out, pinpoints at the same time the difficulty of the woman's position in today's
critical discourse. If, in our culture, the woman is by definition associated with
madness, her problem is how to break out of this (cultural) imposition of madness
without taking up the critical and therapeutic positions of reason: how to
avoid speaking both as mad and as not mad. The challenge facing the woman to­
day is nothing less than to "re-invent" language, to re-learn how to speak: to speak
not only against, but outside of the specular phallocentric structure, to estab­
lish a discourse the status of which would no longer be defined by the phallacy
of masculine meaning. An old saying would thereby be given new life: today more
than ever, changing our minds—changing the mind—is a woman's prerogative.

NOTES
1. Freud has thus pronounced his famous verdict on women: "Anatomy is destiny." But
this is precisely the focus of the feminist contestation.
2. Quotations from the "Preface," the "Notice" and from Balzac's text are my transla­
tions; page numbers refer to the Gallimard/Folio edition; in all quoted passages, italics mine
unless otherwise indicated.
3. This suicidal murder is, in fact, a repetition, not only of Philippe's military logic and
his attitude throughout the war scene, but also of a specific previous moment in his rela­
tionship with Stéphanie. Well before the story's end, Philippe had already been on the
point of killing Stéphanie, and himself with her, having, in a moment of despair, given up
the hope of her ever recognizing him. The doctor, seeing through Philippe's intentions,
had then saved his niece with a perspicacious lie, playing precisely on the specular illu­
sion of the proper name: "You do not know then," went on the doctor coldly, hiding his
horror, "that last night in her sleep she said, "Philippe!" "She named me," cried the baron,
letting his pistols drop" [p. 206].
4. Here again, the ambiguous logic of the "savior," in its tragic and heroic narcissism, is
prefigured by the war scene. Convinced of his good reason, Philippe characteristically,
impoverished by force, on others, so as to "save" them; but ironically and paradoxically, he al­
ways saves them in spite of themselves: "Let us save her in spite of herself!" cried Philippe,
sweeping up the countess" [p. 182].

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SANDRA M. GILBERT AND SUSAN GUBAR

INFECTION IN THE SENTENCE
the woman writer and the anxiety
of authorship
(1979)

What does it mean to be a woman writer in a culture whose fundamental defini­
tions of literary authority are, as we have seen, both overtly and covertly patriar­
chal? If the vexed and vexing polarities of angel and monster, sweet dumb Snow
White and fierce mad Queen, are major images literary tradition offers women,
how does such imagery influence the ways in which women attempt the pen? If

-CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN

I try to describe this long limitation, hoping that with such power as is now mine, and such use of language as is within that power, this
will convince any one who cares about it that this "living," of mine had been done under a heavy handicap....

-EMILY DICKINSON

The man who does not know sick women does not know women.

-NAK MITCHELL

I stand in the ring
in the dead city
and tie on the red shoes

-ANNE SEXTON
the Queen’s looking glass speaks with the King’s voice, how do its perpetual kingly admonitions affect the Queen’s own voice? Since his is the chief voice she hears, does the Queen try to sound like the King, imitating his tone; his inflections, his phrasing, his point of view? Or does she “talk back” to him in her own vocabulary, her own timbre, insisting on her own viewpoint? We believe these are basic questions feminist literary criticism—both theoretical and practical—must answer, and consequently they are questions to which we shall turn again and again, not only in this chapter but in all our readings of nineteenth-century literature by women.

That writers assimilate and then consciously or unconsciously affirm or deny the achievements of their predecessors is, of course, a central fact of literary history, a fact whose aesthetic and metaphysical implications have been discussed in detail by theorists as diverse as T.S. Eliot, M.H. Abrams, Erich Auerbach, and Frank Kermode. More recently, some literary theorists have begun to explore what we might call the psychology of literary history—the anxieties, hostilities and inadequacies writers feel when they confront not only the achievements of their predecessors but the traditions of genre, style, and metaphor that they inherit from such “forefathers.” Increasingly, these critics study the ways in which, as J. Hillis Miller has put it, a literary text “is inhabited... by a long chain of parasitical presences, echoes, allusions, ghosts, ghosts of previous texts.”

As Miller himself also notes, the first and foremost student of such literary psychohistory has been Harold Bloom. Applying Freudian structures to literary genealogies, Bloom has postulated that the dynamics of literary history arise from the artist’s “anxiety of influence,” his fear that he is not his own creator and that the works of his predecessors assume existence before and beyond him, assume essential priority over his own writings. In fact, as we pointed out in our discussion of the metaphor of literary paternity, Bloom’s paradigm of the sequential historical relationship between literary artists is the relationship of father to son, specifically that relationship as it was defined by Freud. Thus Bloom explains that a “strong poet” must engage in heroic warfare with his “precursor,” for, involved as he is in a literary Oedipal struggle, a man can only become a poet by somehow invalidating his poetic father.

Bloom’s model of literary history is intensely (even exclusively) male, and necessarily patriarchal. For this reason it has seemed, and no doubt will continue to seem, offensively sexist to some feminist critics. Not only, after all, does Bloom describe literary history as the crucial warfare of fathers and sons, but he sees Milton’s fiercely masculine fallen Satan as the type of the poet in our culture, and he metaphorically defines the poet’s task as a sexual encounter between a male poet and his female muse. Where, then, does the female poet fit in? Does she want to annihilate a “forefather” or a “foremother”? What if she can find no models, no precursors? Does she have a muse, and what is its sex? Such questions are inevitable in any female consideration of Bloomian poetics. And yet, from a feminist perspective, their inevitability may be just the point; it may, that is, call our attention not to what is wrong about Bloom’s conceptualization of the dynamics of Western literary history, but to what is right (or at least suggestive) about his theory.

For Western literary history is overwhelmingly male—or, more accurately, patriarcal—and Bloom analyzes and explains this fact, while other theorists have ignored it, precisely, one supposes, because they assumed literature had to be male. Like Freud, whose psychoanalytic postulates permeate Bloom’s literary psychoanalyses of the “anxiety of influence,” Bloom has defined processes of interaction that his predecessors did not bother to consider because, among other reasons, they were themselves so caught up in such processes. Like Freud, too, Bloom has insisted on bringing to consciousness assumptions readers and writers do not ordinarily examine. In doing so, he has clarified the implications of the psychosexual and sociocultural contexts by which every literary text is surrounded, and thus the meanings of the “ghosts” and “double” which inhabit texts themselves. Speaking of Freud, the feminist theorist Juliet Mitchell has remarked that “psychoanalysis is not a recommendation for a patriarchal society, but an analysis of one.” The same sort of statement could be made about Bloom’s model of literary history, which is not a recommendation for but an analysis of the patriarchal forces (and attendant anxieties) which underlie our culture’s chief literary movements.

For our purposes here, however, Bloom’s historical construction is useful not only because it helps identify and define the patriarchal psychosexual context in which so much Western literature was authored, but also because it can help us distinguish the anxieties and achievements of female writers from those of male writers. If we return to the question we asked earlier—where does a woman writer “fit in” to the overwhelmingly and essentially male literary history Bloom describes—we find we have to answer that a woman writer does not “fit in.” At first glance, indeed, she seems to be anomalous, indefinable, alienated, a freakish outsider. Just as in Freud’s theories of male and female psychosexual development there is no symmetry between a boy’s growth and a girl’s (why, say, the male “Oedipus complex” balanced by a female “Electra complex”) so Bloom’s male-oriented theory of the “anxiety of influence” cannot be simply reversed or inverted in order to account for the situation of the woman writer.

Certainly if we acquiesce in the patriarchal Bloomian model, we can be sure that the female poet does not experience the “anxiety of influence” in the same way that her male counterpart would, for the simple reason that she must confront precursors who are almost exclusively male, and therefore significantly different from her. Not only, after all, do these precursors incarnate patriarchal authority (as our discussion of the metaphor of literary paternity argued), they attempt to eliminate her in definitions of her person and her potential which reduce her to extreme stereotypes (angel, monster) drastically conflict with her own sense of her self—that is, of her subjectivity, her autonomy, her creativity. On the one hand, therefore, the woman writer’s male precursors symbolize authority; on the other hand, despite their authority, they fail to define the ways in which she expresses her own identity as a writer. More, the male authority which constrains their literary personae, as well as the fierce power struggles in which they engage in their efforts of self-creating, seem to the woman writer to contradict the terms of her own gender definition. Thus the “anxiety”—that a male poet experiences is felt by a female poet as an even more intense “anxiety of authorship”—a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a “precursor” the act of writing will isolate or destroy her.
This anxiety is, of course, exacerbated by her fear that not only can she not fight a male precursor on "his" terms and win, she cannot "beget" upon the self-same earth the muse. As Juliet Mitchell notes, in a concise summary of the implications Freud's theory of psychosexual development has for women, both a boy and a girl, "as they learn to speak and live within society, want to take the father's [in Bloom's terminology the precursor's] place, and only the boy will one day be allowed to do so. Furthermore both sexes are born into the desire of the mother, and, as through cultural heritage, what the mother desires the phallic-turn, the male children desire to be fathers, whereas the boy can fully recognize himself in his mother's desire. Thus both sexes repudiate the implications of femininity," but the girl learns (in relation to her father) "that her subjugation to the law of the father entails her becoming the representative of 'nature' and 'sexuality,' a chaos of spontaneous, intuitive creativity."

Unlike her male counterpart, then, the female artist must first struggle against the written socialization which makes conflict with the writer's (male) precursors seem inexpressibly absurd, futile, or even—as in the case of the Queen in "Little Snow White"—self-annihilating. And just as the male artist's struggle against his precursor takes the form of what Bloom calls revisionary swerves, flights, misreadings, so the female writer's battle for self-creation involves her in a revisionary process. Her battle, however, is not against her (male) precursor's reading of the world but against his reading of her. In order to define herself as an author she must redefine the terms of her socialization. Her revisionary struggle, therefore, often becomes a struggle for what Adrienne Rich has called "Revision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction... an act of survival."

Frequently, moreover, she can begin such a struggle only by actively seeking a female precursor who, far from representing a threatening force to be denied or killed, proves by example that a revolt against patriarchal literary authority is possible.

For this reason, as well as for the sound psychoanalytic reasons Mitchell and others give, it would be foolish to lock the woman artist into an Electra pattern made by the social and historical structure Bloom has set up as her precursor—and we shall see women doing this over and over again—searches for a female model not because she wants dutifully to comply with male definitions of her "femininity" but because she must legitimize her own rebellious endeavors.

At the same time, like most women in patriarchal society, the woman writer does experience her gender as a painful obstacle, or even a debilitating inadequacy; like most patriarchally conditioned women, in other words, she is victimized by what Mitchell calls "the inferiorized and 'alternative' (second sex) psychology of women under patriarchy." Thus the loneliness of the female artist, her feelings of alienation from male predecessors coupled with her need for Sidney precursors and successors, her urgent sense of her need for a female audience together with her fear of the antagonism of male readers, her culturally conditioned timidity about self-dramatization, her dread of the patriarchal authority of art, her anxiety about the inappropriateness of her medium, the only media she can use, all these phenomena of "inferiorization" mark the woman writer's struggle for artistic self-definition and differentiate her efforts at self-creation from those of her male counterparts.

As we shall see, such sociosexual differentiation means that, as Elaine Showalter has suggested, women writers participate in a quite different literary subculture from that inhabited by male writers, a subculture which has its own distinct history and literary traditions, even—though it defines itself as—much as the "main," male-dominated, literary culture. Distinctive, I stress, history. At the same time, as Patricia McDonald notes, this female literary subculture has been exhaurishing for women. In recent years, for instance, while male writers seem increasingly to have felt exhausted by the need for revisionism which Bloom's theory of the "anxiety of influence" accurately describes, women writers have seen themselves as pioneers in a creation so intense that their male counterparts have probably not experienced its analog since the Renaissance, or at least since the Romantic era. The son of many fathers, today's male writer feels hopelessly belated; the daughter of too few mothers, today's female writer feels that she is helping to create a viable tradition which is at last definitively emerging.

There is a darker side of this female literary subculture, however, especially where women's struggles for literary self-creation are seen in the psychosexual context described by Bloom's Freudian theories of patrilineal literary inheritance. As we noted above, for an "anxiety of influence" the woman writer substitutes what we have called an "anxiety of authorship," an anxiety built from complex and often only barely conscious fears of that authority which seems to the female artist to be by definition inappropriate to her sex. Because it is based on the woman's socially determined sense of her own biology, such anxiety of authorship is quite distinct from the anxiety about creativity that could be traced in such male writers as Hawthorne or Dostoevsky. Indeed, to the extent that it forms one of the unique bonds that link women in what we might call the secret sisterhood of the written literary subculture, such anxiety in itself constitutes a crucial mark of that subculture.

In comparison to the "male" tradition of strong, father-son combat, however, this female anxiety of authorship is profoundly debilitating. Handled down not from one woman to another but from the stern literary "fathers" of patriarchal tradition to all their "inferiorized" female descendants, it is in many ways the germ of a disease that can affect at any rate, a defilement, a disturbance, a distorting effect like a stain throughout the style and structure of much literature by women, especially—as we shall see in this study—throughout literature by women before the twentieth century. For if contemporary women do now attempt the pen with energy and authority, they are able to do so only because their eighteenth- and nineteenth-century foremothers struggled in isolation that felt like madness, obscurity that felt like paralysis to overcome the anxiety of authorship that was endemic to their literary subculture. Thus, while the recent feminist emphasis on positive role models has undoubtedly helped many women, it should not keep us from realizing the terrible odds against which a creative female subculture was established. Far from reinforcing socially imposed stereotypes, only a full consideration of such problems can reveal the extraordinary strength of women's literary accomplishments in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Emily Dickinson's acute observations about "infection in the sentence," quoted in our epigraphs, resonate in a number of different ways, here, then, for women writers given the literary woman's special concept of her place in literary psychohistory. To begin with, the words seem to indicate Dickinson's keen
consciousness that, in the purest Bloomian or Millierian sense, pimicous "guests" and "ghosts" inhabit all literary texts. For any reader, but especially for a reader who is also a writer, every text can become a "sentence"-a weapon in a kind of metaphorical germ warfare. Beyond this, however, the fact that "infection in the sentence breeds" suggests Dickinson's recognition that literary texts are coercive, imprisoning, fever-inducing; that, since literature usurps a reader's interiority, it is an invasion of privacy. Moreover, given Dickinson's own gender definition, the sexual ambiguity of her poem's "Wrinkled Maker" is significant. For while, on the one hand, "female" (meaning especially women writers) "may inhale" simulated "female diseases," not so much because it takes its name from the Greek word for womb, but because hysteria did occur mainly among women in turn-of-the-century Vienna, and because throughout the nineteenth century this metaphorical germ warfare, as if to elaborate upon Aristotle's notion that female autonomy was in and of itself a deformity.12 And indeed, hysteria was defined as an invasion of privacy. Moreover, given Dickinson's own gender definition, the sexual ambiguity of her poem's "Wrinkled Maker" is significant. For while, on the one hand, hysteria did not merely urge women to act in ways which would cause their "female diseases" parody did not merely urge women to act in ways which would cause them to become ill, the psychoanalytic and/or literary socialization literally makes women sick, both physically and mentally.13 Hyste-

...
with a female friend, not to speak of more legitimate reasons. ... Constantly con-
considering their nerves, urged to consider them by well-intentioned but short-
sighted advisors, [women] pretty soon become nothing but a bundle of nerves."

Given this socially conditioned epidemic of female illness, it is not surprising
to find that the angel in the house of literature frequently suffered not just from
fear and trembling but from literal and figurative sicknesses unto death. Although
her hyperactive stepmother dances herself into the grave, after all, beautiful Snow
White has just barely recovered from a catatonic trance in her glass coffin. And if
we return to Goethe's Makarie, the "good" woman of Wilhelm Meister's Travels
whom Hans Eichner has described as incarnating her author's idea of "contem-
plative purity," we find that this "model of selflessness and of purity of
heart... this embodiment of das Ewig-Weibliche, suffers from migraine head-
aches."16 Implying ruthless self-suppression, does the "eternal feminine" neces-
sarily imply illness? If so, we have found yet another meaning for Dickinson's
assertion that "Infection in the sentence breeds." The despair we "inhale" even
"at distances of centuries" may be the despair of a life like Makarie's, a life that
"has no story."

At the same time, however, the despair of the monster-woman is also real,
undeniable, and infectious. The Queen's mad tarantella is plainly unhealthy and
metaphorically the result of too much storytelling. As the Romantic poets feared,
too much imagination may be dangerous to anyone, male or female, but for
women in particular patriarchal culture has always assumed mental exercises
would have dire consequences. In 1645 John Winthrop, the governor of the Mas-
sachusetts Bay Colony, noted in his journal that Anne Hopkins "has fallen into a
sad infancy, the loss of her understanding and reason, which had been growing
upon her divers years, by occasion of her giving herself wholly to reading and
writing, and had written many books," adding that "if she had attended her
household affairs, and such things as belong to women... she had kept her
wits."17 And as Wendt Martin has noted:

in the nineteenth century this fear of the intellectual woman became so in-
tense that the phenomenon... was recorded in medical annals. A thinking
woman was considered such a breach of nature that a Harvard doctor reported
during his autopsy on a Radcliffe graduate he discovered that her uterus had
shrivelled to the size of a pea.18

If, then, as Anne Sexton suggests (in a poem parts of which we have also used
here as an epigraph), the red shoes passed furtively down from woman to woman
are the shoes of art, the Queen's dancing shoes, it is as sickening to be a Queen
who wears them as to be an angelic Makarie who repudiates them. Several
passages in Sexton's verse express what we have defined as "anxiety of author-
ship" in the form of a feverish dread of the suicidal tarantella of female creativity:

All those girls
who wore red shoes,
each boarded a train that would not stop.

......

Certainly infection breeds in these sentences, and despair: female art, Sexton sug-
gests, has a "hidden" but crucial tradition of uncontrollable madness. Perhaps it
was her semi-conscious perception of this tradition that gave Sexton herself "a
secret fear" of being a "reincarnation" of Edna metropolitan, whose reputation seemed
based on romance. In a letter to DeWitt Snodgrass she confessed that she had "a
fear of writing as a woman writes," adding, "I wish I were a man—I would rather
write the way a man writes."19 After all, dancing the death dance, "all those girls/who
wore the red shoes" dismantle their own bodies, like anorexics renouncing the
guilty weight of their female flesh. But if their arms, ears, and heads fall off,
perhaps their wombs, too, will "shrivel" to "the size of a pea"?

In this connection, a passage from Margaret Atwood's Lady Oracle acts almost
as a gloss on the conflict between creativity and "femininity" which Sexton's vio-
lent imagery embodies (or dis-embodies). Significantly, the protagonist of
Atwood's novel is a writer of the sort of fiction that has recently been called "fe-
male gothic," and even more significantly she too projects her anxieties of au-
thorship into the fairy-tale metaphor of the red shoes. Stepping in glass, she
sees blood on her feet, and suddenly feels that she has discovered:
The real red shoes, the feet punished for dancing. You could dance, or you
could have the love of a good man. But you were afraid to dance, because you
had this unnatural fear that if you danced they'd cut your feet off so you
wouldn't be able to dance... Finally you overcame your fear and danced,
and they cut your feet off. The good man went away too, because you wanted
to dance.20

Whether she is a passive angel or an active monster, in other words, the woman
writer feels herself to be literally or figuratively crippled by the debilitating al-
ternatives her culture offers her, and the crippling effects of her conditioning
sometimes seem to "breed" like sentences of death in the bloody shoes she in-
herits from her literary foremothers.

Surrounded as she is by images of disease, traditions of disease, and invitations
to both disease and to dis-case, it is no wonder that the woman writer has held
many mirrors up to the discomforts of her own nature. As we shall see, the no-
tion that "Infection in the sentence breeds" has been so central a truth for liter-
ary women that the great artistic achievements of nineteenth-century novelists
and poets from Austen and Shelley to Dickinson and Barrett Browning are often

They tore off their ears like safety pins.
Their arms fell off and sang down the street.

And their feet—oh God, their feet in the market place—

......

They could not listen.
They could not stop.
What they did was the death dance.
What they did would do them in.
both literally and figuratively concerned with disease, as it to emphasize the effort with which health and wholeness were won from the infectious “vapors” of despair and fragmentation. Rejecting the poisoned apple her culture offers her, the woman writer often becomes in some sense anorexic, renouncing her mouth on silence (since—in the words of Jane Austen’s Henry Tilney—“a woman’s only power is the power of refusal”), even while she complains of starvation. Thus both Charlotte and Emily Brontë depict the travails of starved or starving anorexic heroines, while Emily Dickinson declares in one breath that her eye got “put out.” "As we shall also see, other diseases and dis-eases accompany the two classic symptoms of anorexia and agoraphobia. Claustrophobia, for instance, agoraphobia’s parallel and complementary opposite, is a disturbance we shall encounter again and again in women’s writing throughout the nineteenth century. Eye “troubles,” moreover, seem to abound in the lives and works of literary women, with Dickinson matter-of-factly noting that her eye got “put out,” George Eliot describing patriarchal Rome as “a disease of the retina,” Jane Eyre and Aurora Leigh marrying blind men, Charlotte Brontë deliberately writing with her eyes closed, and Mary Elizabeth Coleridge writing and creating her poetry because “her eyes were steeled and bright, the Sun’s rays smote her till she masked the Sun.” Finally, aphasia and amnesia—two illnesses which symbolically represent (and parody) the sort of intellectual incapacity patriarchal culture has traditionally required of women—appear and reappear in women’s writings in frankly stated or disguised forms. “Foolish” women characters in Jane Austen’s novels (Miss Bates in Emma, for instance) express Malapropian confusion about language, while Mary Shelley’s monster has to learn language from scratch and Emily Dickinson herself childishly questions the meanings of the most basic English words: “Will there really be a ‘Morning’? Is there such a thing as ‘Day’?” At the same time, many women writers manage to imply that the reason for such ignorance of language—as well as the reason for their deep sense of alienation and inescapable feeling of anemia—is that they have forgotten something. Deprived of the power that even their pens don’t seem to confer, these women resemble Doris Lessing’s heroines, who have to fight their internalization of patriarchal strictures for even a faint trace memory of what they might have resembled. “Where are the songs I used to know? Where are the notes I used to sing?” writes Christina Rossetti in “The Key-Note,” a poem whose title indicates its significance for her. “I have forgotten everything I used to know so long ago.” As to make the same point, Charlotte Brontë’s Lucy Snowe conveniently “forgets” her own history and even, so it seems, the Christian name of one of the central characters in her story, while Bronte’s orphaned Jane Eyre seems to have lost (or symbolically “forgotten”) her family heritage. Similarly, too, Emily Bronte’s Heartbreak “forgets” or is made to forget who and what he was; Mary Shelley’s monster is “born” without either a memory or a family history; and Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Aurora Leigh is early separated from—and thus induced to “forget” her “mother land” of Italy. As this last example suggests, however, what all these characters and their authors really fear they have forgotten is precisely that aspect of their lives which has been kept from them by patriarchal poetics: their matrilineal heritage of literary strength, their “female power” which, as Annie Gottlieb wrote, is important to them because (not in spite of) their mothers. In order, then, not only to understand the ways in which “Infection in the sentence breeds” for women but also to learn how women have won through disease to artistic health we must begin by redefining Bloom’s seminal definitions of the revisionary “anxiety of influence.” In doing so, we will have to trace the difficult paths by which nineteenth-century women overcame their “anxiety of authorship,” repudiated debilitating patriarchal prescriptions, and recovered or remembered the lost foremothers who could help them find their distinctive female power.

NOTES


1. In “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Eliot of course considers these matters; in "Avebury" traces the ways in which the realist includes what has been previously excluded from art; and in The Sense of an Ending Frank Kermode shows how novelists lay bare the literariness of their predecessors’ forms in order to explore the dissonance between fiction and reality.


5. Ibid., pp. 404–405.


11. See Jesse Bernard, "The Paradox of the Happy Marriage," Pauline B. Bart, De-
A MINDLESS MAN-DRIVEN THEORY MACHINE

intellectuality, sexuality, and the
institutions of criticism

(1989)

A male perspective, assumed to be ‘universal’ has dominated fields of knowledge.

GAYLE GREEN AND COPPELLIA KAHN, MAKING A DIFFERENCE

I should hope eventually for the erection of intelligent standards of criticism.

JOHN CROWE, RANSOM, CRITICISM, INC.

To be signed with a woman’s name doesn’t necessarily make a piece of writing feminine. It could quite well be masculine writing, and conversely, the fact that a piece of writing is signed with a man’s name does not in itself exclude femininity.

HELENE CIXOUS, ‘CASTRATION OR DECAPITATION’

The male machine is a special kind of being, different from women, children, and men who don’t measure up. He is functional, designed mainly for work. He is programmed to tackle jobs, override obstacles, attack problems, overcome difficulties, and always seize the offensive. He will take on any task that can be presented to him in a competitive framework, and his most important positive reinforcement is victory. This ideology makes competition the guiding principle of moral and intellectual, as well as economic, life. It tells us that the general welfare is served by the self-interested clash of ambitions and ideas.

MARC CHAGALL, THE MALE MACHINE

This is an essay about the tie between the institutional construction of intellectuality and the social construction of sexuality. Let me start with error.

Knowing that we do not know is knowledge. And further, knowing that what one thought one knew is no longer believable is the most significant form of knowing. Just as problems, in some sense, precede solutions and precede answers, so not-knowing, including not-knowing-one-does-not-know, precedes knowing. This is the precondition upon which an intellectual comes to know. She acknowledges that a problem remains a problem, that an answer does