist Issues 1, No. 1 (1980), 15-17. This important manifesto is reprinted in Marks and Courtivron, pp. 212-30.
The dictionary in general attempts to eliminate metaphorical procedures, acting out of unconsciousness.] The dictionary is, however, only a rough draft. (p. 43. Bracketed sentences were omitted in the English text—translation mine.)

The lacunae are absences which signify: the absence of a discourse—women's in male discourse, male discourse in Wittig—becomes the sign of an ideological order. What is missing prior to Les Guérillères is the female presence in language and culture, symbolized in the text by the circle O: whatever men "have not been able to fill with their words of proprietors and possessors, this can be found in the gaps, in all that which is not a continuation of their discourse, in the zero, the O, the perfect circle that you invent to imprison them and to overthrow them" (p. 114). Les Guérillères fills that gap by articulating what has been missing from male discourse. The Lesbian Body is also a "filling in" of the missing parts of the female body censured by heterosexual institutions and literature.

In the dictionary of Lesbian Peoples, it is male culture that is eliminated from the text. Along with this disappearance goes the absence of metaphor and of the unconscious. Just as in the poem absence from "text" and "meaning" leads to action overthrowing male domination "outside the text in another writing," in the dictionary we see the overthrow of male language by "lesbian language."

It is consistent with Wittig's insistence upon concrete political reality that her writing, though rich in symbols and similes, goes far toward banishing metaphor. As the example of The Lesbian Body demonstrates in its reversal of the metaphorizing process of male love poetry, metaphor is always in some sense a denial of the word that is replaced by another. But metaphor disguises this absence with the presence of the substituted term. Because Wittig's writing is political, she consistently marks the absent term, calling it to our attention to force us into an evaluation of the ideological implications of "absence" from discourse and language.

"Lesbian writing" therefore acknowledges the historical silence of women and seeks to correct it by filling in the gaps. At the same time, Wittig silences male discourse to allow textual and linguistic space for the development of the new language. Yet it is clear that such female discourse must not become a feminine interiorized monologue. Two passages in Lesbian Peoples cited at length below explicitly condemn the development of a feminine language.

"It was also during the Silver Age that the languages diversified. After the amazons had stopped being a link between the mother cities, the mother lan-

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language changed. The mothers modified the original tongue by introducing
the sacred into the "meaning," confusing the basic literal sense with their
symbols. . . . When during the following ages communication was restored
between the mothers, they did not understand one another and would under-
take infinite exegesis and decoding of meanings because even between them
suspicion arose." (p. 78)

"In these languages [of the mothers] the meanings were redoubled and mul-
tiplied, through redundancies which functioned like a gallery of mirrors. They
were languages completely adjusted to the mothers who lived in permanent
representation. The languages were thus entered into the ritual, they became
the ritual, incantatory, sacred, evocative, obsessionnal and tyrannical.

"Less well known is the original language of 'letters and numbers' which
the ancient amazons did not relinquish. It was, without doubt, a language
at the same time much more simple and much more complicated than those
which were known later. The legend says that the old language was capable
of creating life or of 'striking' death. The legend says that the old language
could displace mountains or, in any case, enormous stones. The legend says
that the old language could stir up storms from the sea or appease them.
Nothing is known anymore of these 'letters' and of these 'numbers.' The
significations and the phonemes had without doubt a different relation
between them. One cannot imagine that this language was composed of 'sen-
tences' with a construction and a syntax as rigid, rigorous, repressive as those
we know. The legend had been transmitted by the mothers, the great mothers
who had deformed the original language and then realizing what they had
done felt full of regret for the past." (p. 94)

The language of the mothers and the Amazonian original lan-
guage differ in important points. The former is characterized by the
multiplication of meanings, of representationalism, increasingly di-
verted from reality. In a jibe at the hermetic language characteristic
of many French theorists, Wittig says such language is unable to com-
unicate, necessitating "infinite exegesis." Terms like "rigid,"
"obsessional," "repressive," and "tyrannical" convey a sense of entrap-
ment within a hall of mirrors. By contrast, the original language con-
sists of concrete signifiers — "letters and numbers" — that have a direct
relation to reality. This language not only communicates clearly, it
acts to alter the physical world with almost magical force. I think we
can assume that these passages indicate an ideal of "lesbian writing."
Not a new creation, but the recovery of an original mode of discourse
lost when women identified themselves with motherhood, this language
would act immediately upon the cultural environment to restore the
lost harmony.

Rosenfeld has discussed at length the techniques Wittig uses to
make of French a language that can convey the power of "lesbian writ-
ing”: the use of the present tense to abolish time distinctions; the passive voice; a concrete vocabulary; repetition; multiplication of the female subject; the transformation of intransitive into transitive verbs; and the elimination of grammatical forms preempted by the masculine gender. Wolfe also notes the use of contradiction and overdetermination to free language from hierarchies, and Ostrovsky summarizes her techniques for creating feminist symbols.\textsuperscript{21} I will not duplicate their analyses, but I wish to point out how Wittig uses cultural traditions in literary language simultaneously to critique male writing and to develop “lesbian writing.”

Wittig recognizes that one cannot invent a new culture from scratch. In order to eliminate masculine hegemony over discourse, which has been internalized by women, she must reappropriate Western culture for women. Hence her extensive use of mythology and allusions to literature. It is a radically subversive act to rewrite the myths of our culture in the female voice. Barthes has demonstrated the extent to which cultural myths are reactionary forces because they clothe ideological positions in the guise of the “natural.”\textsuperscript{22} By recasting central figures from a feminist perspective, Wittig forces the reader to re-examine the masculinist bias underlying our literary and cultural heritage.\textsuperscript{23}

For the reader, the names in \textit{Les Guérillères} evoke that heritage, but the new context shifts their meaning. When Desdemona displaces Othello as the center of attention, a restructuring of our perception of heterosexual love occurs. The feminization of male names can cause more radical shifts in the reader’s perceptions. Given the powerful force of Christianity as support for patriarchal institutions, one cannot innocently read a phrase like this one set in the context of lesbian love: “m/y depthless one m/y veil of Lesbos your face all flat painted on the linen of Veronica like the anguished features of Christa the much-crucified” (\textit{The Lesbian Body}, p. 32).


\textsuperscript{23}For more on these techniques, see Crowder, “The Semiotic Functions of Ideology in Literary Discourse,” \textit{Bucknell Review} 27, No. 1 (1982), 156–68.
Translating cultural myths into the feminine voice can highlight the underlying power of such myths. The Eve myth in particular has shaped Western ideas about women. In Les Guérillères, Eve is a Medusa-Eurydice being guided from the hell of ignorance by her counselor snake Orpheus. God and Adam are of course omitted, which changes a transgression into a positive quest for knowledge. In Lesbian Peoples, Eve is paired not with Adam in a heterosexual hierarchy, but with Lilith, her companion-lover (p. 52).

A further revolt against male language reverses the semantic content of key words. We have noted how Wittig transforms body parts normally viewed with disgust into erotic images in The Lesbian Body. The dictionary format allows Wittig and Zeig to redefine words systematically in Lesbian Peoples in a way that violates our expectations. “Woman,” “wife,” “mother” become extremely pejoratively, while words used as insults in male culture, “amazon,” “dyke,” and “witch,” express great approval. Hence, the “Red Dykes” call themselves that “in sheer modesty” (p. 132).

Finally, Wittig’s works to date constitute a restructuring of genres. Wenzel has illustrated how The Opoponax is a new bildungsroman, Les Guérillères a reworking of the epic tradition, The Lesbian Body a female “Song of Songs,” and Lesbian Peoples a new lexicon and history for a new society.24 The formal dislocations that occur when a female subject replaces a male go far beyond the simple substitution of a heroine for a hero. When compared with Wittig’s works, traditional genres stand revealed as grounded in sexist ideology.

Wittig is under no illusion that writing alone will transform masculinist society. The Amazon for her is not a romantic figure evoked in nostalgia for a prepatriarchal past. She is the activist lesbian feminist of the present fighting to transform the future. Wittig is aware of the danger that writing can substitute for confrontation, as women turn inward, lost in utopian dreams or the exploration of the unconscious.

“Lesbian writing” is a tool for transforming the female subject’s relation to all cultural systems which are, by definition, political.25 Transformation of language and writing is a revolutionary act only insofar as it is integrated into a comprehensive political revolt against the feminine as well as the masculine. To date, only lesbian society has achieved this level of personal and political awareness. The

“guérillères” say, “let those who call for a new language first learn violence. They say, let those who want to change the world first seize all the rifles” (p. 85). Lesbians, who have refused to become or to remain “women,” must write the new world with their bodies as well as their tongues.

The Mothers: Writing the Birth of the Self

Hélène Cixous is perhaps the best known of a number of women who in various ways support the development of “woman’s writing.” While one must derive Wittig’s theory of writing primarily from her fictional works, Cixous has published a number of manifestos delineating her conception of “woman’s writing” and language. I will rely primarily upon such works, using her fiction for illustration.

If I have chosen to use Wittig and Zeig's appellation of “mothers” for adherents of “woman’s writing,” it is not because Cixous is determinedly pronatalist! Yet despite occasional disclaimers, Cixous views motherhood as a primary trait of women, as we shall see. But is maternity a metaphor or a biological act for Cixous? A hesitation between metaphor and reality, the symbolic and the lived, permeates her writings.

Like Wittig, Cixous sees women’s relationship to the body as a central hurdle in the drive to eliminate repression of women. But Cixous’s theory of “woman’s writing” is based upon a vacillation between the body as concrete object and the body as a signifier in the social discourse of the unconscious.

Cixous constantly exhorts women to “write the body.”

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27 Cixous is extremely prolific. Below are some of the major manifestos. Fictional works will be noted upon first reference. All subsequent references appear in the text. “Castration or Decapitation,” introd. and trans. Annette Kuhn, Signs 7, No. 1 (1981), 41-55; “The Laugh of the Medusa.” Signs 1, No. 4 (1976), 875-93 (“Le Rire de la Méduse,” L’Arc No. 61, 39-54); with Catherine Clément, La jeune née (Paris: UGE 10/18, 1973); “Rethinking Differences,” in Homosexualities and French Literature, pp. 70-86; La venue à l’écriture; and Christiane Makward, “Interview with Hélène Cixous,” Sub-Stance No. 13 (1976), 19-37.
By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her. . . . Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time.

Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth. ("The Laugh of the Medusa," p. 880)

"Writing the body" is an injunction to liberate the unconscious. Women, alienated from language, have been literally silenced. Unable to sublimate the libido into cultural achievements, woman is physically incarnate. "More so than men who are coaxed toward social success, toward sublimation, women are body. More body, hence more writing" ("The Laugh of the Medusa," p. 886). Cixous maintains that the female body is also not fragmented, but a whole in which each part is a whole:

not simple partial objects but a moving, limitlessly changing ensemble, a cosmos tirelessly traversed by Eros, an immense astral space not organized around any one sun that’s any more of a star than the others. ("The Laugh of the Medusa," p. 889)

As this passage shows, the movement from the concrete body to cosmic metaphors is characteristic. Yet, despite such statements affirming the unity of the body, in fact it appears most often in pieces: the breast, the abdomen, the mouth, the vagina, the head. Whereas Wittig refers to the entire body in concrete terms, Cixous most often focuses upon the vagina and the breast—the source of the "white ink" with which women will write—as roots for her metaphors. Liquid products such as milk and blood abound: when she thinks of woman’s body, she says, "I think in terms of overflow, in terms of an energy which spills over, the flow of which cannot be controlled" ("Rethinking Differences," p. 71). The body serves as a pretext for the symbolic. In her fiction, dreams and other devices serve to make this transition from the physical to the metaphoric. In the highly erotic text Souffles, for instance, the narrator dreams of climbing a tree which grows as she climbs, helping her reach the stars. She gradually becomes aware that the tree is her lover’s penis and the sequence ends in a bout of love-making which in turn becomes a flight to the stars. Similar dreamlike voyages in search of the lover occur in Portrait du soleil.28

In some cases, metaphoric expression is used to get back to the concrete. Cixous's recent writing has been influenced by the work of the Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector. Cixous admires Lispector's ability to strip mundane objects of cultural meaning and make the reader see them clearly, a process requiring a precise attention peculiar to women. This theme is developed fully in To Live the Orange, a text which poses the problem of the relationship between political action, represented by Iranian feminists resisting repression by Islamic revolutionaries, and “woman's writing.” Cixous, led to introspection by Lispector's work, finds herself guilty of becoming separated from reality by her quest for self-expression. The orange becomes a complex symbol for the concrete reality of women who must act openly against oppression.

While we are trying to live a rose, oranges are refusing to let the veil be imposed upon them, oranges that we have never seen are going out in the streets of Oran, while we are so slowly discovering the superabundance of ways of rose-being, all that a rose can tell us; fifty thousand roses, less-veiled than ever are manifesting themselves, in the center of Teherange, walk abreast more than unveiled, exposed, in the center of religions, refusing to let themselves be iranized, oranges of a modern courage daring to give themselves as food for thought, piercing the thousandnight, daring to oppose the repressing of everyrose. (p. 96)

This rich passage suggests that knowing the orange as a physical entity leads to knowing women as a political presence. The image of unveiling, revealing what is behind the mask of literature represented by the “thousand and one nights,” seems almost to denounce metaphorization by its very overdetermined use of metaphors! When one contrasts the political activism of the Iranians with the luxurious introspection of Western women slowly exploring the “rose” of femininity, this would almost seem a rebuke to the quest for “woman's writing” itself. Yet even with her insistence upon political reality in this later work, the physical body is curiously absent, veiled in abstraction and symbolism. The difference between To Live the Orange and The Lesbian Body could scarcely be greater.

Such abstraction comes about because the body is only a sign of the difference between male and female libidos and psychology. Nearly

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every critic elaborates Cixous’s theory of difference, expressed succinctly by Richman: “To write, then, is to be possessed by the difference [between man and woman] which is the source of passionate attraction.”

That libidinal difference originates in physiological differences is evident in Cixous’s theory. She contrasts the masculine, oriented upon a single privileged organ—the penis—with the feminine, which is diffused throughout the body and multiplied infinitely. The “jouissance” or ecstasy which is the source of “woman’s writing” derives from this multiplicity of pleasure in the female libido. Ideally the two libidos should exchange energy, augmenting pleasure, until the repressive “masculine economy” is ruptured and both partners break free of phallocentric restraints. Images of flight and of theft, based upon the dual meaning of the verb “voleur” (“to fly” and “to steal”) translate this process. In Souffles, it is Jean Genet, as the character “Jenais” (“I am born”) who leads the narrator into this flight and theft.

But masculinist repression prevents this breaking away into flight. Cixous attacks caustically (and wittily) “phallocentrism” which makes a fetish of the penis. Male thinkers have created the phallus as the center of discourse and have incarnated “lack,” via the castration complex, as the motive of desire. Desire and the very symbolic order—including language—that organizes perception have therefore been profoundly distorted, to the detriment of men and women:

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 told: idolize it, that which you cannot brandish. 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. (“The Laugh of the Medusa,” p. 884)

If difference is inherent between men and women, opposition is cultural and results from the privileging of one over the other. Phallic culture has created language and has silenced the expression of the female body and the female libido.

“Woman’s writing” will rescue the feminine from this silence. Critics uniformly describe the libido that must be expressed in terms

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31 Richman, p. 75.

of maternity. Andermatt seems to imitate Cixous's own hyperbolic style to describe "woman's writing" thus:

For the woman the book is so fecund and so ubiquitous it has literally only to inundate the male with its amniotic flow of words.

Conversely to the male who at best can only spray his words, the writer-as-mother gives birth to and "nourishes" her text, at once giving milk and accouching it.33

But is this maternity derived from the physical potential to give birth as the primary mark of difference, or is it a metaphor? Cixous is ambivalent. While the vocabulary of motherhood dominates her writing, she is defensive about charges of biological determinism, which she counters with a celebration of pregnancy as the moment when a woman becomes a woman:

We are not going to refuse, if it should happen to strike our fancy, the unsurpassed pleasures of pregnancy... For if there's one thing that's been repressed here's just the place to find it; in the taboo of the pregnant woman... when pregnant [she]... takes on intrinsic value as a woman in her own eyes and, undeniably, acquires body and sex. ("The Laugh of the Medusa," p. 891)

It is worth noting that Cixous feels motherhood and pregnancy have been repressed by male culture, while Wittig shows maternity as the very definition of women in our culture. It is clear here that Cixous is referring to physical maternity, but elsewhere she seems to contradict herself:

It is beyond doubt that femininity derives from the body, from the anatomical, the biological difference, from a whole system of drives which are radically different for women than for men. But none of this exists in a pure state; it is always, immediately "already spoken," caught in representation, produced culturally. This does not prevent the libidinal economy of woman from functioning in a specific manner which modifies her rapport with reality. ("Interview," p. 28)

Elsewhere she says that Freud's famous "anatomy is destiny" was death to women: there is no essential nature, only historical and cultural structures (La Jeune née, pp. 150-52). This seems to imply that

33Verena Andermatt, "Hélène Cixous and the Uncovering of a Feminine Language." Women and Literature 7, No. 1, 40, 44.
maternity is a cultural role (which men could fulfill as well).\textsuperscript{34} But Cixous also says it is the maternal body that is the source of "woman's writing": "woman is always in a certain sense 'mother' for herself and for the other" (La venue à l'écriture, p. 56, translation mine). Even in a lesbian relation, the female couple "gives birth" to the text.\textsuperscript{35}

Despite the constant shifting between the biological and the cultural sources of Cixous's "mother," it is clear that potential maternity is a sign of womanhood. I must agree with Jones's assessment of the essentialist trap underlying such thinking:

I myself feel highly flattered by Cixous's praise for the nurturant perceptions of women, but when she speaks of a drive toward gestation, I begin to hear echoes of the coercive glorification of motherhood that has plagued women for centuries.\textsuperscript{36}

Unlike Wittig, then, Cixous views the division of people into the categories "man" and "woman" as a natural result of biological differences. Liberation from phallocentrism would not negate these differences, but would place them into an equal relationship by reestablishing bisexuality. Richman has explained in detail the difference between Cixous's bisexuality and the more common notion of androgyny.\textsuperscript{37} The fusion of masculine and feminine traits in an androgynous bisexuality would be a sort of castration producing an asexual being. Rejecting this idea Cixous says:

I oppose [to it] the other bisexuality on which every subject not enclosed in the false theater of phallocentric representationalism has founded his/her erotic universe. Bisexuality: that is, each one's location in self (répérage en soi) of the presence—variously manifest and insistent according to each person, male or female—of both sexes, non-exclusion either of the difference or of one sex, and, from this "self-permission," multiplication of the effects of the inscription of desire, over all parts of my body and the other body. ("The Laugh of the Medusa," p. 884)

This process takes place between the members of a couple rather than within the individual.

\textsuperscript{34}Makward, "Nouveau regard," p. 51, emphasizes that "woman's writing" does not mean writing by women only—men are quite capable of it.

\textsuperscript{35}Wenzel, p. 270.


\textsuperscript{37}Richman, pp. 67–69.
Because of historical repression, women have retained their bisexuality, while men have imprisoned themselves in monosexuality. Because female eroticism is not located in a single organ, women have escaped such reductionist thought and continued to desire all of their own bodies and all of the other body. This desire is depicted literally in *Souffles*, when the narrator and the man exchange bodies and roles in intercourse: “a violent pain in the pubis at the same time I feel an erection in an atrocious pain announce to me that we had broken through the difference” (p. 24, translation mine). When another person arrives, she doesn’t want to resume her “woman’s skin” which would separate her from the interchange of sexual difference that had become a dialectic between herself and the man (p. 27).

If Cixous proclaims the necessity of a return to a primordial bisexuality, her views on homosexuality are less clear. While it is not essential to creativity, there is, she suggests, no invention possible without a certain kind of homosexuality in the interplay of the masculine and feminine within the writer (*La Jeune née*, p. 154). It is Genet’s homosexuality which enables him to practice “woman’s writing.” But she condemns “lesbians” unequivocally, while praising “feminine homosexuality.” Both “feminists” and “lesbians” deny their femininity and want to be men. The “lesbian” becomes:

the latent “man-within,” a man who is reproduced, who reappears in a power situation. Phalocracy still exists, the phallus is still present in lesbianism. . . . there is a homosexuality which is entirely feminine and has nothing to do with heterosexuality, and which leaves no room for man such as he is. . . . It has lifted anchor and has completely entered into the feminine . . . And it all functions particularly on the level of non-power. (“Rethinking Differences,” pp. 74–75)

“Lesbians” repress the feminine and seek power, while Cixous accepts only that female homosexuality which values the feminine and non-power. This passage uncomfortably resembles a certain discourse current among American lesbian feminists who reject “power” as “unwomanly.” A political strategy of lesbian separatism as a means of

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38 The distinction some French women make between “lesbian” (“une lesbienne”) and “female homosexual” (“une homosexuelle”) is complicated. “Lesbienne” has a more political overtones, while “homosexuelle” refers more to one’s private lifestyle. The *Questions féministes* collective split in part over this issue. See Monique [Plaza’s] “Document” *La revue d’en face* Nos. 9–10 (1981) and following responses for a debate on this issue.
appropriating power is not in accord with Cixous's vision of a bisexual dialectic between men and women.\textsuperscript{39}

If Cixous's stance seems to accord with the vision of the mother, her Amazon is scarcely the kind of radical lesbian envisioned by Wittig. It is ironic that one of her rare allusions to the Amazon is determinedly heterosexual. In a lengthy homage to Kleist's \textit{Penthesilée}, seen as an example of "woman's writing," Cixous depicts the Amazon as warring only to win an egalitarian relationship with men:

They don't wage war to kill but to capture \textit{s'empoigner}. Astonishing capture of love, which places war at the mercy of love, and love at the mercy of violence... The Amazons go forth to gather men as they gather roses, for the festival that awaits the vanquished. Conquer, yes, but in order to marry. (\textit{La Jeune née}, p. 216, translation mine)

These images indicate that the object of her search is to discover a rapport between men and women which would allow them to achieve bisexuality.

If a transcendence of separation is expressed in writing, it is because writing serves to release the inherent bisexuality of the unconscious. Cixous's theory is written as much within as against Freudian and Lacanian conceptions of the unconscious. She rejects the Oedipal drama and castration as the origins of desire. Not lack but plenitude marks desire in the feminine:

We're not going to repress something so simple as the desire for life. Oral drive, anal drive, vocal drive—all these drives are our strengths, and among them is the gestation drive—just like the desire to write: a desire to live self from within, a desire for the swollen belly, for language, for blood. ("The Laugh of the Medusa," p. 891)

\textit{Repression} of the feminine by phallocentrism constitutes a figurative decapitation of women which must be countered with writing that serves to free the female unconscious. Just as women are more "body" and more "bisexual" than men, so women are more "unconscious." Denied speech and access to culture, women have not censured the unconscious and are therefore better able to free it from cultural

\textsuperscript{39}Gagnon, \textit{La venue}, pp. 76–77, explicitly condemns as sexist lesbians who make a "political" choice to "repress male desire within themselves and to exclude from their camps all that recalls our domination and our secular alienation: the male" (translation mine). Lesbians are hence at fault both as too "masculine" (Cixous) and for having excluded the "male" (Gagnon).
restraints. Further, the unconscious is not universal and fixed, but a product of history. While it may tend to repeat the "old stories," a return of repressed feminine libido will reshape it ("Castration or Decapitation," p. 52). Women are the "dark continent" which is not unknowable, only so far unexplored ("The Laugh of the Medusa," pp. 884–85).

Since Cixous places such importance on the unconscious, it is not surprising that the hysterical figure of Freud's Dora, should command a privileged position in Cixous's work. The hysterical literally speaks with the body: faced with a male world which offers her no outlet for the repressed libido, she transforms her symptoms into a dramatic language. For Cixous, the hysterical is the archetype of woman in all her strength who turns against patriarchy its own prohibitions. While Clément objects that this is a futile gesture, since the hysterical is isolated and does nothing to change the social structures of prohibition, Cixous maintains that, through her body speech, the hysterical reveals both repression of the feminine and resistance to it (La Jeune née, pp. 281–85). Dora is indeed irrepressible in Cixous's own texts, appearing as a character again and again. In her play, Portrait de Dora, Cixous shows how Dora's hysteria forces her family and Freud himself to acknowledge their illicit desires. In a fantasy, Dora cuts the throat of Herr K, who has tried to seduce her:

*I squeeze him tightly and I cut his throat . . . His pain makes me ill. I had a great pain in my throat. It is hard for me to talk.* (p. 27, italics in original, translation mine)

Repression is death unless the hysterical can cry out through her illness. Cixous's Dora says to Freud, "When one can no longer speak, one is dead" (p. 71, translation mine).

The hysterical demonstrates the inherent strength of women who, even when "decapitated," find a kind of speech. Cixous thinks that the unleashing of this strength in "woman's writing" cannot help but have a revolutionary impact upon discourse and, ultimately, society. There is no such thing as neutral writing, only masculine and feminine

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41 Cixous, Portrait de Dora (Paris: des femmes, 1976). Dora, Freud, and the family K also appear as characters in Portrait du Soleil and in virtually all the nonfiction works as well. Sigmund Freud, "Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria" (1905), Standard Edition, pp. 3–122, presents the original case upon which Cixous's work is based.
texts. To date, feminine discourse has almost no antecedents, and those few are primarily male: Genet, Kleist, Shakespeare, Joyce, along with Duras and, to a limited extent, Colette.\textsuperscript{42} This lack of predecessors is fortunate, for no prior constraint exists to inhibit the multiplication of female voices in “woman’s writing” (“Rethinking Differences,” p. 83).

As we have seen, “woman’s writing” is to be an inscription in language of the female body in all its difference through the release of the repressed feminine unconscious. Though Cixous is very articulate about the goals, she declines to specify what such writing would be like, as she thinks it will emerge in multiple styles. Her own writing gives a number of indications of one such style.

The voice plays an important role in “woman’s writing.” Cixous equates the vocal with the unconscious and the physical:

Let’s look not at syntax but at fantasy, at the unconscious: all the feminine texts I’ve read are very close to the voice, very close to the flesh of language, much more so than masculine texts. . . . There’s tactility in the feminine text, there’s touch, and this touch passes through the ear. (“Castration or Decapitation,” p. 54)

This emphasis on the voice and sound is translated by a heavy reliance upon puns and wordplay in Cixous’s style. She repels words to play upon the difference between orthography and pronunciation in French, and sometimes she uses multilingual puns. This passage from \textit{To Live the Orange} is typical:

Juis-je juive ou fuis-je femme? Jouis-je judia ou suis-je mulher? Joy I donna? ou fruo en filha? Fuis-je femme ou est-ce que je me ré-juive. (Am I enjewing myself? or woe I woman? Win I woman, or wont I jew-ich? Joy I donna? Gioia jew? or gioi am femme.) (p. 35 in French, p. 34 in English)

At such times the narrative is overcome by plays with sound. In the following, the repetition of the nasal -on in “con” (“cunt”) establishes a hypnotic rhythm:

L’air résonne des ondes émises par un con de bronze: après sept mille détours, le grand battant horizontal a frappé son gong. Longtemps grande et gonflé

\textsuperscript{42}Colette is cited as an example of “woman’s writing” in “The Laugh of the Medusa,” but in “Rethinking Differences,” p. 82, Cixous rejects her as “not great” and “too controlled.” Cixous’s critical examination of key male authors in \textit{Prénoms de personne} (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1974) and her comments on Kleist, Shakespeare, and others in \textit{La Jeune née} are of interest for her definition of “women’s writing.”
l'air immense de ses ondes, le con du monde. ... Un son ne succède pas à un son mais le doublant, l'étoffe et le porte plus loin, onde sur onde chante le grand con conquérant. 43

Such stylized play perhaps accounts for the paucity of translations of Cixous's fictions.

Metaphor is another favored technique in her works. She values it above all for its ability to break down semantic hierarchy and reason, to release the unconscious:

Metaphor breaks free; all that belongs to the realm of fantasmatic production (la production fantasmatique), all that belongs to the imaginary and smashes language from all sides represents a force that cannot be controlled. Metaphors are what drive language mad ... but one must work on it by trying to pull it, as far as possible, away from the strict meaning ... to which it always alludes; it must be drawn toward the figure and away from the strict meaning. ("Rethinking Differences," pp. 71-72)

Whereas Wittig regards metaphor as potentially obfuscating women's political reality, Cixous views it as a means to release the feminine from the bonds of phallocentric language.

Her writing is very personal. Micha has noted her use of dreams, memories, narratives, and her use of fables and myths in a personal iconography. 44 Most critics adopt Cixous's own maternal metaphors to describe her style as "flowing," "formless," "fluid." 45 For Cixous, the feminine text is especially marked by a lack of closure: the volume may end but the writing continues, thrusting the reader into the void ("Castration or Decapitation," p. 53). Indeed, her works seem less discrete entities than sequels, as forms and characters float from narrative to narrative. Lengthy sentences with considerable redundancy and embedded clauses predominate. Parenthetical insertions or sentences broken at unconventional points translate the nonlinearity of "woman's

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43 This passage was chosen to illustrate sound play, not for meaning. Below is my own rough translation: "The air resounds with the sound waves emitted by a cunt of bronze: after seven thousand detours, the great horizontal clapper has struck its gong. For a long, long time booms and swells the immense air with its waves, the cunt of the world. ... One sound does not succeed another sound, but comes along side it, stuffs it full and carries it further, wave upon wave sings the great conquering cunt." Souffles, p. 17.

44 Micha, pp. 115-16.

writing.” Cixous values surplus, madness, the irrational overflowing of verbal energy. The reader is caught in an endless effusion of Cixous’s imagination as she takes the reader on a labyrinthine voyage into the sea/mother (mer/mère) of the feminine unconscious.

Clearly Cixous’s strategy for women is to adopt many of the traits stereotypically attributed to women in male discourse. Flowing, formless language, irrationality, the unconscious, maternal nurturance, rejection of power, and being closer to the body are prized in her theory of “woman’s writing.” Women must mark out a territory within the feminine difference and use it to destroy phallocentric domination of language and discourse, in order to establish an equal dialogue in a bisexual culture.

Amazons or Mothers

These two conceptions of how to write women’s experience reveal a profound division which extends far beyond the literary realm. The French feminist movement has already been splintered over these issues. The American movement has maintained its unity largely by ignoring them, by trying to include both Amazons and Mothers. But our feminist goals and strategies may fail unless we articulate more clearly the consequences of each position. Are we to affirm that women are different from, superior to, men, to proclaim “Women are wonderful”? This leads uncomfortably close to a doctrine of “separate but equal,” which the American experience has found a dangerous dogma indeed. Yet much of American feminism today is dedicated to creating a “women’s culture,” which will of necessity remain marginal unless we directly attack patriarchal institutions.

Must we then abandon the hard-won affirmation of women we find in women’s music, books, art? Wittig’s Amazonian culture does not demand that. We need to create our own cultural space to recover from the violence inflicted by male culture, but at the same time we must combat that male culture in direct political action. “Women’s culture” could thus become a retreat from the battle or it could become the most potent weapon we have against oppression. We must choose or risk floundering on this hidden conceptual schizophrenia.

I am skeptical of Cixous’s goal of refining “difference” while eliminating “opposition,” particularly since the differences she defines

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resemble so closely male descriptions of women. I believe women must resist the allure of neo-femininity in all its forms if we are to abolish the sexual caste system. Writing the female experience can teach women how to speak, how to follow the Amazons into the Glorious Age.

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