

# FEMALE GENESIS

Creativity,  
Self and  
Gender



NICOLE WARD JOUVE

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*Creativity, Self and Gender*

**NICOLE WARD JOUVE**

Polity Press

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## Introduction

# Male and Female Made (S)he Them

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him;  
male and female created he them. (Genesis 1: 27)

It is the sixth day, the crowning day of creation. God blesses 'them', tells 'them' to 'be fruitful and multiply', gives 'them' dominion 'over every living thing'. 'Them'?

## Male and FEMALE?

Men and women? The King James's translation of the Bible spells early and symptomatic trouble for women. On the one hand Genesis says 'them'. They, male and female, are equally included in the blessing, the bid to be fruitful, the dominion over every living thing. On the other, the translation says 'he' for God. 'He' created 'man', 'him', 'in his own image'. The masculine gender is associated with the creator, and the main name of the created human, Adam. Never mind that 'Adamah' means earth, soil, that Adam means the earthy, the clayey one, which applies as much to female as to male. That we are all, males and females, whether in the symbolic six days of the biblical creation, or through millions of years of evolution, made of matter. The Adam of chapter 2, the first human being, the one who is formed from the dust of the ground and breathed life into, is firmly male. Eve is created second, shaped from a rib from Adam's side, as a companion for Adam: for it is not good that man be alone. We all know the sequel: how Eve, not Adam, is seduced by the serpent, how she wants to taste of the fruit of knowledge, how the fall ensues. Countless prior, parallel or derived mythic stories follow:

from Pandora releasing all evils upon the world by opening the fatal box, to Eve in the medieval *Roman de Renart* stealing the rod God has given Adam to lash the sea and bring out of it all kinds of goodly animals. Adam has worked in the daytime. Eve creeps in at night, while Adam is asleep. She wants to be a creator too. She lashes the sea in her turn: out of it come all the evil beasts, lion and tiger and wolf and finally, last, fox . . .

Since that first chapter of Genesis, 'they' have not been equal sharers in the blessing of creation, in dominion over all living things. Full identity as a human being, in the act of knowing and in the creative act, have been firmly aligned with the male of the species, at least within the classical Greek and the Judeo-Christian civilizations and their European offspring. The female creator has been a deviant, the stealer of the rod. Man has been the universal category. Woman the endless problem, the one who would not stay in her place, whose deviancy lost Eden. The one whose existence has needed continuous definition in relation to the male: as companion, as begetter . . . For in that relation is her place, and if she tries again to have a direct relation to knowledge, to creation – well – we all know what evils will follow. Only when 'alone of all her sex' (as Marina Warner has stressed) she is both virgin and mother can she have power. The power of absolute humility. God's servant, God's mother: procreator, not creator. At least in the Christian tradition.

For there are earlier myths, earlier civilizations, in which there are goddesses, mother-centred societies. Is Judeo-Christianity, along with classical Greek and Roman thought, the expression of a male-centred, Arian era, succeeding a female-centered, Taurean one? Is the Judeo-Christian privileging of the male a phase through which humankind has been going for quite a while, but that will change in its turn? Can we imagine a further evolution to yet other types of relationship, beyond the splendours but also appalling imbalances and excesses of the Piscean age? What difference would it make if it was a 'She' who created? Can we imagine such a state? Can we go back to it, as seventies feminisms dreamt to do?

Male and female made *she* them. But of course: all human beings are, as Adrienne Rich put it, 'of woman born'. All children, whether male or female, have come out of a woman. For human societies to move from a mother-centred to a male-centred state, for the male to become *the* maker, all sorts of structures have to move into place: taboos, kinship systems . . . all the power structures which anthropology has described in the past hundred years or so, down to the religious and philosophical or scientific systems which have been analysed in the last thirty. Such as Aristotle's notion that the semen was the source of the embryo, the womb merely a vessel in which it developed, which neatly made the father into the key maker . . . Or such as Freud's notion that the little boy's sexuality was the point of reference, the little girl a complicated set of deviations from it, so that femininity itself appeared to be a disorder . . .

*Male and Female Created (S)he Them.* Introducing an 'S' into the quotation, making the creating subject either female or male, is my way of putting the question of the female knower, the female creator, firmly at the centre of this book. The essays here gathered ponder *her*. Historically grounded her: in the recent past, or today. She both mutates as contexts and civilizations mutate, *and* finds the same questions recurring: by virtue of her being a 'she'. Thus the first chapter asks how, at a particular moment in western civilization, in nineteenth-century Restoration France, a writer as aware of sexual difference as Balzac perceives the human and social contradictions deriving from the education given to young women, aimed at preserving them from knowledge, both intellectual and sexual. Each moment in history, each place, each class, makes something else of Eve, alters her *gender*: yet Eve clings on...

A number of the chapters are concerned directly with the woman creator, especially in her relation to motherhood, presented throughout the patriarchal ages as woman's true vocation, and the obstacle to her creativity: she is a procreator, she cannot be a creator. Will getting rid of the Mother help women become more creative? Must the 'Angel in the House', as Woolf called her, be murdered before women can be artists? How crucial to her specific, irreverent creativity, her subversion of the codes of femininity, is Angela Carter's hostility to the figure of the Mother? Can the Mother be a poet? Or if a mother happens to be a poet, is it another part of her that creates?

What is the female genesis?

### Male AND Female?

'Male and female created He them.' Does that mean that all created beings, both males and females, were made with masculine and feminine components, with both principles active in them, the offspring of both? Or that He made one male and one female, but as related components of His creation? Male relative to female, female to male, each finding itself and its fulfilment in relation to the other? There are, again over the ages, countless human mediations and variations on this theme, from Pausanias' story of the androgyne in Plato's *Symposium*, the double beings having been forcibly separated, each half seeking forever after for its other half – to Virginia Woolf's notion that the true, the full creator is both male and female, needs to achieve a lyrical state of balance – to Jung's ascription of an inner anima figure to men, an animus figure to women: it is in finding a relation to the inner other, the inner figure of the other sex, that each sex achieves integration.

Several of the chapters here meditate on this relation of male to female. The essays on the 'Battle of the Sexes and the First World War' look at some of the damage, lived and imaginary, which the experience

of the war did to the sexes' relations to each other. They also suggest that there was, in the 1920s, an attempt on the part of both male and female writers to go beyond anger and mourning – an attempt at reparation, a seeking for balance which took the form of writing through, and out of, the imagined other sex. The essays seek to go beyond the terms, coined and bandied in these same 1920s, of penis envy for women and of womb envy for men, to the inner relation each sex can have with the complementary, imaginary organs.

Chapter 8 is concerned with image-related forms of creativity. This essay on metaphors looks at how both men and women writers imagine the creative act. It reflects on the differences and similarities between the ways in which each sex uses images of the sea, and of the boat or bark or shell, to figure the work of art: here again, the relation to the mother (as sea, or container) turns out to be central, this time to *both sexes*. The interesting question becomes, where do the differences appear, and at what stage: image-making (metaphor) or pattern-making (narrative)?

Though the lion's share of the book is given over to the female figure, creator or knower, archetypal or real mother, metaphor or figure of speech, the question of the male creator and knower is also posed, either through the figures of Balzac, Breton, the war poets, Lawrence, Ponge, Freud or Lacan, or through reflexions on their imagined relation to femininity. But it is only in the conclusion that the question of the Father, present mostly till then through his deficiencies or absence, manages to become, however briefly and in extremis, centre stage ...

### **Feminisms: Where To Now?**

There are born, periodically, movements that call themselves or are in the orbit of what today we call feminisms. They shake the obstacles that lie in the path of women's full access to humanity. They question the ways in which societies construct femininity. Obviously, at such times passionate, apposite and also excessive or skewed things are said and done. And less obviously, things that make one miserable by virtue of the complex business of being human, and not by virtue of the specific constraints placed upon one's sex, get mixed up with the question of one's sex. Movements build up, have an impact. There are angry, hostile, as well as positive, reactions. Some things change for the better. Others don't, like the dragon disturbed in its sleep, that stirs and shakes itself, then goes back to sleep on its mound of gold. Some things go back to what they were before, or worse. But then new subtle changes for the better timidly appear. In the process everybody, men and women, gets rattled. Other problems than the question of one's sex come to the fore, new and old, that seem more urgent, that are seen, rightly or wrongly, as unrelated: wars, poverty, unemployment, nuclear and environmental

threats ... Or else it seems that the problem has been solved. Feminist issues are forgotten. Till women, somewhere and often in several places at once, begin to chafe at what they feel to be unjust and counterproductive or downright oppressive constraints. And the whole thing gets moving again.

Since 1968, we have been going through such a phase.

In the early days of what has been called second-wave feminism, a conspiracy of the evil Ps, the emanations of the Pater Familias, was seen to rule the empire. The Patriarchy was the enemy: a universal system of oppression to which men, by virtue of their sex, were all somehow party. Politics and Philosophy, the preserves of the males. Power: the realm of the Patriarchs. Phallogocentrism, privileging the Phallus and rationality, was the empire's system of thought. Based upon binaries it always placed one term, associated with the male, above the other, associated with the female. Man above woman, form above matter, mind over body, culture over nature. The One, Simone de Beauvoir had already said, above the Other, the second, sex. Subject (male) above (the sexual, female) object.

Feminism analysed the inequalities – economic, cultural. It pointed out that women owned 1 per cent of the world's wealth, did vast quantities of the world's work, were at the receiving end of battering and of legal discrimination, committed one-tenth of violent crimes. It proposed many ways to liberation. Equality was demanded. Let women have the same things as men. The same laws. And other laws too, abortion rights or affirmative rights that would put them on a par with men. Give them equal opportunities, rights. Equal pay. Let them have access to power: in politics, in the judiciary, the church, the media, finance ... Philosophical, cultural and psychoanalytic avenues were diversely pursued. Feminism proposed to revalue the Other, woman, in all that she was and had done as artist, thinker, politician. To revalue 'womanly' things and activities, the female body, quilt-making, nature, the subconscious, the mother and mothers. To analyse (as Luce Irigaray did) how the western subject had always been constructed in the masculine, and to make room for a feminine subject. To stop subsuming, to foreground the maternal body and those early impulses connected with it, as Kristeva has kept doing. Or else, as Cixous, in agreement with Derrida, did, to refuse hierarchized differences in favour of *différance*, of sexual difference as an interplay of masculine and feminine, endlessly renegotiable, endlessly deferring meaning. To write the repressed feminine body and in so doing to give a voice to what has never been heard. Or else again, following Deleuze, to propose 'becoming-woman' as a necessary, otherizing passage towards a new subjectivity, a minority experience as it were, relevant to both men and women. To disbelieve, shake, subvert the law, in language as in the polity always seen as the Law (and Name) of the Father. To argue (as Judith Butler does, following Foucault) that everything, matter, the body,

is discursive – that gender itself is a repressive construct. The task then is to ‘denaturalize’ it, in order to expose its fundamental unnaturalness.<sup>1</sup>

But that was, it gradually became clear, mostly well-to-do white western women talking. Feminisms had denounced the ways in which ‘man’ had been taken as a universal term, made to mean all human beings, but had in fact specifically meant men: so men had always been privileged, even though they might not have felt it. Now it appeared that white Western feminists had done the same, had universalized ‘woman’. They had been talking *for* others – subsuming women of colour, poor women, women from other cultures and parts of the world. How dare white Western feminists claim that what they wanted, from their privileged position, their liberal, generally atheistic system of values, was right for others? That was another form of oppression, African-American, African, Muslim, Asian, Hispanic women now forcefully pointed out. Post-colonial studies concurred. White feminisms were neocolonialist. Who had dared say that sisterhood was global?

Meanwhile many men saw how much women had gained, in their sense of self, their understanding, from all the shaking up, the questioning of the givens of femininity. Being a man was no picnic either, especially in a world full of uncertainties, unemployment, crumbling family patterns ... Let masculinity be questioned too. Masculinity studies came about. One now talked about gender, not women. While on one level, that is, a new awareness of the racial and cultural diversities of women’s experiences shattered the notion that you could talk about women, on the other the specificities of women’s plights became dissolved in the larger reflexion on the impact of socially constructed sexual difference.

And what about same-sex desire? Bisexual desire? What about compulsive heterosexuality, continuous with – expressive of? – phallogocentrism? Gay and lesbian studies, queer theory, bisexual studies grew. There again, through new alliances, new questionings, the terms women, woman, ceased to represent a focus, a locus, for liberation calls.

The enemy had multiplied (rather like Foucault’s power). It had initially been the system, the empire, call it the patriarchy or capitalism or phallocracy – whoever was in charge (your man or your boss or father or prime minister would do). Now the enemy could be white women, Western women, affluent women, women from the north, heterosexual women, homophobia, racism, binaries, women who liked men, women you didn’t agree with ... There were studies of violent women, women criminals, which shook the notion that there might be such things as feminine gentleness, maternal impulses which might be held up as models for a less violent world. Debates about the more emotional issues, violence, pornography, abuse, became polarized. It could now be seen that women were as aggressive as men (even though, in effect, they were less violent: but few were interested in that, unless it be as an argument in the continuing battle with the patriarchy). The women’s movement split, and split again. Being a woman was no longer an identity. It was

precisely sexual difference, biological differences made into an alienating bugbear, that came to be seen as the root of the trouble, binding women to motherhood. The very term Woman, which had been a rallying call, rather like 'workers of all countries unite' in the old Internationale, came under attack: the job to do, it now seemed, was to unmoor women from that body that had always been the pretext for their suppression. The body had to be mastered, shown to be changeable, malleable (the new clay, as it were, but it was the masterful ego that was to mould it, not the Spirit of God). Identity had to be tactical, forever reinvented, a mask put on, and cast off. Guerrilla tactics became the order of the day in a world in which the old iron curtains had fractured, then been shattered: alliances with other oppressed groups, theoretical wizardry, deconstruction, imaginary geometries, transvestism, transsexuality, endless transformations of your body, your image . . . All to do with representations, scenarios in which you felt you had been an object: now you became the subject and agent and Pygmalion of your own body, your own sexuality. You had to be nimble. Question, and question again. You had to 'position' yourself before you talked. Swiftly slot into opposition: you were aware of the relativism of what you were saying. You were linking up in cyberspace.

This book stems from this context. Ending with dialogues, it is aware of contradictions, full of questioning and self-questioning. It continuously seeks to revise its positions, leaves issues in mid-air, 'to be continued' in some other space. A collection of 'essays', essayings of thought on this, that and the other, whatever happened to preoccupy me at a given moment, this is a book on the hop, shifting its terrain as it goes. It searches for a voice as it listens to voices.

But it is neither relative nor provisional. Though its answers change and are often contradictory, the contradictions are the fruit of necessity – not scepticism, or doubt that answers may be found. It believes that the apparent bewilderment and splitting of the women's movement are, as well as a symptom of contemporary crises, the sign of its coming of age. A much greater awareness of complexities is being arrived at. Genuinely diverse thinking is being done, and the intricate realities revealed by fine scholarship have made us more modest and tentative in what we say, but also thereby more far-reaching. Truly mature thinking is being produced, and through interdisciplinarity subtler perspectives are opening. Relations are being perceived that once would have been made invisible by the partitioning between disciplines. I hope that there are at least signs of such maturity in the diversity of my own approaches, and sources. I have certainly learned, and keep learning, a great deal from psychoanalysis, and not just those versions of it that have become fashionable. This book attempts to listen to voices which are not 'in' voices: thus in my essay on 'The Battle of the Sexes' I question the prominence given to Freud's and Lacan's views of femininity in feminist debates on



psychoanalysis. Orthodoxies have formed in feminism as everywhere else, and they create blinkers which are difficult to remove, but which it is important to get out of the way.

### **Against Gender Trouble**

If I belong to the 1990s in my awareness of the complexities of gender, I am very much against what seems to be at present, in feminist circles, the spirit of the decade. My sense is that the way to progress lies, not in making 'gender trouble', as Judith Butler has famously called it, in destabilizing the terms 'masculine' and 'feminine', but on the contrary – as my title suggests – in making more room for the female alongside the male genesis. In not letting the trees – the realization of the infinite diversities of women in their diverse cultures, of the complexities of power, of the difficulties in finding lasting answers to women's suppression and sometimes oppression (not to mention homophobia, ethnic or race or class hatred) – prevent one from seeing the wood: which is, that (as I see it) the end of life is to find fulfilment as a human being, male or female, male and female. Working to understand better how gender works, where it begins and ends, how masculinity relates to femininity and vice versa, can gain more than anarchic or theatrical processes of destabilization. For once things have got destabilized, what new formation is going to take their place except one made of the very ingredients you'd got there to start with? What human beings are made of won't go away: ambivalence ... Fear and anger and hatred and tenderness and love, those conflicting impulses which are the human lot and which for want of containment, of shapes and structures that might help them conflict in healthy, in bearable ways, can so easily erupt into psychopathological formations ... That the women's movement, philosophically so critical of binaries, should have become embattled in so many either/or positions (Women against Pornography/Women Against Women Against Pornography, defenders versus attackers of 'Essentialism') should be a lesson in humility. There may be more future in patiently learning about projections than in seeking for an endlessly border-hopping self. Long gone, it seems to me, in these Rwanda-torn times, are the Fanon days in which one could believe that the uprising of the wretched of the earth and their expulsion of the colonizers would lead to new-found identities and singing tomorrows. Carnival – wonderful as its subversiveness can be – has its limits too: for it to erupt a few days in the year, there have to be power structures in place all the other days. And you can only be a nomad if you are lucky enough to have the wherewithal – in a large and plentiful land or in your bank account – to sustain you in your wanderings ...



It is one of the immense merits of feminism in the last quarter of a century or so to have brought to light how much gender is constructed, how relative – and ideologically charged – our gender valuations and expectations are, how much economics, and custom, and ethnicity, and period and place, enter into it. But because it is so, there is no vantage-point from which all this could be inclusively thought out. Concepts like masculine and feminine can only be examined fruitfully within precise parameters: looking, for instance, at how the femininity of a young girl in aristocratic Restoration France is explored and critiqued by Balzac.

My own parameters are close to home. Like Marion Milner it seems to me that 'knowing is no good unless you feel the urgency of the thing.'<sup>2</sup> Thinking for me needs to be rooted in experience and not just abstract knowledge. My range is the literature I have lived with all my life, some nineteenth, some twentieth century, some by male, some by female authors, some in French and some in English. I grew up in France, have spent most of my adult life in English-speaking countries, and the divides and the differences have long exercised me: they were central to my previous book, concerned with bilingualism and being caught in the middle, between two cultures, *White Woman Speaks with Forked Tongue*. My growing interest in the psyche has taken me more and more into areas of literary and psychoanalytic theory. A long-lasting concern with feminist issues makes me revisit areas of feminist debates, particularly those which are alive to writing as flesh, as life: so-called French feminisms ... For issues to have meaning for me, they have to be embodied.

Embodied: in texts. In speaking human beings, with their history, their agenda. And so I am uncomfortable with the more recent debates that analyse gender as technological, think that theory will produce the right answer (always the latest, the most dramatic = newsworthy; and always the only one). They discuss its geometries and geographies, praise the endlessly invented 'sexual personae' of art, costume, extol transvestism, self-modelling surgery, as if gender were removable at will, a thing of surface rather than one that plunges deep into our social and psychic histories, at once individual and collective. To my mind, writing *on* the body as opposed to French feminist seventies notions of writing the body subsumes that very body that is at present so fashionable. It makes it a thing that came out of nowhere, a materiality without an underground, used for a narcissistic show whose sole destination is the theatre of the gaze.

There is gender confusion – in all of us. And a good thing too; and probably a good thing, Andrew Samuels remarks, if there came to be more. For where there is most gender certainty on the surface is probably when there is most confusion beneath.<sup>3</sup> The worst homophobe may be the one who has least faced up to his or her leanings towards people of the same sex, and uses an aggressive show of certainty to protect herself or himself. Colette talks of the 'grave courage' that it takes for a woman to come to terms with 'ce qui l'incline vers la femme', her attraction to