Hélène Cixous: The Effect of Freud and Lacan on Écriture Féminine

In considering different concepts within post-structuralism, the relationships between feminism and discourse continue to be a topic for both debate and investigation. New psychological awareness in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly concepts formulated by Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, propelled new awareness in the fields of sexuality, psychoanalysis and linguistics. The French philosopher and writer Hélène Cixous, motivated by the dominance of the masculine perspective in these theories, as well as the cultural and linguistic developments in France in the 1970s, created a new type of discourse, called écriture féminine, where the intention was to communicate a female perspective by “writing woman”. The premise of Cixous’s idea, manifested in her essay *Laugh of the Medusa* and in the essay *Veiled Lips* by Irigaray, clarify the ideas that sexuality is linked to writing and how we communicate in society. Cixous and Irigaray were instrumental in motivating a new conversation in feminism, particularly writing and art, on defining gender through the emphasis and definition of difference. By understanding Cixous’s intentions with écriture féminine through her influences from psychoanalysis and philosophy, the significant impact of Cixous’s writings on various conversations surrounding feminism and feminist art can be better understood.

In the act of “writing woman,” Cixous sees writing as an exposure of sexuality, even as an act of sexuality, in particular masturbation, an act which excludes the necessity of the male: “she

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1 “Woman must write woman” (Cixous 877).
2 Cixous’s essay, *La Rire de la Medusa*, was originally written in French in 1975 and translated by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen in 1976. This essay analyzes the English translation.
physically materializes what she’s thinking; she signifies it with her body” (881). She connects writing with “[woman returning] to the body which has been more than confiscated from her…your body must be heard” (Cixous 880), where the phrase “returning to the body” signifies the act of vocalizing woman. She structures écriture féminine in the context of difference, or différence, which stems from the influence of the philosopher Jacques Derrida. Cixous exploits Derrida’s concept of différence by recognizing the established code in the structure of traditional writing to work against in her method of écriture féminine. In his idea of différence, Derrida’s critique of Western philosophy points out the difficulties of accurately assigning signification within a language that is predominantly self-referential (Smith 377). This also criticizes the concept of binary opposition that characterizes much of Western thought, a concept Terry Eagleton refers to in Literary Theory: “Each sign in the system has meaning only by virtue of its difference from the others” (97).

Cixous’s intention was not for women to write within the established masculinist discourse, but through difference create a language intended to disrupt, to oppose, to embody the exact opposite of institutional masculinist writing:

A feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic; as it is written it brings about an upheaval of the old property crust, carrier of masculine investments; there’s no other way. There’s no room for her if she’s not a he. If she’s a her-she, its in order to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the “truth” with laughter (886).

Cixous defines the canon of traditional writing as the kind of writing that was accepted by publishing houses and editors.

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3 Cixous’s chosen method of writing can also be attributed to Derrida by his perspective that writing, as more stable than speech in the context of meaning because of its separation from immediacy and the ability to separate it from context (Smith 378).
The relationship with sexuality and *écriture féminine* refers back to the theories on psychosexual and linguistic development by Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. Freud’s concepts on psychosexual development, which pitted the bulk of his theories on the male, cast females exclusively in relation to males. The Electra version of the Oedipal stage relies on the idea that the girl, as castrated, is inferior, a quality that is recognized by all other inhabitants of his theories (Eagleton 156). Freud connects being castrated with punishment and a source of shame. The male child proceeds through sexual development out of a desire to protect what he has, while the female child, already incomplete, can only envy what she does not have. Lacan identified the missing quality, or “lack”, as desire, which he identified as the recognition of the missing “other” (Phillips, “Lacan and Language). Cixous’s response is a challenge to the “litany of castration” as rhetoric of envy and shame: “Castration? Let others toy with it. What’s a desire originating from a lack? A pretty meager desire” (Cixous 891). In his work on psychoanalysis, Lacan recognized the link between language and sexuality. He further defined three stages or orders of being, the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. Lacan assigns the Symbolic order as the stage where the child moves into the realm of language after the conflict of the Oedipal crisis (Eagleton 167). Terry Eagleton connects the child’s beginning recognition of “difference” and “sexuality” within these stages: “the child’s first discovery of sexual difference occurs at about the same time that it is discovering language itself” (166). By connecting writing with sexuality, Cixous references Lacan’s theories that connect psychosexual growth with the relationship to language since by this concept language in the form of writing and sexuality are innately linked.

Two of the main connections to Freud and Lacan in *écriture féminine* are the theories of repression and the unconscious. The bulk of Freud’s theories rely on the idea that what is repressed and contained within our unconscious, mainly unfulfilled sexual desires, makes us who we are (Eagleton 152, 167). The connection between the unconscious, repression and *écriture*
féminine can be found by looking at the context of the word “repression.” The previous connotation of repression referred to the suppression of women by men, but there is also Cixous’s double meaning of repression of self and sexuality that refers to the theories of Freud where the “subject who emerges from this process is a ‘split’ one, radically divided between the conscious life…and the unconscious, or repressed desire” (167). Within the vein of language development, the social scientist Michael Billig debates that:

…[Repression] is demanded by language: ‘in conversing, we also create silences’…Thus, in learning to speak, children also learn what must remain unspoken and unspeakable. This means two things: first, that repression is not beyond or outside language, but is, instead, the constitutive resource of language; and second, that repression is in interactional achievement. (Cameron and Kulick 119).

Here the connection with language refers to the learning process by children of the rules within discourse. Conversely, by learning what to speak, they also learn what not to speak, and consciously learn how to repress themselves; one example of this would be learning to speak politely versus learning to speak rudely (Cameron and Kulick 119). Thus, by this definition, children, by learning to speak “male”, they learn by contrast what is speaking “female”.

Freud’s split subject is significant due to the correlation of the Other. Lacan parallels the conscious and unconscious with the binary structure of the Self and the Other, while Simone de Beauvoir defines the binary in regards to gender: “He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other” (Beauvoir xxii). Lacan defines the “Other,” or that which is repressed, as that which is missing, which he refers to as “lacking” (Cameron and Kulick 108). Cixous connects these two classifications, the Other of the unconscious and woman as Other through the vehicle of écriture féminine while vigorously objecting to the Freudian labeling of “lack” with “woman”: “we will never be lacking” (Cixous 893) while also connecting it with the lack of women in other areas of history. Her response is to effectively insert écriture féminine into the same binary structure in
order to fully represent this “lack”: male writing as the writing of the Self (or Subject) and feminine writing as the discourse of the Other (Phillips, “Lacan and Language”). In this vein, the assertion by Billig about repression in language development supports the idea by Cixous that *écriture féminine* is not necessarily writing by women but can be done by men as well, an observation that she connects with the writer James Joyce. Her assertion within *Laugh of the Medusa* concerns two definitions of “bisexuality” that are intrinsic to her defense of *écriture féminine*: “Bisexuality: that is, each one’s location in self (répéarage en soi) of the presence—variously manifest and insistent according to each person, male or female—of both sexes, nonexclusion (*sic*) either of the difference or of one sex” (884). The second and related definition concerns writing, where writing is “bisexual” in the sense that is neuter. Her intention with this definition is that writing can represent both sexes but that thus far, the canon of established writing has only represented the “male” type of writing. Cixous is also proposing a redefinition of the “subject” (the Self) where she dismantles the psychoanalytical theories of Freud that rely on the concept of lack as a result of castration by recognizing the bi-sexedness of any one person that is represented by their conscious and unconscious.

In the context of language structure and devices, another connection with the unconscious again references Lacan’s contribution of the linguistic connection. The method of *écriture féminine* examines the linguistic devices of metaphor and metonymy, which are classified by Roman Jakobson as the two main processes of human language that differ in the way identifications are made with a particular concept; “metaphor [condenses meanings together], and metonymy [displacing one on to another]” (Eagleton 157). The use of metaphor and metonymy within *écriture féminine* can be analyzed using the connection with the conscious and unconscious and Cixous’s application of stylized writing. Eagleton discusses how Lacan describes the unconscious as “structured like a language” because of the way metaphor and
metonymy work within the conscious and the unconscious. The primary example of this is how dreams work, where a particular concept or object that we experience may be replaced by a random and seemingly unrelated alternative (whatever the unconscious can access). In metonymy, the replacement is more connected while the substitution that occurs in metaphor may be completely unrelated (157). In her essay “Essentially Speaking”: Luce Irigaray’s Language of Essence, which discusses the issue of essentialism as a reaction to Luce Irigaray’s essay *Veiled Lips*, Diana Fuss examines the preference of metaphor over metonymy within the dominant figures of speech in Western syntax:

In theories of language, metaphor has long dominated over metonymy. We see this dominance played out in Lacanian psychoanalysis where the phallus stands in a privileged metaphoric relation to the body (it “stands for” sexual difference), and where the “paternal metaphor” emerges as the privileged signifier. Why is metaphor validated over metonymy? (Fuss 71).

Similarly to Irigaray, Cixous challenges the Western emphasis on the binary opposition of metaphor and metonymy in *écriture féminine* by shifting this emphasis from metaphor to metonymy. The prior point made by Lacan of the unconscious working in metonymy relates to this idea since the binary of metaphor and metonymy parallel the conscious and unconscious. Fuss approaches the question of whether the unconscious articulates itself “as a specific operation within the unconscious: the play of metonymy?” (73). Her analysis shows that on the linguistic level, *écriture féminine* uses a different type of semiotic syntax that uses metonymy and metaphor differently than in masculine Western discourse. Fuss writes that “for Irigaray, the relation between language and the body is neither literal nor metaphoric but *metonymic*” (68).

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4 The ‘semiotic’ is a term coined by Julia Kristeva in her book *La Révolution du langage poétique* (1974). Her use of the term refers to a “pattern or play of forces which we can detect inside language, and which represent a sort of residue of the pre-Oedipal phase (Eagleton 188).
Cixous also uses metonymy as a mode of difference and as a connection with the repressed feminine self (72).

In asking the question about the use of metonymy, Fuss sees the connection between a feminine writing with the idea of semiotic writing. The use of metonymy and metaphor is not by chance but is intentional and intrinsic because of its connection to poetry. Eagleton discusses:

> What happens in poetry, however, is that we pay attention to ‘equivalences’ in the process of combining words together as well as selecting them: we string together words which are semantically or rhythmically or phonetically or in some other way equivalent (99).

Here he connects the intentions of poetry and the definition of metonymy through combination (or condensation) and association. The significance with this idea is the correlation to poetry that écrite féminine holds in its rhythm and symbolization. While there is still a presence within metonymy of metaphor, the displacement and condensation of meanings, like what occurs in poetry, are what constitute Cixous’s definition of a feminine syntax; she uses metaphor to indicate metonymy. Cixous adds an additional layer of difference by molding écrite féminine to the style and rhythm of poetry, which is considered to be the most complex form of discourse as well as creating the most tension between words in order to take advantage of the expressive potential of language, even including the nonexistence of one thing or another in order to produce meaning through a minus device (Eagleton 102). The difficulty with assigning poetry with the feminine occurs in the implication that if poetry is associated with the feminine, then potentially the opposite, or science, would be assigned to the masculine, which in turn deemphasizes the opposing pairs of the feminine and poetry. The threat of this binary can be dismantled by the application of Cixous’s definition of the “bisexual Self” that is comprised of both a “male” and “female” element.
One influence from poetry and literature that can be seen in Cixous’s and Irigaray’s writings is the heavy reference or reworking of classical myths, particularly those referenced by Freud and Lacan. Freud frequently referenced classical mythology, which can be seen in many of his titles for his theories (such as the myths of Oedipus and Electra). Freud frequently chose myths that cast women in weaker or negative roles, particularly within the context of the Oedipus complex, as can be seen in his use of the myth of Medusa, the snake-haired Gorgon who, after gazing on men, froze them to stone, which Freud connected to decapitation as a type of castration. The implementation of myth, particularly within its relationship with poetry, is intentional: “…for Cixous the potential for dissidence that she identifies in the poetic tradition is central to her very notion of theory” (Zajko and Leonard 3). While Cixous relies on myth as a poetic device, Irigaray focuses on dismantling the contradictions surrounding the myth (4). The use of myth is also related to the concept of the Law of the Father because of the post-structuralist perspective of myths within the context of the grand myth and Christian thought. For Freud, the Oedipus complex “is the beginnings of morality, conscience, law, and all forms of social and religious authority” (Eagleton 156). The recognition of the patriarchal law is directly related to the definition of the semiotic discourse previously mentioned. According to Eagleton:

[The] semiotic is the ‘other’ of language which is nonetheless intimately entwined with it. Because it stems from the pre-Oedipal phase, it is bound up with the child’s contact with the mother’s body, whereas the symbolic, as we have seen [concerning the events surrounding the Oedipus complex], is associated with the Law of the Father. The semiotic is thus closely connected with femininity (188).

The relationship with the mother’s body mentioned by Eagleton can be reinforced through the use of bodily imagery used by Cixous and Irigaray. The “body” which woman is asked to write towards also encompasses that of the other woman, including the mother, a connection made by Cixous (881). The two feminists strongly imply a mystical quality to women’s sexuality and it is
this mystery that écriture féminine represents. Their language explores the connection of this “body of the mother” to the myth of a mother goddess that is connected with the earth. This is in strong contrast to the dominant Western perspective, where most Western religions hold the view of a paternal authority figure. Cixous, Irigaray, and many of their contemporaries implemented symbols that were associated with this great goddess figure and her personification in the earth as her body.

Cixous’s variation of écriture féminine opened new questions within society regarding women and sexuality, including the exposure of new veins of theory within philosophies concerning gender. These conversations in turn inspired the development of different routes of the current feminist movements and feminist artists who created work representing the different perspectives of these conversations. Two of the most prominent conversations that occur surrounding defining or representing women (the question most commonly approached in relation to Cixous’s work) concern the ideas of essentialism versus the post-structuralist view of gender as a construction of society. Both of these ideas include the concerns of the potential to reinforce the gender binary or to not represent women accurately.

There is an immense amount of writing that has been done about gender, as well as the opposing views between cultural feminism (essentialism) and gender as a construction; this also includes the accusation by some groups towards Cixous of demonstrating essentialism within écriture féminine. The conversation regarding essentialism involves the perspective that men and women are essentially different, while the non-essentialist perspective holds the view that there are no fundamental qualities that make a thing what it is. Within the feminist conversation the question of what is “essential” in the state of being female is continuously debated; this discussion includes the degree of emphasis that is put on female biology versus what Mary Daly defines as “‘female consciousness’ that has a great deal to do with the female body” (Alcoff
409) or what Adrienne Rich defines as “female energy”. Fuss discusses how the essentialist definition of “woman” implies that there will always persist some part of “woman” which defies masculine influence (68). Here the struggle that comes out of the consideration of essentialism is the reluctance to reduce “woman” down to mere sexual difference, while simultaneously defining the essence of woman by the female sex.

Alice Echols defines the drive of cultural feminist writings as “[denigrating] of masculinity rather than male roles or practices, by their valorization of female traits, and by their commitment to preserve rather than diminish gender differences” (Alcoff 411). The strength of this argument lies in the emphasis on the female body, a derivative of Freud and Lacan, by Cixous as the source of difference and self-knowledge, and the lengths to which she went to describe the difference in sexuality between the masculine and the feminine. Feminist art of the cultural feminist movement was characterized by female-associated motifs: central core imagery, goddess symbols, the female figure, topics which were considered inherently “female” and a renewed interested in elevating such crafts (low art) as quilts, many of which were typically associated with female activities, into high art. Cultural feminist artists included the work of Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro. Chicago’s most well known work, The Dinner Party, was an immense triangular banquet table with thirty-nine place settings featuring sculpture that individually represented female artists, icons, and goddesses, as well as the names of 999 women from history inscribed on the tiles underneath the table. Schapiro created “collaborations” between herself and historical female artists and also “femmages” (or “feminine + collage”) that combined materials that were typically associated with craft or female activities.

The main opposing philosophical response, as defined by Linda Alcoff, was to reject the ability to define woman as such at all, and to instead deconstruct all conceptions of woman (otherwise known as the social construction of gender). This perspective upheld the view that
attempts to define or understand woman, whether by feminists, politicians, or society at large, were erroneous because of the methods created by men to define women. According to this view, even the very concept of “woman” is a social construction that fluctuates from society to society. Opponents of the essentialist conversation take issue with the inflexibility with the definition of essentialism, which denotes a type of permanence or inability to fluctuate from individual to individual, as well as the reinforcement of binaries and their power structures. The post-structural philosophical thread included the work of artists who held the perspective of gender and identity as a social construct, such as the work of Cindy Sherman and Wangechi Mutu. Sherman’s photographic work looks at gender and identity as a social construct in her work of self-portraits, such as her Film Stills series where she assumes the role of an unidentified female character in various situations that fall within the situational stereotypes of the cinematic film industry. Mutu explores the construction of a female figure that she creates using collage material from a variety of media.

Today, the growth of the post-structural perspective proliferates, but the essentialist view continues to linger as the debate over the definition of woman continues (Fuss writes: “…in feminist theory, essentialism is the issue which simply refuses to die” [62]). One issue with the idea of social constructionism is the reality of the judicial system and the political stage. Alcoff quotes Julia Kristeva in her essay Cultural Feminism vs. Post-Structuralism: “It follows that a feminist practice can only be negative, at odds with what already exists so that we may say ‘that’s not it’ and ‘that’s still not it’ ” (418). Kristeva also voices her concerns regarding the creation of a type of writing that might occur almost exclusively outside of the territory of masculine discourse by an exclusion based on the potential accusation that écriture féminine reduces the feminine to a type of hysterical mystic (Jones, “Writing the Body”). Ann R. Jones discusses whether the body can be used as the source for self-knowledge, and thus self-
definition, after the recognition of sexuality as a construction. Thus, sexuality as defined by Freud and Lacan is also constructed because it is developed, a result of the interactions of the family within socially defined roles towards the child. Jones notes that focusing only on the development of the child ignores the impact of the continuing progression of self-perception and sexual identity development that occurs after childhood. Jones sees issues within Cixous’s approach towards defining woman because of difference as a reinforcement of essentialism and thus the gender binary that reinforces the dominance associated with binaries.

These two main arguments concerning Hélène Cixous’s work, ongoing in several variations today, stand as testaments towards the great impact that her work within the form of *écriture féminine* had on the conversation regarding gender. The text serves as a voice that challenges and undermines the assumptions of established Western societal structures and the way women were considered or limited within those structures. A shallow reading of any of Cixous’s examples of *écriture féminine* might support the argument of essentialism. Diana Fuss asks the question: “…are there ways to think and to talk about essence that might not, necessarily, “always already,” ipso facto, be reactionary? (62). Cixous does not relegate any woman to a particular role but that of speaking about their own experience. The accusation of essentialism, wholly focused on the bodily emphasis within the *écriture féminine*, misses the connections between the theories of language and the conscious and unconscious that Cixous recognized and embodied in *écriture féminine*. She bases her theories on the linguistic and psychoanalytic conversations initiated by Freud and Lacan in order to propose the idea of a dual sexuality that is embodied in each person. One way of recognizing the validity of this idea is the fluidity in the way that the expression of both genders fluctuates from person to person; an example of this would be when a traditionally female or male perceived trait is expressed in the opposite sex. Another example of this is the conversation by Cixous regarding metaphor and
metonymy. Her analysis of these two devices of language does not rely on the idea that males solely communicate through metaphor, and women metonymy, a perspective that would reinforce the essentialism debate. Instead she proposes that each person can communicate in both types of syntax, and that society in fact reinforces metaphorical communication through the constructed institution of Western writing. By contributing to the canon of writing, Cixous effectively demonstrates the rigidity and phallocentric quality of institutional writing by connecting philosophical and linguistic theories in *écriture féminine*. 


Écriture Féminine

Kari Friestad
Example of *Écriture Feminine*

“And why don’t you write? Write! Writing is for you, you are for you; Your body is yours, take it. I know why you haven’t written. (And why I didn’t write before the age of twenty-seven.) Because writing is at once too high, too great for you, it’s reserved for the great—that is, for “great men”; and it’s “silly.” Besides, you’ve written a little, but in secret. And it wasn’t good, because it was in secret...”

Hélène Cixous
Syntax

“We’re stormy, and that which is ours breaks loose from us without our fearing any debilitation. Our glances, our smiles, are spent; laughs exude from all our mouths; our blood flows and we extend ourselves without ever reaching an end; we never hold back our thoughts, our signs, our writing; and we’re not afraid of lacking.”

Laugh of the Medusa

“This persuasion is necessary to subdue the wildness of a nature still resistant to the logic of truth. The growlings, the cries, the grumblings, the barkings, the abusive reproaches—and to the gods...--, the passion for blood...the imprecations, the altercations, the exlamations, interrogations,...the laments, the moanings, the curses,...the songs, the hymns, the frenzies,...all at once, all together, without anyone being identified...”

Luce Irigaray, *Veiled Lips*
Example of Écriture Féminine

Joanna Freuh wrote (Towards a Feminist Theory of Art Criticism):

“Feminist thinking is the curves, bends, angles, and irregularities of thought, departures from prescribed patterns of art historical logic. To be “straight” is to be upright-erect-phallic-virtuous-heterosexual, but feminists turn away from the straight and narrow. Deviants without their heads on straight.”
Georgia O’Keeffe
Judy Chicago
SOME LIVING AMERICAN WOMEN ARTISTS

Mary Beth Edelson
Cindy Sherman
Wangechi Mutu