



The Female Body IN Western Culture

CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES



Edited by Susan Rubin Suleiman

THE
FEMALE BODY
IN
WESTERN CULTURE



contemporary perspectives

EDITED BY
SUSAN RUBIN SULEIMAN

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S.R.S.

Cambridge, Massachusetts

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CONTENTS

Introduction	1
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EROS



(Re)Writing the Body: The Politics and Poetics of Female Eroticism	7
SUSAN RUBIN SULEIMAN	
The Somagrams of Gertrude Stein	30
CATHARINE R. STIMPSON	
In Praise of the Ear (Gloss's Glosses)	44
THOMAS G. PAVEL	

DEATH



Dangling Virgins: Myth, Ritual, and the Place of Women in Ancient Greece	57
EVA CANTARELLA	
Speaking Silences: Women's Suicide	68
MARGARET HIGONNET	
Death Sentences: Writing Couples and Ideology	84
ALICE JARDINE	

MOTHERS



Stabat Mater	99
JULIA KRISTEVA	
The Matrix of War: Mothers and Heroes	119
NANCY HUSTON	

ILLNESS



- The Rest Cure: Repetition or Resolution of Victorian Women's
Conflicts? 139

ELLEN L. BASSUK

- The Clinical Eye: Medical Discourses in the "Woman's Film"
of the 1940s 152

MARY ANN DOANE

- Interpreting Anorexia Nervosa 175

NOELLE CASKEY

IMAGES



- The Virgin's One Bare Breast: Female Nudity and Religious Meaning in Tuscan
Early Renaissance Culture 193

MARGARET R. MILES

- "This Heraldry in Lucrece' Face" 209

NANCY J. VICKERS

- Edgar Degas and the Representation of the Female Body 223

CAROL M. ARMSTRONG

- Sexuality at a Loss: The Films of F. W. Murnau 243

JANET BERGSTROM

- Ladies Shot and Painted: Female Embodiment in Surrealist Art 262

MARY ANN CAWS

- Jean Rhys: Poses of a Woman as Guest 288

ALICIA BORINSKY

DIFFERENCE



- Woman as a Semiotic Object 305

CHRISTINE BROOKE-ROSE

- Sexuality, Sin, and Sorrow: The Emergence of Female Character (A Reading
of Genesis 1-3) 317

MIEKE BAL

- The Politics of Women's Bodies: Reflections on Plato 339

MONIQUE CANTO

Rereading as a Woman: The Body in Practice	354
NANCY K. MILLER	
Female Fetishism: The Case of George Sand	363
NAOMI SCHOR	
Huysmans: Writing Against (Female) Nature	373
CHARLES BERNHEIMER	
Notes on Contributors	387
Illustration Credits	390

INTRODUCTION

SUSAN RUBIN SULEIMAN

That the female body has occupied a central place in the Western cultural imagination hardly comes as news. In the visual arts—from the prehistoric Venus of Willendorf to the countless representations of nymphs, goddesses, odalisques, and the Virgin Mother, right down to the images that grace our billboards and magazine covers — as in poetry, mythology, religious doctrine, medical and psychoanalytic treatises, and prose narratives of all kinds, we find ample testimony to the fascination that the female body has exerted on our individual and collective consciousness. And simultaneously with its attraction, we find testimony to the fear and loathing that that body has inspired: beautiful but unclean, alluring but dangerous, woman's body (can we say that it is always, in some sense, the mother's body?) has appeared mysterious, duplicitous — a source of pleasure and nurturance, but also of destruction and evil. Mary and Pandora, in sum.

It was while reflecting along these lines — my reflection being inspired by the extraordinary growth of feminist theory and criticism over the past decade, on the Continent as in the United States — that I was first prompted to undertake this collection of essays. As the title of the book makes clear, modesty was a virtue I decided to dispense with, at least as a start. If one were going to deal with this subject at all, clearly one had to be bold, aiming for the widest possible vision — in the range of disciplines and approaches, as in the variety and time span of the topics treated. I therefore formulated my starting questions in the broadest, most ambitious terms: What “place(s)” has the female body occupied in the Western imagination, and in the symbolic productions of Western culture, over the past two thousand years? What shifts, slippages, or displacements of that body have occurred or might occur in our own time, and what would be the cultural consequences of such displacements?

If the female body has always been with us (together with the male), in what might appear as a kind of timeless continuity, it is clear that the questions we ask about it and the places we accord it in our own discourse can only be contemporary: bound to the present, determined by our own specific historical situation. In that sense the subtitle of this book, “Contemporary Perspectives,” is redundant: what other perspectives

could we claim to have, if not those of our own time and place? And yet the subtitle has an informative, nonredundant function as well, for it emphasizes a necessary awareness of the specificity (and the limits?) of the views presented here, even as it suggests a quasi-programmatic, quasi-polemical statement about what it means to speak in a contemporary way about this apparently eternal subject.

To be aware of the specificity or the limits of one's views is to realize that unchanging truths, even about something as concrete, as biologically "fixed" as the human body, are impossible to arrive at. The cultural significance of the female body is not only (not even first and foremost) that of a flesh-and-blood entity, but that of a *symbolic construct*. Everything we know about the body — certainly as regards the past, and even, it could be argued, as regards the present — exists for us in some form of discourse; and discourse, whether verbal or visual, fictive or historical or speculative, is never unmediated, never free of interpretation, never innocent. This is as true of our own discourse as of those we might seek to analyze or criticize.

Such a salutary self-consciousness does not mean, however, that choice is impossible, that all discourses must be considered equal in value and relevance. On the contrary, an awareness of our own time-bound specificity can empower us to declare our positions, our questions, our choices, for what they are: important to us, here, today. Chosen, not given. It is not an accident, for example, that this volume of contemporary perspectives on the female body has not made room for the discourse or the images of the pornography industry, which is all too contemporary and too much with us. Nor is it an accident that all of the essays included here, despite their divergences in style, discipline, and point of view, can be qualified in one way or another as feminist. That is the programmatic or polemical aspect of the enterprise, suggesting that not everything we see and hear today deserves to be called contemporary; that it is not enough to be *of* our time in order to be *with* our time (contemporary, from the Latin *com*, together, with, and *tempus*, time).

So much for what might be called the underlying premises, or the beginning intentions, of this volume. To what degree the realized work matches the ambitions of its conception I cannot say, being too close to it for dispassionate judgment. I am extremely pleased, as editor, by the shape the volume has taken over the two and a half years of its growth. About the shape, I shall say a few words.

The thematic subheadings under which the essays are grouped were not decided in advance; they suggested themselves to me only after I had read all of the essays several times. Once they did suggest themselves, however, they acquired a kind of self-evident necessity: yes, these were obviously the right words from which to start thinking about the female body in our culture. I especially liked the way they made possible the juxtaposition of essays whose relatedness was not immediately evident, while separating others that might have appeared to belong together.

Thus Eva Cantarella's essay on female death in Greek civic rituals and society is separated from Monique Canto's reflections on Plato's theories about women in the city; but it is united with Margaret Higonnet's exploration of female suicide and with Alice Jardine's thoughts about Beauvoir's problematic farewells to those who mattered most to her: Sartre and her mother. Monique Canto's essay, in turn, receives a particular lighting by being juxtaposed with the questions about sexual difference — questions that are themselves significantly varied — raised by Christine Brooke-Rose, Mieke Bal, Nancy Miller, Naomi Schor, and Charles Bernheimer.

In a similar way, Margaret Miles's essay on the multiple religious and secular meanings of the "Virgin with one bare breast," which apparently belongs next to Julia Kristeva's reflections on the Virgin Mother and Nancy Huston's essay on mothers, becomes even more interesting when juxtaposed with other essays that deal with images; and these latter essays are themselves united and divided by the *kind* of images they focus on: rhetorical (Nancy Vickers), cinematic (Janet Bergstrom), pictorial (Carol Armstrong and Mary Ann Caws), or metaphorical, as in the pose (Alicia Borinsky).

Under the sign of Eros, one finds an unexpected yet resonant conjunction between Thomas Pavel's playful "praise of the ear" and Catharine Stimpson's deft descriptions of "Lifting Belly" and other Steinian "sograms," while my essay seeks to explore some of the possible connections between female sexuality, feminist politics, and a "feminine" poetics. Under Illness, Ellen Bassuk's essay resonates uncannily with Mary Ann Doane's, Bassuk portraying a real-life situation and Doane analyzing the same situation as represented in a film genre; Noelle Caskey brings yet another perspective on female illness by attempting to understand the dynamics of that quintessentially feminine disease in modern culture, anorexia nervosa.

Over and above the order and shape produced by the grouping of the essays, what must be emphasized is the significant convergence of all the essays around a limited number of problems and questions, and in some cases around a tentative vision, or wish, for the future. This convergence is all the more remarkable given that there was no preliminary consultation among the contributors, and especially given the wide range of approaches, topics, and disciplines represented.

On second thought, the convergence may not be all that surprising, even while remaining significant. What, after all, are the problems that come up again and again, seen each time from a different angle? Having power versus lacking it, speaking versus keeping silent, acting versus supporting action, existing for oneself, as subject, versus existing for the other, as object. These are familiar oppositions, and in a sense they are all subsumed by a single other one: male versus female. Julia Kristeva shows us how the discourse of the Church Fathers "created" the Virgin Mother, and counterpoints this showing with her own discourse as a non-

virginal mother who is also a daughter. Nancy Huston shows how the counterterm — but also, in a paradoxical way, the homologue — of “hero” in our mythologies is “mother.” Nancy Vickers shows us Shakespeare’s Lucrece as the prize in a rhetorical contest by male speakers; Christine Brooke-Rose shows us women schematized and “reduced” in the models of male semioticians; Mieke Bal shows female character defined and categorized by male readers of our “first story,” Genesis; Nancy Miller shows us women as they are read, and more importantly written (on or about) by the male pen; Mary Ann Caws and Carol Armstrong show the female model, as well as the female viewer, caught by the brush or the camera of male artists. And so on.

All of this is sobering, as a view of our past and of our present. And whither the future? It would be a gross injustice (as well as an impossible task) to try to reduce such a rich variety of essays to a single answer; yet it seems to me that insofar as any answer is suggested, it lies somewhere in the direction of blurred gender boundaries, that is, in a critique of traditional, absolute male/female oppositions — and this includes the oppositions I myself have emphasized in the preceding paragraphs. For as many of these essays show, even in the past, traditional oppositions have been subverted in unexpected ways and unexpected places: in some of Degas’s paintings of women, for example (despite his well-known misogyny), in Murnau’s images of “feminized” men, in George Sand’s “fetishism” (supposedly a “male” perversion), in Jane Austen’s “domestic” novels.

Androgyny in a new key? Why not? Or better still, androgynandry, gynandrogyny. The possibility of such multiple blurrings (which are not an attempt to deny difference, as Charles Bernheimer shows Huysmans doing, but rather an attempt to redraw and mix up the lines of differences in new, energizing ways) is the “dream” my own essay ends with; but I see it as well, suggested if not always explicitly stated, in the essays by Armstrong, Bal, Bergstrom, Caws, Kristeva, Miller, Schor, Stimpson. It is, I think, a dream worth pursuing.

EROS



(RE)WRITING THE BODY: THE POLITICS AND POETICS OF FEMALE EROTICISM

SUSAN RUBIN SULEIMAN

I had a feeling that Pandora's box contained the mysteries of woman's sensuality, so different from man's and for which man's language was inadequate. The language of sex had yet to be invented.
Anais Nin (1969:100)

As the general outcry — both for and against — that followed the publication of Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* in 1969 made clear, the question of women's bodies and women's sexuality is a highly loaded one. It has implications both for politics — that is, for the relations of power and control that govern a society — and for literature, or the production of verbal constructs that in some ways reflect and in some ways help to create those relations. The program implicit in Millett's analyses, which were soon to be followed by others, and which coincided with the rise of the women's movement as an international phenomenon, seemed as clear as it was urgent. Women, who for centuries had been the *objects* of male theorizing, male desires, male fears and male representations, had to discover and reappropriate themselves as *subjects*; the obvious place to begin was the silent place to which they had been assigned again and again, that dark continent which had ever provoked assault and puzzlement ("Was will das Weib?"). The call went out to invent both a new poetics and a new politics, based on women's reclaiming what had always been theirs but had been usurped from them: control over their bodies and a voice with which to speak about it.

Over the past decade and a half, we have seen this program, if not fully realized, at least fully embarked on. There have occurred real, measurable changes in women's lives — for example, the laws liberalizing abortion in the United States and in France — as a result of it. At the same time, the program itself, both in its theoretical formulations and in the kind of imaginative writing that can be thought to correspond to it, has evolved over the years. What seemed, at first, an unproblematic desideratum — let woman speak her own body, assume her own subjecthood — has become problematized, complicated by increasingly difficult questions:

what exactly do we mean when we speak of woman as subject, whether of speech or writing or of her own body? Is there such a thing as *a* — (or *the*) — subject? Is there such a thing as woman's body, woman's sexuality? Is there such a thing as woman, or, for that matter, man? These questions — which become inevitable the moment one begins seriously to think about the body or about sexuality, whether male or female — did not originate in the contemporary women's movement or in contemporary feminist thought; but the latter has evolved to encompass them and has infused them with a new urgency, whether in the form of analytical discourse or imaginative elaboration.

In what follows I should like to support and illustrate this statement by discussing what I see as three exemplary gestures of re-appropriation in the works of some American, French and English women writers. I call these gestures exemplary, not in order to suggest that they ought to function as models to follow, but because they represent three different possibilities for — and constitute so many actual manifestations of — the contemporary attempt, by women, to rewrite and rethink the female body and female sexuality.

EQUAL RIGHTS, OR TELLING IT WITH FOUR-LETTER WORDS

The two novels, both American, that I shall focus on first were published in the same year, 1973. Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* became a national best-seller, with several million copies sold in hardback and paperback editions; Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle*, first published by a small feminist press in New York, sold an astonishing 70,000 copies in that edition before being bought and distributed by Bantam Books, after which it sold a great many more. Both of these works are exceptionally good first novels, by poets who have a real flair for language. I happen to think that neither Jong nor Brown has written anything as good since, although they have each published other novels, but that is another matter, for what interests me is not their work in general but these particular books.

Why these two? Because they correspond, although in somewhat different ways, to what might be called the first wave of the American women's movement. They can be thought of as fictional counterparts to books like The Boston Women's Collective's *Our Bodies Our Selves*, also first published in 1973, or Shere Hite's *Sexual Honesty, By Women for Women*, published in 1974 and later expanded into the *Hite Report on Female Sexuality*. The impulse behind these works was perhaps most succinctly summed up in one of the editorial statements of the *Hite Report*: "researchers must stop telling women what they *should* feel sexually, and start asking them what they *do* feel sexually" (Hite 1981:60). *Fear of Flying* and *Rubyfruit Jungle* are fictional manifestations of the same impulse. Both are obviously autobiographical, narrated in the first person

by heroines who are struggling to define themselves sexually and artistically, and who are aware of the tangle of contradictions implied by that combination where women are concerned. Both novels have an undeniable freshness and vitality in the use of language; I think that this is due partly to their lack of inhibition in using “unladylike” four-letter words, and partly to their ironic awareness of their own unconventionality. The uninhibited, humorously flaunting use of obscenities in a novel signed by a woman and published by a major press (*Fear of Flying* was published by Holt, Rinehart and Winston) in the year 1973, constituted in itself a significant gesture, both in terms of sexual politics and in terms of what I am calling sexual poetics.

The story told in *Fear of Flying* is well-known, so I do not need to repeat it. What I wish to argue is that Jong’s use of obscene language — which was generally recognized as a “first” in American fiction by a woman — was a self-conscious reversal of stereotypes, and in some sense a parody of the language of the tough-guy narrator/heroes of Henry Miller or Norman Mailer. I did a quick count of the number of times the word “fuck” or its variant appears in the first chapter of the novel; in the space of fourteen pages it appears fourteen times, including once in the title of the chapter (the famous “zipless fuck”). That kind of accumulation must, I contend, be interpreted as parodistic. What is involved here is a reversal of roles *and* of language, in which the docile and/or bestial but always silent, objectified woman of male pornographic fiction suddenly usurps both the pornographer’s language and his way of looking at the opposite sex. In one of the passages analyzed by Kate Millett, the narrator/hero of Miller’s *Sexus* says about a woman: “She had a small juicy cunt, which fitted me like a glove” (Millett 1971:3–8). Jong’s narrator/heroine, Isadora, says about her husband: “I fell in love with Bennett partly because he had the cleanest balls I had ever tasted” (Jong 1971:30).

Among the negative reviewers of *Fear of Flying*, some of the most harshly critical were women: “Complaints, complaints, all in the same vacuous language. . . . Endless discontent,” wrote Patricia Meyer Spacks about the heroine (1974:284). And Millicent Dillon, writing in *The Nation* about what she called the “new bawd” (as opposed to the old bawds we find in Chaucer or Cervantes), spoke disapprovingly of the attempt to fuse “vulgarity with self-discovery and self-conscious art” (1975:220). What I find surprising is that no one noticed — or at any rate, no one gave its due to — the self-irony that accompanied the complaints and the vulgarity; nor did anyone give proper weight to the allusions that occasionally surfaced in the text, undercutting both the heroine and her male predecessors. At the end, for example, when Isadora looks at her body soaking in the bathtub, what does she see? “The pink V of my thighs, the