

## **Woman as Artifact: Sexual Scripts and a Female Education From the Reformation to Monique Wittig**

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This essay postulates that the gendering of women in Western societies has assumed a conscious, systematic, therefore educational form over the last 500 years. Given the proliferation of advice literature whose intention was to domesticate women into a new heterosexualized bourgeois family model which reflected a burgeoning capitalist socio-economic policy the sites of female experience have become increasingly privatized. This educational discourse, made potent through recourse to the proliferation of the printed word, emphasised a sexual script which reflected a trope of separate spheres which socially constructed women into social roles at the same time as it narrowed their productive contributions by emphasising their reproductive functions. The author analyses these historical processes then addresses radical feminist positions whose ideological assumptions suggest the transformative possibilities of a new sexual script. The conclusion to this argument is that such separatist views do not, in fact, effectively break with the discourse of the last centuries despite the deconstructionist reversal postulated by contemporary gender-theorists such as Monique Wittig.

Dans cet article, nous croyons que, dans les sociétés occidentales, la féminisation a assumée une position consciente, systématique et conséquemment éducative depuis plus de cinq cents ans. En tenant compte de la profusion de la littérature, dont l'intention était de localiser les femmes dans un nouveau modèle familial bourgeois et hétérosexuel et qui reflétait une politique socio-économique capitaliste, l'expérience féminine est devenue de plus en plus une affaire personnelle. Ce discours éducationnel, mis de l'avant par l'ampleur de la documentation écrite, a placé beaucoup d'importance sur des écrits dont l'orientation est sexuelle. Cela se retrouve spécialement dans un ensemble de domaines qui ont relégué les femmes dans des rôles sociaux bien spécifiques. En même temps, cela a réduit la valeur de leurs contributions parce que trop d'importance a été mise sur leurs fonctions de reproduction. L'auteur de cet article analyse ces processus historiques et s'adresse ensuite aux positions féministes radicales qui proposent une nouvelle écriture féministe. Nous concluons en croyant que de telles orientations ne s'éloignent pas des positions traditionnelles même en tenant compte des considérations de théoriciens qui croient, comme Monique Wittig, à un reversement de ces positions.

Artifact: a characteristic product of human activity as a) a handmade object ... b) a mass-produced item ... c) an inferior artistic work ... d) someone or something held to be a typical product (as of social forces). (*Webster's Ninth Collegiate Dictionary*, 1993)

### *Introduction*

Since the Reformation the gendering of women in Western societies has taken a systematic, rational, and intentional form in an educational discourse that provides a prism through which to discern the bourgeois ethos of western culture. The discourse has been facilitated through the potent material manifestation of the printed word. Historians have come to describe the discourse as the trope of separate spheres, that is, a male public theatre of commerce, politics, and institutions, and a female private domain of family, motherhood, and domesticity. The discourse has concentrated on women's social roles and functions and despite the distance of several hundred years the ideological landscape has not changed significantly with its landmarks only viewed from the different angles of a given time and place. The discourse itself has been firmly entrenched as a sexual script consisting of sets of norms, values, and sanctions governing erotic acts, status, and gender roles whereby "people learn to be sexual as much as they learn anything else" (Trolden, 1988, p. 6).

The discourse on the education of women is articulated in an outpouring of advice literature, sermons, tracts, scripture, treatises, philosophies on female nature, conduct books, and marriage manuals, which have reinforced the informal aspects of female socialization and gender trait acquisition. It has codified views on domesticity and legitimated asymmetrical power relations through the nuclear heterosexualized family, the cult of true womanhood, and the idealization of educated motherhood. It is a discourse that has been described as one of anxiety and marriage obsession in a literature which demonstrates that by either birth or education a woman is nothing until a man desires her to be or, as Mary Wollstonecraft argues, whose meaning is subsumed under the needs of others (Groag Bell & Offen, 1983, pp. 56-57). It is a literature that regulates and creates desire by identifying certain objects of sexual exchange, a sexual currency minted in an explicit gender-politics, to be more valuable than others (Mason, 1935).

This paper examines the assumptions behind the trope of separate spheres and its relationship to the metaphor of artifact that suggests that the personae of women have been made over by men; and how we come to see

ourselves through the lens of male discourses (Scott, 1986). The first section poses this as a problem in a general commentary. The second section examines the problem through the historical literature by translating its meanings as sexual script. Part three suggests that the sexual script remains unchanged despite the proliferation of a feminist scholarship that infers it has radically revised and displaced the original androcentric discourse on female gendering.

Before I proceed to the body of the text I am obliged to state that the parameters of the discussion excludes any elaboration on the problematizing of gender as a discursive category or on the complexities of the body as the site of gender construction. Given the scope of an article, I can only treat these peripherally. It is not however, economy alone that constrains the overall argument but also a measure of intellectual modesty as I concede this area of specialization to a veritable battalion of critical theorists and poststructuralists who have deconstructed this topic with a considerable insight that I could never hope to improve upon (Foucault, 1980, 1985, 1986; Epstein, 1988).

### *"Passing" as Woman*

A lively discussion has emerged recently that examines gender identity through images of cross-dressing, gayness, transsexuality, bisexuality, androgyny, and "queer theory" (Warner, 1992; Epstein & Straub, 1991; Fuss, 1991; Garber, 1992; Gallagher & Lacquer, 1987; Chodorow, 1976). The discussion opens up an exploration of the idea that woman is a hand-made/man-made artifact produced through the systematic rationalization of gender. As historians generally eschew suggestions as to the moral contingencies of one's sex implicit in essentialist views of human nature, we tend to define gender as a social construction imposed on sexed bodies in relation to each other; or as Simone de Beauvoir says "one is not born, but becomes, a woman" (de Beauvoir, 1952, pp. 48-51). Therefore gender formation reflects particular exigencies of a given temporal, moral, and spatial ecology with the trope of separate spheres seemingly constructed within the parameters of postreformation social organization and intellectual thought. This essay suggests that gendering took on a different form and meaning to that which had been understood with regard to sexual relationships in the late middle ages; a form that has demonstrated astonishing resilience and a meaning that has remained fairly constant.

We are gendered into social roles and functions whose discourses alter and transform even as cultures do. Moreover, it is education in its formal and

informal senses that perpetuates and shapes gendered experiences in their systematic and institutional forms. Because such forms consciously shape experience – even to the gendering of knowledge itself – educational discourses have become a potent vehicle of sexual politics. At least since the Reformation such a politic has been based on presumptions of women as reproductive beings and objects of (male) desire within a controlled spatial ethos (the heterosexualized family rather than communal networks) while at the same time delimiting their public economic contributions. In this sense the well-known feminist axiom follows that sexuality is to feminists what work is to marxists; or put another way, gender is to women what class is to workers and capitalists.

If the above is a reasonable proposition then gender becomes both an external and internalized regulatory apparatus approving female conduct in a relationship of power which in turn reflects the larger political theatre (Armstrong & Tennenhouse, 1987; Snitton, 1983). For example, as illustrated in “On Domesticall Duties,” under Puritan governance the wife is “under officer in the Little Commonwealth” whereas the fully sexualized but noneroticised woman of in both the *Emile* and *La Nouvelle Heloise* is educated “to make herself agreeable” to a husband who dominates the “little fatherland” of the bourgeois family (Gouge, 1627, Rousseau, 1762/1960, 1761/1968). Moreover Vives had previously agreed that the husband was to be dominant in all things except the conjugal relationship which was never to be compelled (Vives, 1559) whereas Sir Thomas Smith, using an explicit political language, also had much to say about family governance and its connections to statecraft. More recently John Donzelot argues that over several centuries since the Renaissance sexual relations were transformed from a government of families to a government through the family (Donzelot, 1979; Davis, 1977). Indeed, in a panoptic sweep that politicized and psychologized family life, a far more invasive form of surveillance was effected than that which had been gone before in that the control was seemingly devoid of those external expressions of coercion and compulsion which traditionally maintained communal societies.

Moreover the discussion on the best means of educating women became synonymous with the best means of *gendering* women as objects of desire and of reproduction for and by men. Marjorie Garber discerns the conflation of the two when she notes that as a consequence women are “truly transvestites” (Garber, 1992, pp. 1-20). Coinciding with the idea of woman as artifact, she argues that the processes of gendering females into women necessarily becomes a politics of drag with its objects commodified into interchangeable and exchangeable parts (cosmetics, brassieres, coiffures, and so on)

accoutrements, and social roles at the same time as they are distanced from their authentic selves even to the extent that they no longer know who and what constitutes that authentic self. Indeed a corpus of advice abounds as to how best to achieve this state of psychic and physical transvestism or how to use the body as a site that resists it in a literature ranging from popular magazines (e.g., *Vogue, Flair, Mademoiselle*) to articles in reputable scholarly journals by feminist academics (Armstrong & Tennenhouse, 1987, pp. 4-5; Garber, 1992, pp. 48-50). No matter the genre, all address the anxieties on how to pass as woman, or how to resist the seductions involved by such passing. Despite their different locations they speak to a similar preoccupation.

The formal discourses on a female education have produced a gender construction whose ideal is created by men. Men create an ideal of woman in relation to themselves. In short like the world itself gender becomes a work of men, a representation of the androcentric paradigm (Scott, 1986; Butler, 1991).

If we decode the messages contained in the thousands of printed pages of admonition and advice dating from the 15th century humanist educators to the scores of self-help, child rearing, image-obsessed paperbacks on contemporary bookshelves, we may apprehend only a little how women have been formally, systematically, and assiduously gendered into patriarchy and how separate spheres came to be equated with the heterosexual privatized family, which is, after all, a relatively recent phenomenon. The transmission has been so convincing that many find it impossible to conceive that such an institution in its present form has not always existed; or as Judith Butler has pointed out "heterosexual identity is propelled into an endless repetition of itself as it is 'ontologically consolidated' into phantasms of 'man' and 'women'" (Butler, 1991, p. 21) Thus, female gender becomes the same as those definitions of *artifact* which begin this essay. At this point it is important to recall that while misogyny has flourished in most cultures, heterosexualism and its corollary, heterosexism did not necessarily flourish in the manner of today.

The privatized temporal, physical, and psycho-social spaces of the modern bourgeois family were well established by the end of the 18th century but had not then filtered down into the working class experience as either a functional or seductive model. Indeed the privatized world of the family as a haven in a heartless land of laissez-faire economics has sustained the public domain by a symbiotic division of labour (Lasch, 1987; Gies & Gies, 1987). However, lest we be persuaded that the private female world is a distinct entity separated from the public domain we need to be aware that the world

of women is in fact the world of men. Female culture does not operate in isolation but represents the dynamics of a reciprocal exchange (Kerber, 1988). In brief the conjugal family, which is shorthand for the private sphere, advantages male members by mobilizing its private resources for the upward mobility of men by freeing males for roles of public advancement. In understanding this historical reality we might be more cautious in our celebration of a private domain which has been so carved out of male-defined social order.

### *The Discourse as Sexual Script*

As the Protestant Reformation advanced, its theological shockwaves dislocated the former communal topography of a monastic tradition which had evolved over centuries thus creating a psychic vacuum in personal sensibilities and popular culture. Consequently, the hierarchical moral and social presumptions of medieval household structures and kinship systems were eroded by privileging marriage and family life as a religious calling more pleasing to God than celibacy; a point made explicit by Martin Luther and then elaborated by social critics such as Thomas Becen (Becen, 1543; Stone, 1975, 1977; Shorter, 1975; Fox & Quitt, 1980). Priesthood, Mother Church, and the powerful imageries of "Theotakis" – Mother of God – were displaced by the *paterfamilias* and new forms of patriarchal family governance. In turn those attributes formerly invested in the Virgin Mary were ascribed to lay-women. Thus a secular deployment took place which transfigured a deified feminine principle into a desexualized but carnal concept of motherhood, which became the emotional locus of family life. Likewise the family itself came to symbolise a new kind of cloister, a new kind of confessional: psychologically intrusive, inward looking, and increasingly separated from the profane distractions of community organization. In such a hothouse atmosphere so bleakly organized around sin and anxiety about personal salvation the mother, as arbiter and mediatrix, replicated the ancient pieties but did not have the capacity to offer a final absolution which rested only in the hands of an implacable God.

Following those events begun by Luther at Wittenburg, although by no means causally related, the bourgeois woman's occupations increasingly became more circumscribed as she was denied entry to those professions and occupations in which she had hitherto participated. Mediocre minds such as Timothy Rogers expanded on the ideas of superior minds such as those of Vives or Thomas Elyot (Rogers, 1677; Vives, 1523; Elyot, 1545). The good woman's moral and spatial domestication is interpreted now through the

constraints placed upon her social role. That of "huswyffe" became valorized at the expense of applewife, alewife, fishwife, or for that matter, glassblower, miller, auctioneer, bricklayer, nun, and prioress. In turn Thomas Parker could barely conceal his contempt for occupations other than wife when he wrote deploring that his sister's "printing of a Book, beyond the Custom of your Sex, doth rankly smell" (Parker, 1650, p. 13). No wonder that Mary Astell, in genteel desperation, argued for a Protestant monastic life where the ladies might read and write as women once had done in the service of God. She protested the constraints placed upon female intellect but only after both Bathsua Makin and Hannah Woolley had lamented in a similar vein. Woolley's ascerbic *Gentleman's Companion* has a contemporary ring:

The right education of the female sex, as it is in a manner everywhere neglected, so it ought to be generally lamented. Most in this depraved later age think a woman learned and wise enough if she can distinguish her husband's bed from others. Certainly man's soul cannot boast of a more sublime original than ours, they have equally their efflux from the same eternal immensity, and are therefore capable of the same improvement by good education. Vain man is apt to think we are merely intended for the world's propagation and to keep its humane inhabitants sweet and clean; but by their leaves, had we the same literature he would find our brains as fruitful as our bodies. Hence I am induced to believe we are debarred from the knowledge of humane learning lest our pregnant wits should rival the towering conceits of our insulting lords and masters. (Kinnaird, 1979, p. 53)

Moreover, a male's abilities to support female dependents came to signify the economic affluence of a burgeoning middle class and the model of the heterosexualized family. Along with the outpouring of commentaries written through a theocratic lens legitimating a revised family model, there can be discerned a new intolerance towards homosexuality (Boswell, 1980). It is interesting that the regulation of the homosexual body coincided with the domestication of the female body in what might be judged as a narrowing of the moral imagination. The present preoccupation with liberalizing sexualities which unites the women's movement and gay rights movement might be better understood in light of the historical imperatives of heterosexual privilege that effected a radical transformation in the politics of the body for both groups.

It must also be noted that just as women's public roles diminished and they assumed greater psychological influence over their children, men withdrew from their former responsibilities through apprenticeship and other occupational training in sharing childrearing tasks. Boys no longer found themselves "breeched" at a young age as they were professed "out of the

hands of women” into tasks and occupations supervised by adult males who trained their offspring, the sons of relatives, kinfolk or servants, into their apprenticeships. The moral training of boys took place more and more within the confines of the family under the close surveillance and control of its female members (Ariés, 1962, pp. 137-329).

The early treatises on the education of women reflected a somewhat embryonic view of the domestic sphere when compared with that of the 18th century. The initial advice literature has little resemblance to the ultimate domestication of woman as wife and mother so apparent in Rousseau's *Emile*. Vives, in fact, tended to adulate friendship over biological family, understanding the latter in terms of the more general construct of the medieval domicile – “those who are of kinship or of affinity, or with whom you live together in one home and household” (Tobrina, 1968, p. 147). Such a membership embraced far more than persons who were biologically connected. The puritans, by contrast, exemplified woman's role as “helpmeet” rather than in the manner of the humanists who gendered her into those rare virtues identified as peculiarly feminine. John Cotton whose famous wedding sermon, delivered on June 19, 1694, in New Castle, New England elaborated the theme of woman as helpmeet (Cotton, 1694). This was expanded by Cotton Mather and Benjamin Wadsworth (Mather, 1699; Wadsworth, 1712). Such tracts illustrate a codification of intimate relations in a tension between public and private matters not previously apparent (Snawsel, 1631; Markham, 1615; Rich, 1616; Smith, 1734; Anonymous, 1695, 1740).

The discourse which has been described briefly in these pages accompanied a major shift in sensibility during the centuries immediately following the Reformation. An emphasis on the companionate basis for marriage and the emotional ties that stressed a loyalty among family members which must always supercede any other affections altered attitudes towards children. The bonds between mothers and children tightened and parental love manifestly altered, taking on more intensely expressive forms. There are as many different interpretations of this shift as there are historians, not the least pointing to the changing demographics, economic arrangements, and political transformations. Moreover, reductions in maternal and infant mortality rates suggest that a lessening of psychic distance occurred with more mothers becoming emotionally invested in their surviving offspring as they anticipated the horrors of childbirth with less trepidation (Badinter, 1980; Hardyment, 1983; Dally, 1982). Nonetheless there remains a factor which tends to be overlooked.

### *The New Family as Sexual Script*

It is generally agreed that a culture moving from oralism to literacy represents a major paradigmatic shift (Postman, 1982). However, its implications are less discussed with regard to the radical change in interpersonal and familial relations. The Protestant world-view dramatically altered the dynamics between adults and children in its dismantling of catholic sacramental forms of grace and its emphasis on personal conversion as the necessary, indeed sole, means of salvation. However, if the highlight of Christian nurture was personal conversion, this was not possible without the tools of reading and the literary and exegetal skills of interpreting scripture. Therefore, two startling changes are perceptible: more women became literate; and children, in order to be "saved," were taught reading and writing from the earliest possible age. Tutors were only one component to the pedagogies that evolved with mothers assuming urgent roles and responsibilities to facilitate these processes. Women were inculcated with a scripturally based discourse that stressed literacy tools in order to fulfill the imperatives behind the Protestant views of a covenant with God. This could not be left to chance. Accordingly their anxieties intensified as they were reminded constantly that under the wrath of divine judgement they were to bring their children up in the fear and love of God in order to save infant souls. Eternal reward or damnation; heaven and hell: this was not trivial stuff to be dealt with on a daily basis. Therefore, the mother, as guardian of morality, assumed an ubiquitous presence and psychological influence.

As any of us who has taught young children understand, the relationship between the parent or teacher and the learner is best achieved through patience, encouragement, the hierarchical sequencing of skills, a careful inculcation of behaviours and attitudes, and a carefully balanced reward system. In short, the dynamics between parents (in this case, mothers in particular) and children altered even as the imperatives of religious duty drove such solicitude and education. More time was spent in a climate charged with maternal anxiety, in developing intimate relationships and a mutual dependence. The child became emotionally attached to fewer adults and increasingly separated and protected from the physical and moral contaminations of the larger world. Likewise the child interacted with fewer adult role models as that abundantly rich and informal learning environment of the organic community was separated from the family by the barriers of the domestic space. If parents were reminded of their responsibilities from pulpit and in advice literature, children were reminded of their imperfections, taught the means of grace, and made to understand the necessity for salvation.

Consequently the discourse on the social role and duties of women became more systematic, didactic, and moral in tone, and a woman's education more purposeful; after all the making of mothers was no easier than the making of children into saints (Morgan, 1966; Greven, 1977). Historians have recorded the careful processes involved in constructing a concept of motherhood which was to be learned without the communal structures that had shared in child-rearing. The gendering of women boasted a high and noble aim; none less than that of saving of children's souls (de Mause, 1974; Becker, 1898).

The daily routines of educating children into the disciplines of literacy bound parents and children in a way that was historically singular and produced a psychological climate of unusual emotional interdependence. Along with this highly charged psycho-pedagogical relationship, a confessional mode emerged that, though religiously motivated, formed the basis to the present parental preoccupation with their children's well-being and personal development. The intrusions into children's private lives is analogous with the almost prurient interplay of the 20th century parental obsession to know how one's child thinks and feels. Mothers gained a potent psychological advantage in the family unit but at the high cost of public involvement and by learning to sacrifice individuation through a gender construction that demanded the nurturing of others. Hence, the proliferation of a discourse on women's education whose prime and sometimes sole purpose was to gender them into a cult of true womanhood and to reshape their roles as mothers. Given this phenomenon, we cannot overlook the significance of a theology that replaced sacramental salvific surrogates with the necessity for a scriptural knowledge as the basis for redemption. In such a way gender construction and child-rearing became intrinsically linked.

By the 17th century women's education had become explicitly synonymous with female gendering, as can be seen in Abbe Fenelon's writings (1687). The similarities between his views and those expressed during the enlightenment by a political theorist such as Rousseau points to a continuity in discourse rather than a distance one might assume to exist from one century to the next. As William Boyd points out Rousseau's arguments that "once it has been shown that men and women are essentially different in character and temperament, it follows that they ought not to have the same education," resonates with Fenelon's case that "the knowledge of women like that of men ought to limit itself to instruction of their functions; the differences of their employments ought to make the difference in their studies" (Boyd, 1960, p. 133). Such contemporary feminist philosophers as Jane Roland Martin object to women being made into men's image and while not all women philosophers agree, believe this claim is as historically long

as Plato himself (Martin, 1985; Harris, 1987). Indeed, much feminist scholarship also appears to accept as innate those gender constructs Rousseau observed and argued as natural. The gynocentric fallacy so evident in several centuries of the discourse remains with us in various forms of feminist essentialism (Elshtain, 1987; Alcoff, 1988).

### *Rousseau (Re)Writes the Sexual Script*

No essay on the gendering of women's education is complete without reference to Rousseau. Neither is it sufficient to expose the obvious fact of his misogyny. Rousseau can only be undermined if we recognize the power of his logic no matter how wrongheaded his conclusions. It has been argued persuasively by at least one feminist scholar who takes Rousseau's premises seriously that *Emile* is best interpreted as a blueprint of heterosexual family life (Elshtain, 1981, pp. 147-401). In short, Rousseau provided a major philosophical legitimation of the nuclear (privatized) family. Using a language couched in the rational underpinnings of enlightenment political and social theory, he successfully transformed the theological premises of "complementariness" into an effective instrument of politicization and normalization. Conscious gendering through systems of female education affected a symbiotic union between the tensions of private and public and nowhere was this codification of intimate sexual relations made more explicit than by Rousseau (Luhmann, 1986, p. 173). A weakening theological world view in fact was regenerated by secular appeals to reason and a discursive empiricism (Cassirer, 1963).

Both *La Nouvelle Heloise* and *Emile* provided explicit programs on how to gender women by elaborating a social and political rationale as to why such gendering should not be left to chance (Eisenstein, 1993, pp. 55-96). Rousseau's adaptation of complementariness proved all the more attractive because it was based on appeals to nature; but a nature whose rationality was compatible with the existing bourgeois family ideal of separate spheres with its eroticization of the home and its sacralization of motherhood. The man and the woman were incomplete versions of human-being without union with the other. It is, after all, a view which continues to compel attention.

That Rousseau's sexual script did not radicalize the discourse despite its significance can be seen by Hannah More's reactions to it. More (1790) who wrote politically conservative and evangelical moral treatises on social affairs produced her own version of the sexual script. The compatibility of their views on the institution of marriage, the political significance of respectable middle class family life, and most especially, the gendering of women as

wives and mothers is all the more astonishing given their totally antithetical political and religious views. Neither did More's later *Strictures* with its agreement that each sex has its proper excellencies, undermine Rousseau in any way (More, 1799). On the other hand, the Frenchman, Pierre de Laclos (1783), decried the insipid substitute for "natural woman" which Sophie and Julie represented by pointing out that in all societies men held women in tyranny, making them virtually "slaves;" therefore, under any system of slavery the education of women was useless, and "socialized women cannot be educated" (Groag Bell & Offen, 1983, p. 87). It is fascinating to consider how Laclos's views of natural woman are so similar to those of a contemporary theorist – Monique Wittig – the separatist lesbian feminist who argues for an ungendered "non-woman" by asserting that Rousseau's masterpiece, the social contract, is shorthand for the "heterosexual contract." She claims that this discourse, in all its hegemonic institutional manifestations, grips our minds in such a way, that we cannot think outside of it (Wittig, 1992, pp. 8, 34, 41).

While it is recognized that Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication on the Rights of Women* (1792) is a direct response to Rousseau's social construction, nevertheless it is easy to misunderstand her. Despite her feminist revision she continued to advocate the preservation of the reproductive function as fundamental to a female education. In short Wollstonecraft claimed that even the educated woman remained incomplete until she became a homemaker. Therefore, despite her radical treatment of women's education and advocacy of coeducation she fails to break with the tradition on gendering.

In what amounts to a systematic and reductive analysis of gender, Rousseau is the craftsman who best tells us how woman is to become that handmade, mass produced item, an inferior artistic work (when compared to the reborn natural man – Emile – as a new Adam) and a characteristic product of human activity contained in the definition that begins this essay. The irony is that he saw gendered woman as an artifact – a characteristic product of human activity – thus confounding gendered traits as the work of nature in a manner he did not mistake for the male sex. Nowhere among liberal male philosophers can we find an example of a male who was himself so tragically gendered into "man" so that his misogyny dictated for females a traditional socialization that he so deplored for his own sex. Regrettably no one since has improved upon his *Emile* as the litmus test for female socialization or as the template of separate spheres.

Neither should Rousseau's significance be underestimated given the way he attributed so much moral responsibility to women's role in the family –

that little fatherland – as a central component of his political theory. Rousseau's efforts at creating a fully socialized female as wife and mother were founded on the presumption of a biological, temperamental and intrinsic, that is, natural difference between the sexes. From that presumption it followed that men and women ought to benefit from separate experiences and have different educations. Rousseau's logic provides us with a cautionary tale about conclusions coming from premises that are not carefully worked from the outset.

### *Changing the Sexual Script*

Once firmly in place, by the 18th century the sexual script had only be to transcribed according to the changing political ideologies and economic conditions that followed. In this respect I am reminded of an observation by C.S. Lewis that humanity does not pass through phases as a train passes through stations; being alive it has the privilege of moving, yet never leaving anything behind. One might say that in the industrialized world separate spheres are still alive and well and living in the latter part of the 20th century; this despite a feminist counter-discourse celebrating women's culture and "woman's voice" from which has developed a female epistemology described as different ways of knowing. It seems, however, that by such an inversion this counter-discourse has not broken through the parametres of the discourse which preceded it. An incisive article by Linda Kerber asserts that the metaphor of separate spheres provides the interpretation at the same time as it limits the boundaries of the discussion and anticipates the conclusions it reports. She reminds us that the feminist scholarship retains a restrictive dualism of home/market, household/state, nature/culture, private/public, relational/objectifying and so on, even as it describes female agency within male controlled spaces (Kerber, 1988, pp. 37-39).

This concern is as pertinent to the bulk of recent women's history as it is to the work of Carol Gilligan (1982) or Belenky (1966), the psycho-cultural differences of (female) spaces found in the theories of Piaget, Erikson, or Kohlberg, or even in the existence of separate women's studies programs which have legitimated separate spheres, perhaps even academized the sexual script itself (Fuss, 1991; Noddings, 1985, 1986). One wonders if these are not intellectual genuflections to a discourse that has uniformly constructed our differences in order to regulate them. Does the discourse retain a tautological ability to gender scholarship itself into separate spheres so that the sexual script remains intact even after 500 years? In short, have we fallen

into Rousseau's error by confusing gendered differences with the biological facts of our sexed bodies?

If we continue to emphasise a gynocentric ideology which suggests cooperative, nurturing, relational, peace-loving characteristics as (essentially) feminine ought we be surprised that men insist therefore that we are more suited to take care of children, households, or the infirm, and temperamentally suited for the philanthropic, voluntaristic, or helping services? If we are really committed to this view of innate moral superiority would it not be *immoral* to object to such conclusions? (Rooke, 1985; Offen, 1988; Sommers, 1991; Stock Morton, 1991) Rousseau's words have the hollow sound of a mantra, "once it has been shown that men and women are essentially different in character and temperament it follows that they ought not to have the same education" (Boyd, 1960, p. 133).

In *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* it might appear that Monique Wittig (1992) has effectively broken with the canon by offering possibilities for changing the sexual script. In arguing that lesbianism represents a distinct social category – that of *non-woman* – because it politically and relationally subverts the presumptions of accepted gender constructions she states that

the concept of differences between the sexes, ontologically constitutes women into different/others ... there is no such thing as being-woman or being-man. 'Man' and 'woman' are political concepts of opposition and the copula which dialectically unites them is, at the same time, the one which abolishes them. It is the class struggle between women and men which will abolish men and women. (Wittig, 1992, p. 29)

In 1983, when she wrote "The Mark of Gender," she disclaims the exercise of a language that has produced an oppressive sexual script:

The result of the imposition of gender ... is to deprive women of the authority of speech, and to force them to make their entrance in a crablike way, particularising themselves and apologizing profusely. The result is to deny them any claim to the abstract, philosophical discourses that give shape to the social body. Gender must be destroyed. (Wittig, 1992, p. 81)

Such observations were developed out of those ideas imbedded in an essay written four years previously – "One is Not Born a Woman" – in which she asserted that "we must refuse to become, or to remain, heterosexual [that is, an artifact, because] to a lesbian this goes further than the refusal of the *role* of 'woman.' It is the refusal of the economic, ideological, and political power of a man" (Wittig, 1992, p. 13).

In her essay "On the Social Contract" Wittig engages in a frontal attack on Rousseau; but as she strips away layer upon layer of the conceptual deposits of the topography of the ongoing debate with the 18th century her

argument crashes against the immutable bedrock of the human condition; that is, we live in sexed bodies. "Lesbians are not women" (Wittig, 1992, pp. 21, 33-45). This may be, but humans are male and female, and this biological difference has shaped a wide variety of cultural gendered experiences. While the landscape has shifted the fault line persists despite the intellectual archeology of either the radical lesbians or materialist feminists as they meticulously excavate its artifacts. Neither does the reversal of male/female superiority and inferiority which Wittig so successfully deconstructs in another essay resolve the dilemma at the same time as it exposes the artifice of having "to be," that is, pass, as a "real" woman (Wittig, 1992, p. 10). Nonetheless a haunting mirage still flickers over the sexed bodies of men and women in relation to each other.

Wittig's separatist agenda on gender fails on several other account First, it fails to reduce the anxiety or to escape the marriage-obsession that permeates the discourse I have described. In this case, we see a remorseless *anti*-marriage obsession that exposes centuries of accommodations to the regimes of what has come to be described as "compulsory heterosexuality." Moreover, the *new* discourse is less new than might be assumed at first glance because it continues to exacerbate the anxiety and guilt of straight women who are chastened about their gender identities and their choices. However if the lesbian discourse fails to actually "ungender," it does alter the direction of gender as a power-politic and this is no small thing. At the same time as it inverts language it constructs other forms of manipulating anxiety and guilt. In contrast, the work of Judith Butler (1992) is refreshing in its insistence on gender ambiguity and tolerance of gender confusion.

Second, the radical lesbian critique (of which Butler is part) owes much of its razor-sharp analytic skill to the feminist discourse which gave it a theoretical and strategic basis from which to operate in the first instance. Feminism and radical lesbianism are daughters of the enlightenment, offspring of those liberal philosophies they so frequently repudiate. Indeed, it is supremely ironical that Wittig's dissections and discursive tools are so indebted to the patriarchal forms of logic she contests because she employs them in the manner of such male postmodernists as Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault. Wittig's formulations are conceived in the patterns of thought invented by Rousseau and Laclos or the dichotomies of oppressor/oppressed found in the more recent literature that emerged out of the tumult of the 1960s, such as the cult book of that decade – *The Wretched of the Earth* by Fanon (1966).

Third, and perhaps the most compelling problem is Wittig's configuration of separatism itself. Given that the last five centuries have reinforced the

trope of separate spheres it is sobering to recognize that despite its originality Wittig's deconstruction of "the straight mind" has failed to topple the discourse. In lesbian separatism, the trope of separate spheres is no longer a description of the world but it becomes the world; no longer a figure of speech, or the metaphor for an ideal state. Such an ideal state takes on the sacred dimensions of a holy grail in an absolute separatism that is at once metaphysical and actual because the lesbian identity becomes one's total identity spilling into every aspect of her human endeavours. She is never not a lesbian. This alone becomes her *raison d'être*.

If there is a conflation of public and private spheres in her politics, it is the final sentence in "On the Social Contract" that undermines the case Wittig has so painstakingly carved. Attributing to Rousseau (mistakenly I believe) the proposition that we can reformulate the social contract through "voluntary associations" in the here and now even though a new social order is unlikely, she concedes her vision could be seen as "mere utopia." To this she adds, "if ultimately we are denied a new social order, which can exist only in words, I will find it in myself" (Wittig, 1992, p. 45). In such a gesture she retreats into the ultimate private sphere of herself. By such interiorizing, the political is now absolutely separated from the necessity for praxis except in this most narrow and exclusive space that is found in the recesses of one's innermost being. Surely nowhere is there a more extreme formulation of the Marxian and feminist axiom that the "personal is political?"

In this we see the trope of separate spheres constrict to a single individual as a matrix of moral philosophy and political practice. The sexual script becomes a discourse that is, at once, personalized and relational, and shared by only a few likeminded individuals or voluntary associations (which I presume to mean lovers, partners, same sex familial surrogates, or small elite but similarly gendered social units). The broader society disappears as one turns in on oneself as an ideological alternative existing only in words. Given that feminist scholars seem to ascribe personalism and relationalism as female gendered traits this retreat is even more surprising from Wittig who disdains the construct of "woman." In this about-face she reveals herself as another devotee of democratic individualism because it must be agreed finally that sexual scripts are not merely private convictions. The theatre of a female education cannot be played out only *in the minds* of the actors much less in their psychés. Meanwhile Christina Sommers discerns that while many radical philosophers have become "innocuously utopian and socially irrelevant" this is not the case with "the gender feminist ... [whose] influence on education is growing apace" (1991, p. 188). Wittig is a case in point.

The risks of solipsism are at least twofold. First, by objectifying one's sexual identity as synonymous with one's total being is to transmute the Self into a disembodied ideological construct. Second, the celebration of personal and private in identity-politics is to create intellectual forms which can be bought, sold, and consumed as raw material in the academic market place (as in our teaching, hiring, advising, conference participation, scholarship, and publications). We are in danger of commodifying the Self. As to this second point we may self-advertise, even self-aggrandize our preoccupations and erotic interests but by doing so our identity-politics become renewable resources in keeping with capitalism's voracious consumerist appetite.

Thus, in Wittig's work the trope has come full circle. Public and private spaces come together in the cloister of the Self. The analogue is obvious: the ideologically committed lesbian balances the total impermeability of her private person by transforming this into the public space of her own body. The ultimate privatization of politics and gender parades itself in an ideological mask hiding a public face and if we are to heed Judith Butler's comment that all "gender is drag" it becomes another artifact of gender. Butler asserts that "coming out lesbian" produces a new and different closet because one is recolonized by the sign (of lesbian) and in fact succumbs to a "homophobic determination" which is signified as part of an elite gay/lesbian "theory crowd that seeks to establish the legitimacy and *domestication* [of their studies] within the academy" [*italics added*] (Butler cited in Fuss, 1991, pp. 28, 12-14). In "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" she comments: "Identity categories tend to be the instruments of regulatory regimes; whether as normalising categories of oppressive structures or as rallying points for a liberating contestation of that very oppression" (pp. 10-15). While Butler shares Wittig's sexual preferences she is reluctant to name herself "Lesbian" in a doctrinaire way or situate herself in any fixed ideological camp.

Lest these objections be construed either as an indictment of Wittig's politics or personal preferences I would add that the politicization of the lesbian-body opens wide the theme of this essay and therefore compels us to deepen our excavations of the ontological landscape, that is, to further deconstruct Wittig's deconstructions.

While Wittig's essays are as bold as they are brilliant, they mesmerise with the deadly hooded cobra gaze of a metallic theorizing devoid of a human face. Hers is a politic unabashedly about power: how to wrest it from those who have monopolized it to the disadvantage of females by turning them into women. Her politic deposes Neitchze's Superman with a new Superwoman in a disturbing analysis that ruptures the conventional boundaries of an arena which has socially constructed an ongoing battle of the sexes.

In her preoccupation with the gendering of females into lesbian consciousness in order to defeat heterosexism, Wittig's critique leaves one with the sense that sex and gender must crash against the bedrock of biology so that arguments about the two tend to become circular. As humans must be socialized to be participants in any social order so we must infer some kind of gendering will take place even if in an entirely new form. The issue, apart from preference, is on what grounds and by whose criteria might we achieve a desired gendered [re]construction? And – perhaps this is the most sobering of questions to be raised – who is to choose the new sexual script?

While Wittig's insurgence is logically conceivable, one is left to ponder if it is practically possible; and if so, is it desirable? One cannot dispute the desirability of a world without heterosexism but some more prosaic minds are unwilling to embrace unconditionally this metalogic because it seems to imply a world without *heterosexualism*. Understandably they are baffled by such an implication. Consequently they tremble over the ontological breach of separatism and embattlement. Dizzy with conceptual vertigo, their instincts prevent them from crossing this ontological bridge lest they be swallowed up by dystopian visionaries. The more timid of us apprehend that the world of women is the world of men in reciprocal exchange; that a world without some kind of gendering is unimaginable. Yet we desire to invent ways – sexual scripts if you will – in which this might be done better than it has been. Nonetheless even if it were socially possible these same timid and prosaic souls – including myself – understand that differently sexed bodies will continue to meet, embrace, procreate, and yes, even love.

#### NOTE

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