



Ceci n'est pas une femme

*Écriture Féminine: On Language, Sexuality and the Body in Psychoanalytical
Feminist Context*

Bachelor Thesis

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Introduction

In 1976, Hélène Cixous wrote the notorious words that “[w]oman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal.” (Cixous 1976: 875). This quote can be found in one of her most prominent essays ‘The Laugh of Medusa’ (1976), which is considered as the founding text of ‘écriture féminine’, or ‘feminine writing’. Not only did Cixous introduce a term that is still widely employed by (female) authors, she also relentlessly addressed the hotspot of patriarchy and women’s oppression: the phallogocentric discourse. Jacques Lacan’s notion that our everyday symbolic order as we know it is male centered, and moreover where the “phallus is a signifier” (Lacan 2006: 579), is one of the fundamental ideas in which écriture féminine is entrenched. Directed by this notion of the phallus as signifier, Cixous called for a radical change in language and discourse, and thus, a new language, one in which not the phallus forms the center, but one where the female sexuality is central. Écriture féminine then, is a new writing discourse, one that is created for women, and where women are able to reclaim their bodies which have been caged within an oppressive discourse. Consequently, this discourse does not only exist in theory, but can be found in many novels written by (and for) women, and even outside the psychoanalytical, feminist movement.

Before we dive deep into the exciting world of écriture féminine and feminism, it is important to know where and how écriture féminine was born. Écriture féminine and her founding mother(s) are rooted in psychoanalytical feminism. When Sigmund Freud formulated his famous saying that “anatomy is destiny” (Arneil 1999:173), and argued that a woman is destined to live as a subject that ‘lacks a phallus’, and therefore lives her life in a ‘lack of castration’, many feminists formulated theories in which they either ridicule Freud’s theories, or reformulate them. Psychoanalytical feminists, among whom Cixous¹, appropriate terms of the psychoanalytical scholarship, while simultaneously renouncing Freud’s ideas on the (unequal) relation between men and women. In doing so, the psychoanalytical feminist movement has acquired a network of terms and theories which formulate their concerns relating sexuality, patriarchy and desire. Apart from

¹ Although Cixous herself has always refused to call herself a feminist, considering she thought that feminism was a bourgeois and elite label. Cixous claimed that “feminists are women who want power” (Moi 1985: 103), which is not something that Cixous was aiming at. Furthermore, Cixous refused to see herself as a theorist, and consequently “believes neither in theory nor analysis” (Moi 1985:103). Even though it is not Cixous’ wish to be considered ‘feminist’, Toril Moi rightly points out in her book *Sexual/Textual* (1985), that Cixous’ “indubitable commitment to the struggle for women’s liberation in France, as well as her strong critique of patriarchal modes of thought, make her a feminist” (Moi 1985: 104). That said, I will refer to Cixous as ‘a feminist’ as well. This does not mean that I disrespect nor ignore Cixous’ contestation against the word ‘feminist’, but its purpose is to retain clarity within my thesis.

Freud, Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida play a big role in psychoanalytical feminism, especially their ideas on language, desire and deconstruction.

Even though *écriture féminine* is coined in the 1970s in France, and is most known within the Western, European feminist scholarship, the overall notion of women's writing can be traced back even earlier, and outside Europe. For example, in the early 20th century, rural Chinese women invented their own means of communication that goes by the name of 'Nüshu'. This new language, according to Anne McLaren, was invented by "Chinese women in Jiangyong county" (McLaren 1996: 382). These women "taught each other how to read and write in a phonetic syllabary to correspond with "sworn sisters," record women's ritual and festival performances, and transmit their own life-story" (McLaren 1996: 382). Nüshu is only one of the many accounts of 'women's writing'. The first account of a special women's language, McLaren argues, "can be traced back to as early as the fifteenth century" (McLaren 1996: 384). Even though the invention of Nüshu, and other 'women's languages' are situated in a different era and sociopolitical context, the point is that language and 'the written word' have always played a specific role in cases regarding sexual difference and/or gender oppression. The re-appropriation of language, either by inventing new words, or reorganizing the structure of sentences, is a powerful tool for women to (re-)gain agency, and to communicate without being caught in a patriarchal, oppressive system.

Whereas Nüshu is considered a 'secret language', one that consists of a combination of phonetic syllables and thus creating non-existent words², *écriture féminine* works within the already existing discourse. By deconstructing and rebuilding language as we know it, *écriture féminine* has developed a (theory on) language that at first sight appears fragmented, sliced up and chaotic, but when carefully read, order and logic are found. The novel that I will explore in my thesis in order to illustrate the fragmented yet ordered *écriture féminine*, is Monique Wittig's highly poetical novel *The Lesbian Body* (1975). Wittig, an essayist, novelist and radical feminist, whose writings are situated within the French psychoanalytical thought, employs *écriture féminine*, and works against the phallogocentric symbolic order. By ascribing a lesbian signifier in *The Lesbian Body*, Wittig displaces the phallus as signifier, and is therefore able to reclaim and construct the female, lesbian voice. With the reclamation of the female voice, Wittig employs this voice to construct the female, lesbian body, which has been caged within an oppressive, patriarchal and heteronormative discourse. With hardly any punctuation and lacking a plot, Wittig makes the reader reread, experience and visualize every aspect of the lesbian female body, or, as B. L. Knapp (1979) formulates it in his book review of *The Lesbian Body*, "[e]very nook and cranny, every follicle and

² And Nüshu is exclusively a language created by and for women, whereas *écriture féminine*, as formulated by Cixous, can be employed regardless of "the sex of the author" (Moi 1985: 103)

orifice of the woman's body is divinized, idolized, apotheosized. Nothing is left to the imagination; all mystery has been banished” (Knapp 1979: 738).

Whereas earlier depictions of the women's body, and specifically those formulated within the phallogocentric discourse, tend to mystify the female body, Wittig does away with this mystery by spelling out for us every aspect that a women's body contains. This is what makes Wittig's book especially interesting to explore with the literary theory of *écriture féminine*: not only does she replace the phallus with lesbian sexuality, but Wittig also *literally* deconstructs and rebuilds the female body by naming every aspect, limb, vein and hair that a female (lesbian) contains. The female body is then finally reclaimed, and represented within a symbolic order that is not phallogocentric, but lesbian.

In my thesis, I will construct a theoretical framework around the concept of *écriture féminine*. In my first chapter, I will do so by exploring psychoanalytical feminism and its body of thought, with a special focus on the role of language and desire. In this chapter, I will examine the role of Jacques Derrida's deconstruction and its specific relation to psychoanalytical feminism. Jacques Lacan, and his interpretation of the phallogocentric discourse will also be discussed in depth, considering his ideas are essential in the understanding of *écriture féminine*. In my second chapter, I will define the concept of *écriture féminine* by discussing two major thinkers within the realm of *écriture féminine*: Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray. In this chapter I will have a closer look at the way in which *écriture féminine* interprets language and its relation to the female body. The concept of heteronormativity and bisexuality will also be addressed in this chapter, which will form the stepping stone to the third, and last chapter. In this chapter, I will pick up the terms and theories as formulated in the first two chapters of my thesis, and relate them to Wittig's novel *The Lesbian Body* (1975). This literary analysis will illustrate how the formulated network of terms manifests and comes to life when applied to a literary work. I will examine how *écriture féminine* works on a linguistic level, but also on the overall structure of the novel. In my analysis, I will use several key passages of Wittig's book which are considered as illustrative for the literary work. Or in other words: my methodological approach will be that of a close-reading. The intermediate goal of my thesis, therefore, is to formulate an elaborate network of terms that will form a framework in which a literary work can be read and analyzed, but also how the literary work itself can illuminate and clarify the theory.

1. Hyphenated Feminism: On Psychoanalysis, Lacan and Derrida

Why do I use the word *feminism* when many object to its Western, activist and even separatist associations? I do so because I believe that feminism is much more than an ideology driving organized political movements. It is above all an attitude, a frame of mind that highlights the role of gender in understanding the organization of society. Feminism provides the tools for assessing how expectations for men's and women's behavior have led to unjust situations, particularly but not necessarily for women. (Cooke 2002: 143)

Just as Miriam Cooke states, in the above citation, in her essay 'Multiple Critique. Islamic Feminist Rhetorical Strategies' (2002), I too think that feminism is not exclusively a Western, activist and ideological organization. Rather, it is *a state of mind* which enables critical analysis of unjust gender division and gender stereotypes. I will stick to Cooke's definition of feminism, as well as her motives to refer to the theorists and writers whom will be discussed later on in my thesis, as 'feminists'. The reason for defining my interpretation of feminism, as well as justifying my choice to use this term, is because I believe we have come to live in an era in which feminism is seen as something of an insult, a typically white elitist, and moreover, 'liberal' movement, and I would like to refute this idea by working with, and towards, another definition of feminism³. Important to note, is that Cixous, Wittig and Irigaray are considered to be situated within a 'radical feminism', rather than a 'liberal' feminism. This already shows why, and how, the definition of feminism I will employ contradicts the overall notion of feminism being typically liberal; there is not one feminism, but rather multiple, hyphenated feminisms.

This having been said, I would now like to move on to the topic of this chapter, which is exploring psychoanalysis, and its relation to feminism. Barbara Arneil, in her book *Politics and Feminism* (1999), argues that feminism and schools of thought are always in interaction. Arneil calls this interaction "hyphenated feminism" (Arneil 1999: 152), hyphenated in the sense that "feminism is a modifier, and always the second term, to the larger, referent, theoretical framework" (Arneil 1999: 152). *Écriture féminine*, and consequently Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray are situated within a hyphenated feminism, a psychoanalytical feminism to be exact. Important to note is that my focus will be on the rise of the *French* psychoanalytical feminism, which is quite different from its feminist peers across the Atlantic Ocean.

³ And also to again, support my choice to refer to Cixous, Irigaray and Wittig as feminists.

Defining Psychoanalytical Feminism

The interaction between psychoanalysis and feminism in France started in the late 1960s. It emerged around May 1968, the time of student-worker revolts against the repressive, Parisian government. The events that took place in May 1968 were considered as “the only general insurrection the overdeveloped world has known since World War II” (Ross 2002: 650). Even though the student-worker revolt did not succeed in overthrowing the current state policy in Paris nor France, which was “one of the more repressive of the so-called Western Democracies” (Moi 1985: 95), it did succeed in acquiring “political optimism among left-wing intellectuals in France” (Moi 1985: 95). If the people were capable of *almost* overthrowing their current state policy, they would be capable of almost anything! With this optimism, many feminist groups were created, including the ‘women’s only’ “politique et psychoanalyse” (Moi 1985: 96)⁴.

French psychoanalytical feminists were quite different from their American sisters: whereas the American feminists were preoccupied with renouncing Freud, especially his notion on the idea that “anatomy is destiny” (Arneil, 1999: 173), the French feminists “took for granted that psychoanalysis could provide an emancipatory theory” (Moi 1985:96). So whereas the American psychoanalytical feminist movement⁵ focused on refuting Freud, the French feminists looked for ways in which they could integrate psychoanalytical theory and feminism, and explore how theories on the unconscious and sexuality could help them analyse (unequal) gender roles in society. This different approach to (Freudian) psychoanalysis of the American and the French is mostly due to the fact that the latter is indebted to works of Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida. These philosophers were considered as highly impassable and cryptic by American feminists. It was not until the late 1970s that the American feminists had (*in general*) “overcome the effects of this initial culture-shock” (Moi 1981: 96), and found themselves reading the linguistic approach of psychoanalysis by French feminist scholarship.

With Derrida and Lacan (whom I will discuss in the next section) as their philosophical background, French feminists have as focal point the *role of language* in relation to sexual difference and the body. Or, as Andrea Nye puts it in her article ‘French Feminism and Philosophy of Language’ (1986), [t]he task for French feminism was to carve out a locus for feminist speech and writing against the confines of post-structural theory of language” (Nye 1986: 46). This ‘task’ has been taken up and interpreted differently within the group of French feminists, but language and the (de-)construction of sexuality remains their common ground

⁴ Initially the group was called “Psychoanalyse et Politique”. But when the feminist psychoanalytical movement developed, they changed the name to “politique and psychoanalyse”, because it communicated more with their priorities (politics as the most important aspect), and they got rid of the capitals, see Moi (1985) pp 95-96

⁵ For more elaborate information about the American psychoanalytical feminists, see Arneil (1999) pp 152-185

Language and the Body: On Phallogentrism and Différance

Considering that both Lacan and Derrida have a considerably weighty oeuvre, I will only focus on those terms and ideas that are relevant within the context of *écriture féminine*; this section serves to acquire a basic knowledge of the terminology of Lacan and Derrida. I would like to underline that this part of my thesis is considerably dense and long, which is due to the highly complex theories of Lacan and Derrida. Yet their ideas are essential in understanding *écriture féminine*, and thus I will consider their theories at length.

Jacques Lacan's notion of the Imaginary, the Mirror Stage and the Symbolic Order play an important role in psychoanalytical feminist theory. The Imaginary is the stage in a child's life in which the child "perceives no separation between itself and the world" (Moi 1985:99). This stage comes to being through the Mirror Stage, which can be understood as the moment when the child sees 'its' reflection in a mirror, and perceives this reflection as yet another being with which 'it' can identify. The child is alienated from his body, considering it can only perceive itself through mirage or through the other, whilst simultaneously it is through this alienation that the child identifies. Lacan claims that this mirror image "symbolizes the *I*'s mental permanence, at the same time as it prefigures its alienating destination" (Lacan 2006: 76)

The Imaginary is a stage in which the child has no sense of (sexual) difference or separation, and sees itself as fragmented, considering he can only perceive itself through the mirror. Everything and everyone is united, there is no lack. The Imaginary, and consequently the Mirror Stage, comes to an end when the Name of the Father enters the child's life. With this Lacan refers to the child's sudden awareness of sexual difference: the 'father'⁶ owns a phallus, whereas the mother 'lacks' a phallus. It is with the entrance of the Name, which also indicates the entrance of the Law (meaning that from that point social order and values are set: the Law has entered the child's life), that the child enters the Symbolic Order. Lacan argues that "[t]his moment [entrance of the 'father'] at which the mirror stage comes to an end inaugurates (...), the dialectic that will henceforth link the *I* to socially elaborated situations" (Lacan 2006: 79). Thus, the Imaginary comes to an end when the notion of 'sexual difference' arises. It is also at this point that the (male) child realizes that he is not the same as his 'castrated' mother, forever breaking the unitary bond with the mother; it starts its life in lack. As for the 'female' child and the entrance of the Symbolic Order, she also breaks the bond with her castrated mother, and focusses solely on the father who is the holder of that which has power: the phallus (Grosz 1990: 67-69, Moi 1985:99-101).

⁶ With 'father', Lacan is not exclusively referring to an *actual* father, but also to a metaphorical father: the metaphorical father can be embodied by every 'man with authority'. This authority then, is associated with the phallus as well as with order and obedience (see Grosz 1990: 69)

In relation to *écriture féminine*, the ‘broken’ mother-child bond is of great importance, especially for Irigaray. By using Lacan’s theory on the entrance of the Law, and with that the shattered unity between mother and child, Irigaray argues that women should start writing by employing ‘jouissance’, a term coined by Lacan referring to both bodily pleasure (orgasms), as well as a ‘tool’ or ‘experience’ that takes place within a psychological sphere in which the Law has not yet entered (in a sense, *jouissance* refers to an ‘orgasmic return’ to the Imaginary, if you like). In this way, according to Irigaray, the unity between mother and child is experienced and from this sense of unity, women must start writing.

With the entrance of the Symbolic Order, the unconsciousness is formed; the unitary bond with the mother must be repressed, which Lacan termed, as cited in Elizabeth Grosz’s book *Jacques Lacan. A feminist introduction* (1990) a “primary repression” (Grosz 1990: 66). It is because of this repression and this lack of unity, that language is acquired. Language, which can be understood as the interplay between signifiers, serves as a means to fill up this deficiency; it is the manifestation of a desire back to the Imaginary, a desire to return to the stage where there was no lack. Moi explains to us how this works, very clearly, by stating that “[t]here can be no final satisfaction of our desire since there is no final signifier or object that can *be* what is lost forever” (Moi 1985: 101). So language serves to obtain *the* signifier, or the ultimate desire, that will bring back the Imaginary and with it, its unity with the mother, even though this desire will never be satisfied. Language then, moves from object to object (desire to desire), in search of this desire. The notion of language as a manifestation (or replacement) of desire is picked up by the psychoanalytical feminists as well. This Lacanian psychoanalytical relation enables the psychoanalytical feminists to work within a definition of language that is not structured according to arbitrariness and coincidence⁷, but rather one that is defined by sexuality and desire. These terms play a big role in psychoanalytical feminism (or any feminism for that matter) because it verifies their incentives of the construction of the female sexuality/body through language.

Now to continue with Lacanian theory, the phallic father as the bringer of the Symbolic Order, makes the phallus the center of this order: the center of language. The Symbolic Order, then, has a phallus as signifier: it is a *phallogentric discourse*: “[f]or it [the phallus] is the signifier that is destined to designate meaning effects as a whole, insofar as the signifier conditions them by its presence as signifier” (Lacan 2006: 575). The phallus, as the bringer of Order, is either the signifier of ‘a lack’ (as in the case for ‘the castrated woman’), or of ‘the phallic power’. Everything is defined and explained through this phallic signifier, or as Ann Rosalind Jones puts it: ‘The rest of the world, which I define as the Other, has meaning only in relation to me, as man/father, possessor of the

⁷ See Ferdinand de Saussure’s *Course in General Linguistics* (1916) for more on structuralism, language and the arbitrary sign.

phallus” (Jones 1981: 248). It is from this notion that *écriture féminine* and the psychoanalytical feminists formulate. They aim to write against, and consequently outside, this phallogocentric discourse.

Now that we have seen how language is acquired and how it is related to the phallus, and is therefore *phallogocentric*, I would like to turn to Jacques Derrida, and his notion of ‘différance’. As we have seen, the phallogocentric discourse is a discourse in which the ‘I’ is defined by ‘othering’, and the other only has meaning in relation to self. According to Derrida, as well as Cixous, this causes the phallogocentric discourse to be binary, or: a discourse that only has the capacity to exist and enunciate within binary oppositions: I/Other, “activity/passivity, sun/moon, culture/nature” (Moi 1985: 104), and so on. Cixous argues that ‘woman’ is always to be found on the right-hand of this division: the passive, ‘natural’ side, which is something Cixous wants to get rid of. She therefore uses Derrida’s notion of ‘différance’ as a way to break through, and address the *binary* phallogocentric order.

In his essay ‘Différance’, Derrida states that ‘meaning’ is not conveyed through the “static closure of binary opposition” (Moi 1985: 106), but rather is expressed through the play of the ‘phonemes’ (think for example the phoneme /e/ or /f/, a single unit). These phonemes are not opposed to one another, but they rather *differ*, and therefore have a signifying function. Derrida thus argues that “[w]hat we know as *différance* will thus be the movement of play that “produces” (and not by something that is simply an activity) these differences, these effects of difference” (Derrida 1968: 286). So the play that Derrida calls ‘différance’, is the ‘process’ or play between the ever deferring phonemes, and it is exactly this play of *différance* that produces meaning. This play is complicated when we add the notion of ‘presence’ and ‘absence’ to the discussion. According to Derrida, a phoneme differs from other phoneme(s) precisely because, e.g. the phoneme /a/ differs from those phonemes in a sentence that are *present*, but /a/ also refers and differs from the ‘absent’ phonemes. The /a/ thus only makes sense in relation to the phonemes that are absent, or that are to be enunciated in the ‘future’. Derrida states that

[d]ifférance is what makes the movement of signification possible only if each element is said to be “present,” appearing on the stage of presence, is related to something other than itself but retains the mark of a past element and already lets itself be hollowed out by the mark of its relation to a future element. (Derrida 1968: 288)

By emphasizing the movement of presence and absence, meaning-making and play, Derrida comes to the conclusion that “meaning is never truly present, but is only constructed through the potentially endless process of referring to other, absent signifiers” (Moi 1985: 106). What is important to note

here, the distinction between speech and writing; Derrida deliberately choose to call his theory of phonemes 'différance' with an /a/; if one pronounces this word, it sounds like the familiar word 'difference', but when read on paper, it becomes clear that an /a/ has replaced the /e/. Derrida argues that he choose to make a 'silent spelling mistake' in differe[/a]nce, because this way the phoneme /a/ will remain hidden, "secret, like a tomb" (Derrida 1968: 257).

This emphasis on writing, or the act of 'freezing speech', and the play of language, is picked up by the psychoanalytical feminists (especially by Cixous). Just like *différance*, *écriture féminine* is secret like a tomb, hidden from phallic power. The notion of *différance* enables Cixous and her peers to work with a language that consists of play (rather than, again, the structuralist, binary notion of language). Moreover it is a way of refuting the passive/natural characteristics of women in language, considering *différance* does away with binary distinctions, and makes room for a multiple understanding of language based on play. By using a theory of language based upon *différance*, desire and 'jouissance', psychoanalytical feminists have surrounded themselves with a theoretical framework that enables the practice of *écriture féminine*.

2. *Écriture Féminine*: On Multiple Tongues and Medusa's Smile

Now that we have seen where the psychoanalytical feminists have originated from, and we have acquired a basic understanding of the ideas of Derrida and Lacan, I would like to turn to one of the most important concepts that the psychoanalytical feminists have coined: *écriture féminine*. I will focus on two psychoanalytical feminists who are considered to be the founding mothers of *écriture féminine*: Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray.

Écriture Féminine: On Cixous and Irigaray

Cixous' essay 'The Laugh of Medusa' (1976) is considered to be the cornerstone of *écriture féminine*. As explained in the previous chapter, the phallogocentric discourse is key to the concept of *écriture féminine*. Cixous explains her interpretation of the Lacanian notion of phallogocentrism by using the term 'marked writing'. She argues

that there is such a thing as marked writing; that, until now, far more extensively and repressively than is ever suspected or admitted, writing has been run by a libidinal and cultural-hence political, typically masculine-economy; that this is a locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated (...); that this locus has grossly exaggerated all the signs of sexual opposition (and not sexual difference), where woman has never her turn to speak. (Cixous 1976: 879)

By stating that there a marked writing (that is, phallogocentric order) which consists of *oppositions* rather than *differences*, we can see how and where the psychoanalytical feminists draw upon Derrida and Lacan; if women want to write them selves [sic] they must use a discourse based on difference (*différance*). This emphasis on difference is mainly due to the fact that Cixous, as well as Irigaray argue that women are not opposed to, but 'differing' from men. Moreover, a woman does not have *one* sexuality, but rather multiple (infinite) ones. Cixous argues that "'It is at the level of sexual pleasure in my opinion that the difference makes itself most clearly apparent in as far as woman's libidinal economy is neither identifiable by a man nor referable to the masculine economy.'" (Jones 1981; 251)⁸. Here we can see why sexuality and the body play such a big role in *écriture féminine*; it is at the level of sexuality that women and men *differentiate*. Irigaray, in her essay 'When Our Lips Speak Together' (1980), agrees to this notion of multiple differing sexualities as well, but draws more specifically upon the female genitals. She argues that the female genitals are not *one*,

⁸ Jones quotes Cixous. Original quote can be found here: Cixous, "Sorties," in *La Jeune Née* (Paris: Bibliothèque 10/18, 1975), translated in *New French Feminisms*, p. 98.

because it consists of multiple lips: the lips of the mouth, and the labia. Jones explains that, by summarizing Irigaray, “women experience a diffuse sexuality arising, for example, from the “two lips” of the vulva, and a multiplicity of libidinal energies that cannot be expressed or understood within the identity-claiming assumptions of phallogocentric discourse.” (Jones 1981: 250).

What we see now is the way in which psychoanalytical feminists picked up, or reformulated, terms from Lacan’s theory. By departing from Lacan’s notion of the ‘phallogocentric discourse’, Cixous and Irigaray are able to explain why women are not able to speak and write themselves. The phallogocentric discourse is made up of binaries, of the I versus the Other; the female sexuality cannot situate itself within this symbolic order. Their sexuality is not one, but multiple. Next to this feminist Lacanian adaptation, we can also see where Derrida has been picked up. We need to take into account that, in his formulation of *différance*, Derrida pleads against the notion of a binary sign, and argues for a language that comprises of *différance* and *infinite play*: as such his theory is extremely suited to *écriture féminine*. With the help of Derrida and Lacan, *écriture féminine* comes into existence by using a language based upon difference and multiplicity. In the next chapter, where I will do a close-reading of Wittig’s *The Lesbian Body* (1975), I will demonstrate what the employment of *différance* looks like, and how this affects the reading experience

Additionally, the Imaginary and consequently, the mother-child bond, play a role in (Irigaray’s) *écriture féminine*. Here, in the Imaginary, all the lips, of mother, daughter, sister, vulva, and mouth, can speak together. From this position of unity (but not sameness), the female sexuality and ‘identity’ can come into full existence. But, one might ask, how can one write from this position? Irigaray argues that, when the Imaginary comes to an end with the entrance of the Law, the girl is considered as being castrated and will live her life in *penis envy*: a life that only serves to obtain the phallic power. Irigaray argues that,

as long as the woman is thought to envy the man his penis, he can rest secure in the knowledge that he must have it after all. The function of the female penis envy, in other words, is to bolster up the male psyche (Moi 1985: 133)

So the notion of castration lack only serves to secure the male fear to lose his authority as a ‘holder of the phallic power’, Irigaray states. She then argues that women are, and always have been, constructed within the phallogocentric discourse as “specifically man’s Other” (Moi 1985: 133), and are placed outside the orders of representation. Irigaray argues that this placement of the female as the complete Other causes “only absences, defects, negatives to name ourselves” (Irigaray 1980: 71). For this reason, Irigaray’s ‘When Our Lips Speak Together’ is written like a dialogue; she seems to be in a direct conversation with her ‘Imaginary mother’, her sexuality, her daughter.

I love you, childhood. I love you who are neither mother (pardon me, mother, for I prefer a woman) nor sister, neither daughter nor son. I love you-and there, where I love you, I don't care about the lineage of our fathers and their desire for imitation men. And their genealogical institutions. Let's be neither husband nor wife, do without the family, without roles, functions, and their laws of reproduction. (Irigaray 1980: 72)

This notion of 'writing from/to sexuality' by going back to a stage in which the phallic father was not yet holding true power is important for *écriture féminine*. This 'stage' gets achieved in the way Irigaray does it, that is, denying penis envy and castration, and thus creating a position in which women are outside the dark corner. Or, as is more the case in Cixous' *écriture féminine*, one can use the notion of 'jouissance'. I already touched briefly upon *jouissance* in the previous chapter, but to make a clear definition I would like to quote Jones who states that *jouissance* is "the direct re-experience of the physical pleasures of infancy and of later sexuality, repressed but not obliterated by the Law of the Father" (Jones 1981: 248). In a sense, *jouissance* can also be understood as a 'going back to the Imaginary', but this term refers more explicitly to bodily pleasures, rather than a theoretical backfire to Freud (as in the case of Irigaray). Cixous uses *jouissance* to convince women to start writing from this orgasmic, chaotic, meta position, and by doing so, they will be able to write themselves outside the phallogentric symbolic order that cages their bodies. The emphasis on bodily experience and the reclamation of the body is highly indebted to psychoanalytical theory, where the sexed body and the male/female gender division is the center of attention.

Heteronormativity and Bisexuality

Apart from the sexed body, the notion of heteronormativity must be addressed; how do the psychoanalytical feminists deal with this perception of gender division and the notion of heteronormativity within the context of psychoanalytical thought? *Écriture féminine*, especially Cixous, is concerned with the division of genders. Cixous argues that this strict division again leads to a binary opposition that is central to the phallogentric symbolic order. She argues that *écriture féminine* is employed in a language that is *bisexual*. With 'bisexual' Cixous is not implying the literal bisexuality (that is, when one is attracted to both sexes), because this definition is again trapped within a division of the sexes, but she rather means the 'other bisexuality'. Cixous defines this 'other bisexuality' as a writing in between, a writing that is "multiple, variable, ever-changing, consisting as it does of the non-exclusion either of the difference or of one sex" (Moi 1985:109). This 'other bisexual writing' can perhaps be viewed as the 'sexed' Derridaen *différance*, then. Cixous states that,

[b]isexuality: that is, each one's location in self (...) 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. (Cixous 1975: 884)

So écriture féminine not only goes against the heteronormativity that is embedded within (contemporary) society and language, but moreover strives for a *language* without sex differences; a language that is bisexual. It strives for a unity which is not one nor the same, but a unitary, infinite space in which language can manifest. But not only must this space be created in order to let the language flow, the language must flow according to this space: this language is called écriture féminine. In the next chapter, I will elaborate bisexual language by analysing Wittig's *The Lesbian Body* (1975).

3. Wittig's *The Lesbian Body*: From Bits to Pieces to the Body

By using *The Lesbian Body* (1975) as a case study, I will explore how the literary work and the psychoanalytical framework can be *mutually illuminative*. That is to say, this reading of Wittig does not solely serve to secure the concepts explained in my thesis, but it is also literary analysis of what has been argued throughout my thesis.

Wittig's *The Lesbian Body* is a book that is hard to categorize. To summarize very briefly, *The Lesbian Body* is a love story between woman and her body, or between two women. Their love is expressed by, literally (!), stripping parts of their bodies. Every limb, organ, saliva, everything is removed and described. In this way, Wittig reclaims and sets free the lesbian body in a highly lyrical, poetical language; the construction of the lesbian body through *écriture féminine*. According to Hélène Vivienne Wenzel, in her article 'The Text as Body/Politics: An Appreciation of Monique Wittig's Writings in Context' (1981), *The Lesbian Body* is "an esoteric and erotic Sapphic "Song of Songs," (...) the most notorious of Wittig's works, and probably the most difficult to read" (Wenzel 1981: 265). This description of Wittig's book being 'an esoteric and erotic Sapphic Song of Songs' is essential, considering it addresses several axes of Wittig's book that will help us understand how *The Lesbian Body* employs *écriture féminine*. The *Song of Songs* refers to the biblical book which goes under the same name (it is also being referred at as the *Song of Solomon*). It can be summarized, according to Tawny Holm in her review on Cheryl Exum's *Song of Songs*, "as a "long lyric poem about erotic love and sexual desire," without linear progression, although there is poetic development in spite of the poem's circularity" (Holm 2006: 587). The *Song of Songs* can be read as "essentially two long speeches each by the female and the male lover, with an introductory and concluding dialogue between the lovers about love" (Holm 2006: 587). Wittig's work then, is a Sapphic *Song of Songs*, an erotic and esoteric rewriting of the biblical original. Her book is not a 'dialogue between a male and female lover', but a lesbian esoteric revision.

The rewriting of myth and biblical references is not uncommon in *écriture féminine*, think for example the title of Cixous' essay; 'The Laugh of Medusa'. The world of myth and religion according to Cixous and Irigaray, as stated in Moi's book, "presents a universe where all difference, struggle and discord van in the end be satisfactorily resolved" (Moi 1985: 116). Wittig then, writes within this world that lacks (sexual) difference. But next to *The Lesbian Body* *an sich* being a Sapphic *Song of Songs*, she also refers to myths within her work. Instead of using the real protagonists in the myth in question, Wittig replaces every male character with a female protagonist. For example: "Zeyna the all-powerful she who shakes her mane and grasps the lightnings in her hand" (Wittig 1975: 42). Instead of referring to the Greek god Zeus, she replaced his name with the female Zeyna. Achilles becomes Achillea, and Patroclea is her lover: "Fire fire fire even to the

tendon of Achillea, the well named she who so loved Patroclea.” (Wittig 1975: 34). By displacing the male voice in myth, Wittig does away with patriarchy and heteronormativity as assumed in the structure of myth, and reforms them to lesbian myths. The world of myth and biblical books is a world where the lesbian signifier can flourish and bloom, considering myth symbolizes a world without difference (but with *différance*), and a world where the struggle between male authority over the female body is eventually resolved. Wittig’s world of myth regains even more strength by making it a world that is only inhabited by female lesbian lovers and signifiers. Moreover, the female body is finally opened up, ready to be engraved in language.

The replacement of the male voice by a lesbian one has more implications. As discussed in chapter two, the notion of bisexuality and language play a big role in the theory of *écriture féminine*. In *The Lesbian Body*, from the very beginning of the book, the two lovers are already ‘lesbian’⁹. It is already in the first lines of the book where they declare love to one another: “m/y very beautiful one m/y very strong one m/y very indomitable one m/y very learned” (Wittig 1975: 15). When we take into account that Wittig, by her specific use of lesbian myth, has created a space in which there is no sex difference (I will comment on this in more depth in the next paragraph), and the fact that mythical references are related to their capacity to create a world in which ‘satisfactory ending’ is a given, we can see how Wittig employs Cixous’ notion of bisexual language. Wittig is capable of recuperating the lesbian body because of this sexless, genderless space that is opened up, and it is within this space that language becomes bisexual: it is in between the two worlds, in between the two bodies that both form *The Lesbian Body*. This also reminds one of Irigaray’s Imaginary, that is, writing from a space in which there is no difference, gender or phallic power; just the mother and the child in a primordial sea of love.

But where Cixous and Irigaray, and their notions of bisexuality and the Imaginary, are striving for a ‘stirring up of differences, rather than annulling them’, *The Lesbian Body* indeed seems to strive for a annulling of differences. The *lesbian* female body is all there is left: in this way, differences are not stirred up, but rather have completely vanished. The label of ‘feminine’ loses significance and is not a characteristic brand anymore, the only thing that still exists in Wittig’s world are lesbian bodies, and every single *referent to the heteronormative world is annulled* (although the title, *The ‘Lesbian’ Body*, still seems to refer to differing sexualities).

⁹ Important to note here, is the difference between Cixous’ bisexual language, and Wittig’s lesbianism. Wenzel argues that “[i]n contrast to the metaphorical bi-sexuality of Cixous’s *Souffles*, and the attenuated agony and ecstasy accompanying *the prise de conscience* of a woman coming (from the heterosexual world) to love another woman in *Preparatifs de noces au-deld de l’abime*, the female protagonists in Wittig’s works are female-identified and women-loving before they write themselves into discourse” (Wenzel 1981: 279). But that is not to say that Cixous’ notion of bisexuality and writing is not applicable in Wittig’s context. Bisexual language means also a symbolic order in which there the strict gender division and heteronormativity are blurred.

If we go on further with the insight that *The Lesbian Body* removed the overall label of femininity by creating “a systematic movement to affirm lesbian inter-subjectivity” (Shaktini 1989: 83), *The Lesbian Body* serves to, indeed, rebuild the lesbian body. But this recuperation and rebuilding is not a jolly process, but rather a dark and sometimes painful process. Wittig confronts us with parts of the body that have never been inscribed, parts that show that the lesbian body is not the mysterious female body as depicted in phallogentric language. The ‘lyrical *I*’ in *The Lesbian Body* struggles with this confronting painful process of the loss of the label of ‘the feminine body’, and the confrontation with aspects of the body that are not as poetic as they initially (when still trapped in the phallogentric order) seemed. Rising up from the dark underworld in which the lesbian body has been caged is not always a pleasurable process:

I wish to be expelled from this land blessed above all others because of m/y very great folly, you condemn m/e to every hell, you spit in m/y eyes, you ask m/e how many times it will be necessary to depart once more to travel to find a place to live, you ask m I e if I wish to die and at the moment I say yes your strong hand falls on m/e, darkness covers m/y eyes (Wittig 1975: 118)

This quote addresses the void that is created with the absolute removal of the label of ‘the feminine body’, and the travel from the hellish depths of the phallogentric order to a ‘find a place to live’. Yet, once the lesbian body gets shape, and is stripped from all of its body parts; unity, love and peace and heal the pain caused by the journey out of the depths of discourse. *The lesbian body* shows us the body in a way in which a body has never been represented before.

The Lesbian Body can be read as a constantly climaxing dialogue between two female lovers: a never ending ecstasy in which pain and pleasure intertwine (an experience of jouissance). This infinity can be found throughout the overall structure of the book (where sentences are left unfinished, and can take up half a page without punctuation. Moreover, pages 28, 40, 53, 62, 76, 88, 101, 115, 128, 141, 153 of *The Lesbian Body* (1975) are scattered with names of bodily fluids in big capital letters, which make them stand out from the rest of the pages. Yet what is so remarkable about specifically these pages, is that these pages are the only *finished* ‘songs’ or ‘poems’. “THE LESBIAN BODY THE JUICE THE SPITTLE THE SALIVA THE SNOT THE SWEAT (...) THE PUBIS THE LESBIAN BODY” (Wittig 1975: 28,153). By putting into capital letters, ‘every nook and cranny, every follicle and orifice’ of the lesbian body, yet making this account start with-, and end with THE LESBIAN BODY, tells us what the only finished product is of Wittig’s écriture féminine: the lesbian body. Other songs between the two lovers in the book are everlasting and infinite.

Lastly, I would like to look at one more aspect of Wittig's *The Lesbian Body* in relation to écriture féminine, that is, the way Wittig splits up the pronoun (see for example Wittig 1975: pp 150-151). This way of denying pronouns by splitting them up, can be found throughout the entire book. Wenzel argues that this splitting can be read as "the implicit schizophrenic or split nature of any female who attempts to constitute herself as the subject of her own discourse" (Wenzel 1981:277). The decapitated pronoun can be considered as the ever ambivalent relation between women and language, or woman and her body. In *The Lesbian Body* the reader gets thrown within a world in which there is no single 'I'. By cutting the language to bits and pieces, Wittig reveals the ambivalent character of the lesbian body, by using a language of différance, both literally and figuratively. Also, she seems to employ Cixous' 'other bisexual' language: the split pronoun refers to more than just one 'self', or sexuality, but rather multiple ones. She demonstrates how a language of différance is the only way to construct and reclaim an ambivalent, plural body. Moreover, the inserting of the '/' in between e.g. the m/e also shows how Wittig's 'me' is split: the phoneme 'm' is differing from the phoneme 'e', *yet these phonemes also differ from all the other phonemes that are absent*, making it a split word and thus representing a 'split' identity. This identity only makes sense in relation to all the unrepresented, caged and silenced 'lesbian bodies'; all the other signifiers. Unity, lesbianism, myth, plurality, order, chaos, love, hate, pain and orgasms: all can be found in Wittig's account of the lesbian body, which makes it a manifestation of écriture féminine *par excellence*.

Final Conclusions

Margaret Crosland, in her introduction to Wittig's *The Lesbian Body* (1975) argued that "[t]he implications of a poetic anatomy of the female body are wider than even the male chauvinists may think" (Wittig 1975: 8). It is this statement that I have verified in my thesis. By formulating a broad theoretical framework around the concept of *écriture féminine*, and consequently demonstrating the interconnectedness between Derrida's *différance*, Lacan's phallogentrism and the sexed body, the specific relation between the female body and (poetic) language is laid bare. The symbolic order, or what we know as our everyday discourse, is male centered; it is ordered, structured and created to confirm and secure the male as the holder of phallic power. Moreover, if we follow Lacan's thread, and consider language as a product of the entrance of 'sex difference' and the phallic father, the relation between sexuality, the body and language becomes inseparable. And what is the place of women in this language that is formed as a consequence of the entrance of the father? In the dark corner, the silenced corner. If it is indeed the phallogentric symbolic order that is the very hotspot of patriarchy, oppression and censorship of the female voice, the demand for a 'feminine language' is a sure fact.

Cixous and Irigaray accommodated this request by coining *écriture féminine*. It is through this revolutionary way of writing, that women can reclaim their censored bodies. *Différance*, *jouissance* and the Imaginary are terms that are essential within *écriture féminine* and its employment, considering it enables a writing based on play, multiplicity, bodily pleasure and plenitude. It enables women to pull themselves out of the dark, into the light that *écriture féminine* provides. But it is not solely in the theories of Derrida and Lacan that *écriture féminine* finds ground. It also serves as a tool to get rid of heteronormativity that is embedded in literature, language and society. *Écriture féminine* strives for a language that is gender neutral and bisexual; a writing in between the sexes, in between the physical and the mental world.

By connecting the terms that are essential in understanding *écriture féminine*, a steady and broad network arises. The analysis of Wittig's highly poetical novel *The Lesbian Body* demonstrates the dynamics and vividness of the theoretical framework. The analysis has shown that *écriture féminine* is not strictly theoretical but rather embodies a delicate equilibrium between theory and practice. Wittig's rewriting of myth and biblical stories serves as an example to demonstrate this equilibrium; by ascribing a lesbian signifier, Wittig unsettles the phallic and heteronormative power within myth. She does this by employing poetical functions that are characteristic for *écriture féminine*; displacement of the male voice, annulling sexual difference, splitting up pronouns. By analyzing Wittig in the context of myth and ambivalence or the split identity, *écriture féminine* has revealed *itself*. In this way, the theoretical framework becomes contextualized and shaped. *The*

Lesbian Body shows how *écriture féminine* can be employed, with respect to the theory that it constitutes. Wittig and the framework then, become mutually illuminative: Wittig's book, and consequently my analysis of her book, serve as a literary reflection on the theories of psychoanalytical feminism and *écriture féminine*.

But it is important to also adopt a critical point of view. Convincing and groundbreaking as Cixous' and Irigaray's ideas are, they do not seem to take into account the actual "material factors preventing women from writing" (Moi 1985: 123). In third world countries, for example, a lot of woman do not have access to education, and therefore are not able to write at all. Cixous and Irigaray view 'woman' as an ahistorical, transcendental being, but do not include 'woman' as an actual historical, 'social being', who are susceptible to social circumstances that actually can prevent them from writing. But even though their ideas could use more of an intersectional approach, it does not take away the great influence and change *écriture féminine* has brought about.

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