The Jennine Subject in CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

CHRISTINE WILKIE-STIBBS

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Published in 2002 by Routledge 29 West 35th Street New York, NY 10001 www.routledge-ny.com

Published in Great Britain by Routledge 11 New Fetter Lane London EC4P 4EE www.routledge.co.uk

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Children's Literature and Cutlure Vol. 22

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group. Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data.

Wilkie-Stibbs, Christine, 1948-

The feminine subject in children's literature / Christine Wilkie-Stibbs.

p. cm.— (Children's literature and criticism; 22)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-415-92996-2 (alk. paper)

1. Children's literature—History and criticism. 2. Feminist literary criticism. I. Title.

II. Series

PN1009.A1 W52 2002 809'.89282—dc21

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Dedicated to furthering original research in children's literature and culture, the Children's Literature and Culture series includes monographs on individual authors and illustrators, historical examinations of different periods, literary analyses of genres, and comparative studies on literature and the mass media. The series is international in scope and is intended to encourage innovative research in children's literature with a focus on interdisciplinary methodology.

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Jack Zipes

Foreword

The concept of the feminine¹ derives from the French school of feminist criticism, especially the work of Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, and has been appropriated here as an aesthetics of the body expressed through speech and writing. Within a certain body of children's fiction, the feminine functions as a consciously corporeal use of language that manifests itself in the physical, psychical, material and textual landscapes. This book takes a selection of focus texts from the works of Margaret Mahy and Gillian Cross as paradigms of texts of the feminine, to show how they attempt to "speak the body" because they are inscribed in the conscious and unconscious of language.

This book arises from a perception that the criticism of children's literature has not yet developed a fully articulated critical discourse through which to engage with the feminine in children's texts. Its intention, therefore, is to explore and expose some of the gaps and silences of critical discourse to produce new paradigms of textual engagement and to widen the discursive field. It will be of interest to the large international audience of academics and teachers with a research and teaching interest in the field of children's literature studies, and to the significant international body of students engaging in children's literature studies at graduate and undergraduate levels. It builds on the important contributions of other feminist approaches to children's literature, such as the work of Roberta Seelinger Trites, Lynne Vallone, Lissa Paul, Kimberley Reynolds, and Shirley Foster and Judy Simons.² But it is different in that it is not only a meta-critical work of children's literature criticism, but also rigorously interrogates actual children's literature texts through a particular strain of French feminist and psychoanalytical thought; as such it situates the texts dynamically in the literary exchange in a process analogous to Transference in

xii Foreword

psychoanalysis, to achieve a fully realized feminine poetics of literary identity through acts of reading.

The present study draws on the work of the French critics, Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva, as well as Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic work on subject formation, because each of these critics and theorists has inscribed the human subject in language (albeit through their own distinctive approaches). It is argued here that the various inscriptions in language discussed through these theoretical positions is axiomatic to an understanding of the feminine in the especially literary subjectivity that is embedded in the act of textual engagement. Language is fundamentally present in the dynamics of literary exchange, in a process proposed as analogous to Transference in psychoanalysis. The feminine in children's literature is explored through such sections as "Writing the Subject: l'écriture féminine," "Reading the Mother, le parler femme, the feminine Postmodern Subject," "The feminine Textual Unconscious." Themes like metaphor, metonymy and memory, dreaming, transformation and return are all illustrated by reference to the focus texts. These, and the many chapter subheadings throughout the book, are the basis of the the feminine poetics in children's literature.

These new readings in the feminine show how literary identities are inscribed at many levels in the literary exchange, and that the literary subject of children's literature includes, but is not always or exclusively the child of, generic definition. They show how readings in the feminine are not gendered exclusively as either male or female, and that texts of the feminine do not always relate exclusively to the fictional works written, and/or read, by women, even though it is the case that the focus texts featured here happen to be both written and read by women.

The book therefore identifies the unique forms of literary identity or, "subjectivity," which readings in the feminine may produce. Literary subjectivity is positioned in the discursive space where reading subjects and literary texts converge, interplay, and are implicated in the signifying systems of language. The book, therefore, draws upon a wide critical field, from psychoanalytic criticism, which includes Freud as well as Lacan, the three variants of French feminist criticism mentioned, and textual criticism more generally. This is especially so where psychoanalytical criticism and textual criticism meet in the textuality of the feminine postmodernism which is pursued in chapter 4. The model of readership adopted is founded on the premise that there is a reading subject whose faculties of language (at whatever age or developmental stage) permit entry into a shared discursive space in which there is a reading. There is, then, in this model of readership, an acknowledgedly individualist and private reading, but, simultaneously, the reading is plural by the fact of the literary subject's position in the intertextual space where, as Roland Barthes has said, "all readings are plural."

The emphasis, then, is on reading and, indeed, rereading in the feminine, which theoretically speaking is available to readings across the spectrum of liter-

Foreword xiii

ature. However, it is the case that the manifest and latent characteristics of particular children's fictions are more readily and effectively predisposed than others to the kinds of textual engagements that operate in the feminine definition. The book focuses on just seven paradigm works of children's fiction: Margaret Mahy's The Changeover, The Tricksters, Memory, Dangerous Spaces, The Other Side of Silence, and Gillian Cross's Pictures in the Dark, and Wolf.⁴ As paradigm texts, these seem to provide sufficient scope for the exploration of the feminine through this particular combination of critical perspectives, to liberate new readings that have ramifications and implications for a wider body of children's fictions which reside either wittingly or unwittingly in the feminine.

In terms of generic characteristics and plot structures, these paradigm novels share many similarities that are not necessarily suggested here as being in any way generically definitive but which, nevertheless, seem to suggest themselves as symptomatic of cases of the feminine in children's literature. For example, all the texts feature a central, focalizing character, either female or male, who, though central to the narrative, is always positioned at the margins of their particular social milieu. S/he is, in some way, either physically and/or mentally displaced from "home" into another elsewhere that may be a magical, or a "real," and/or a surreal place which becomes their transformational space: in The Tricksters, the central character Harry is holidaying at the family's summer residence known as Carnival's Hide; in The Other Side of Silence, Hero insinuates herself into the house and world of Miss Credence at Credence House; in The Changeover, Laura's initiation into witchery takes place in the Carlisle House of Janua Caeli; in Pictures in the Dark, Peter is banished from his family home to the garden shed and from thence to the river in his manifestation as an otter; in Memory, Jonny Dark takes up temporary residence at Tap House in the house of old Sophie; in Wolf, Cassy is ejected from her home with Nan into her mother, Goldie's, squat; and in Dangerous Spaces, Anthea comes to terms with the death of her parents in the out-of-time space of Viridian. Each narrative features a magical, surreal, or supernatural character, or characters, who are the agents of transformation: it is the Carnival brothers as trickster-figures in The Tricksters; the mysterious witch-like Miss Credence in The Other Side of Silence; the equally witchy Carlisle sisters of The Changeover; in Pictures in the Dark it is the surreal otter; in Memory it is the aphasic Sophie; in Wolf it is the elusive and ephemeral wolf of Cassy's dreams; and it is the ghostly and mythical Griff of Dangerous Spaces. All the narratives are framed in familial structures in which the family, whether present or absent, is in all cases somehow dysfunctional: either through being split, as in Wolf and The Changeover; or because the parents are violent, inadequate or domineering, as in The Other Side of Silence, Wolf and Pictures in the Dark; or the parents are either absent or dead, as in Dangerous Spaces and Memory; or the parents are duplications and treacherous, as in The Tricksters.

xiv Foreword

In these paradigmatic texts of *the feminine* there is a constant slippage and blurring of the logic and boundaries between fantasy and "reality," past and present, and a continuous interplay between psychic and everyday life, and between fantastic and realistic modes of narrative. There is a recurrent narrative patterning of separation, integration, and return which is classically mythopoeic and intrinsically linked to the great mother myths. These narratives, therefore, favor circularity, fluidity, mutability, intertextuality, and specularity through doubling and metafictional modes, which render them resistant to readings in the mode of an either/or binary logic, in hierarchical structures, or as linear temporality.

These kinds of narrative characteristics clearly manifest themselves in a vast range of children's fictions for which readers of this book will be able to supply their own personal anthologies, the point being that these generic markers of the feminine are not located in the handful of texts featured here, but are infinitely transferable across a spectrum of other texts that are now opened up to different readings by their newfound inscription in the feminine textuality.

Chapter 1, "Introduction: Reading the feminine in Children's Literature," introduces the theoretical context and purpose of the book, and explains why a poetics of the feminine in children's literature is desirable and necessary. It introduces the overarching theoretical positions, such as Lacan's work on subject formation, and the significance of the idea of literary Transference for the recovery of the feminine as a textual unconscious. It proposes that Cixous's idea of "l'écriture féminine," Irigaray's "le parler femme," and Kristeva's "Semiotic" may act as agents of the feminine Imaginary in the act of reading, which concepts are later developed and exemplified through the book. Thereafter, each chapter is preceded by a more detailed interpretation and critique of the theoretical approach(es) it adopts, followed by a reading of the focus text(s) in that mode as an exemplification of it.

Chapter 2, "Writing the Subject in Children's Literature: l'écriture féminine," defines and explains Cixous's idea of l'écriture féminine and focuses on two texts (Mahy's The Tricksters and The Other Side of Silence) that epitomize a generic strain in children's fiction, figuring a central female character on the cusp of adolescence who, in the course of the narrative, realizes self-definition through a process of subjective transformation. It describes this process in terms of a recovery of the feminine Imaginary, achieved, in these cases, through the characters' connecting with their own bodies in and through the agency of their own writing which simultaneously mirrors, and is mirrored in, the experience of the reading subject in the act of reading the text. The particular transformational events described are, therefore, as much a textual as a readerly phenomenon, and are explained as a manifestation of the corporeality of writing and reading that Cixous has appropriated to the feminine in her idea of l'écriture féminine. The chapter demonstrates how both these fictions bear the qualities of discursive fluidity and open structure that Cixous and Irigaray have identified as the feminine in

Foreword xv

their respective definitions of writing and speech, and how in this mode the identity of the reading subject, therefore, de facto is inscribed both as and in *the feminine* at many narrative levels in these kinds of fictions.

Chapter 3, "Reading the Mother in Children's Fiction: le parler femme," theorizes the ambiguous mother figure, and the mother/child dyad, ubiquitously present but seldom theorized in children's literature. They are present in the familial metaphors, and in instances of maternal absences, silence and exclusion from signification that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari described as the "imperialism of Oedipus," and Irigaray described as the "blind spot of the old dream of symmetry." It discusses Pictures in the Dark as a narrative of "The Mother Tongue," embracing Kristeva's conception of the "Thetic," inscribing the language of the maternal body in terms of connectedness and fluidity. It explores how the specter, and the spectrum, of the "phallic mother" is present, and is conflated, in the mother figures which feature in Mahy's The Other Side of Silence, and The Tricksters, as both patriarchy's pre-castrated and, therefore, desiring—and also fetishized—mother, and positions them against Cixous's and Irigaray's critiques of the idea of the "phallic mother." Mahy's The Changeover is explored in terms of the struggle for female liberation from an all-consuming male tyranny in the character of Carmody Braque, and is explained in terms of Irigaray's "speculum." Laura's "changeover" is compared with Irigaray's subversion of the Lacanian Mirror in the story of Alice, who transited from one state and place to arrive at an alternative language at "the other side of the looking glass," to achieve a condition of psychic and corporeal redefinition and logic, expressed in The Changeover as changed mother/daughter relations, and related here to Irigaray's place and space of le parler femme.

Chapter 4, "The feminine Postmodern Subject of Children's Literature," focuses on Memory and Wolf and shows how the feminine is indexed in the fragmented subjectivities which motivate the plots of these two novels. It discusses how the psychical, material, and textual landscapes are related in "classic" postmodern discourses of fragmentation, dissolution, and marginality in which subjectivities are gendered both male and female. They are dispersed across a kaleidoscope of refracted surfaces that confound premodernist conceptions of interiority, depth, and transcendental individualism. However, and paradoxically, these narratives also simultaneously sustain the paradoxical notions of a single center of focus and agency, and notions of "reality" and "truth," and the chapter argues that it is these uniquely paradoxical features that inscribe these children's fictions in the explicitly feminine postmodern definition as it is described here, and that these focus texts are paradigmatic of a substantial body of children's literature in which complex narrative structures and experimental forms that are the mark of "classical" postmodern narratives are encoded in seemingly straightforwardly realist modes.

Chapter 5, "The feminine Textual Unconscious in Children's Literature," draws on Lacan's and Freud's work on dreaming and memory in relation to

xvi Foreword

language, and appropriates them to Wolf, Memory, and Dangerous Spaces, which are defined here as "dream texts." The chapter shows how the recovery of the feminine textual unconscious is achieved through a series of metaphoric substitutions and metonymic images, and how the process of literary Transference described in chapter 1 can best be exemplified through readings of these dream texts because they share the same theoretical characteristics as dreaming and memory. The chapter also argues that the distinguishing characteristics of dreaming and memory—fluidity, mobility, a locus in the unconscious and an indifference to the symbolic laws of logic—have much in common with the characteristics of the feminine Imaginary as described by Irigaray, and also is the locus of the feminine textual unconscious. The place called Viridian in Mahy's Dangerous Spaces is positioned as an example of a feminine circular narrative of return, and as an occluded dream-space in which the central character moves from death through mourning to the reconstitution of subjectivity in the feminine.

The conclusion suggests further children's fictions, which, in their particularities of discursive and manifest contents, reside either knowingly or unknowingly in the feminine. The book concludes that the theoretical positions uncovered, especially the idea of a recovery of the feminine Imaginary through literary Transference in the act of reading, have implications for the way we as adults read children's literature, and how we teach children's literature to children and adults alike, because it extends the range of textual engagements and the critical discourses through which we as academics, teachers, researchers—and all of us readers—engage with a certain body of children's literature of which these focus texts are paradigms. Therefore, the book's identification of a poetics of reading the feminine in children's fiction widens the parameters of the dialectic of readerly engagement through which literary subjectivity has been historically and traditionally inscribed in children's literature. It proposes that these kinds of readings are available equally to the historical and implied reader who, as the readerin-the-text, assumes a literary identity that transcends the limitations of age, gender, and/or experience. In this sense the book concludes that the reading subjects of these kinds of fictions, whether they are gendered male or female, could be quite properly described as une lecteur féminine.

NOTES TO FOREWORD

- 1. The term the feminine is translated into English from French feminist criticism's "le féminin." In the context of this book it bears the same theoretical meanings as were first intended by the French usage (see chapter 1 "Theoretical Introduction") which is quite distinct from the connotations of the word "feminine" in the popular English usage.
- 2. Roberta Seelinger Trites, Waking Sleeping Beauty: Feminist Voices in Children's Novels (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1997); Lynne Vallone, Disciplines of

Foreword xvii

Virtue: Girls' Culture in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1995); Lissa Paul Reading Otherways (South Woodchester, Glos.: Thimble Press 1998); Kimberley Reynolds, Girls Only Gender and Popular Fiction in Britain, 1880–1910 (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf 1990); Shirley Foster and Judy Simons, What Katy Read: Feminist Re-Readings of "Classic" Stories for Girls (London: Macmillan, 1995).

- 3. Roland Barthes, S/Z, trans. R. Miller (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976), 16.
- 4. All references to the focus texts are taken from the following editions: Gillian Cross, Wolf (London: Penguin Books, 1990); Pictures in the Dark (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Margaret Mahy, Memory (London: Penguin Books, 1987), The Changeover (London: Magnet 1985); The Other Side of Silence (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1995); The Tricksters (London: Penguin Books, 1986); Dangerous Spaces (London: Penguin Books, 1991).

Contents

Series Editor's Foreword	ix
Foreword	xi
Chapter 1: Theoretical Introduction: The feminine in	1
Children's Literature	1
Lacan and the Subject	4
The Speaking Subject: "other" and "Other"	12
The Psycho-Dynamics of Text/Reader Relations	14
Literary Transference	16
The Textual Unconscious	20
The feminine Fantastic	23
Summary	27
Notes to Chapter 1	29
Chapter 2: Writing the Subject in Children's Literature:	
l'écriture féminine	37
Theoretical Introduction to the Chapter	37
Summary	43
The Tricksters	44
The feminine in Metafictional Mode	44
Desire in Writing	48
The feminine Fantastic	50
The feminine Carnivalesque	52
The Incest Taboo	53
The Gaze	55
The feminine Intertextual Space	57

The Elemental féminine	60
l'écriture féminine	62
The Other Side of Silence	63
Language, Madness and The feminine	65
Fictional Selves/Self as Fiction	68
The-Name-of-The-Father	70
The feminine and Abjection	71
l'écriture féminine	73
Notes to Chapter 2	74
Chapter 3: Reading the Mother in Children's Literature:	
le parler femme	81
Theoretical Introduction to the Chapter	81
Summary	91
Pictures in the Dark	93
Abjection and Return	94
Women's Time	97
Semiotizing the Symbolic	98
Body Language	98
The Tricksters and The Other Side of Silence	99
Monstrous Mothers	99
The Maternal feminine	104
Dangerous Spaces	106
Speaking the Body	106
The Changeover	107
The Looking Glass from the Other Side	107
The feminine Imaginary and the Witch	109
Discourse of le parler femme	111
Notes to Chapter 3	113
Chapter 4: The feminine Postmodern Subject in	
Children's Literature	119
Theoretical Introduction to the Chapter	119
Summary	125
Memory	127
The feminine Postmodern Landscapes	127
Wolf	133
Fragmented Subjectivity	133
Cultural Nostalgia	134
The Hyperreal	135
Notes for Chapter 4	137

Contents	vii
Chapter 5: The feminine Textual Unconscious in Children's Literature	141
Theoretical Introduction to the Chapter	141
Summary	149
Memory	150
Metaphor, Metonymy, and Memory	150
Sexual Subjectivity	153
Fictional Time and Memory	156
Wolf	157
Dreaming the Wolf	157
From Other to (M)other	161
Imaginary Pleasure/Symbolic Law	163
Dangerous Spaces	164
Dual Ontology	164
The Vel of Alienation	166
Revenant	168
Notes to Chapter 5	170
Conclusion	175
Une lecture féminine	175
Notes to Conclusion	177
Bibliography	179
Index	193

1

Theoretical Introduction: *The feminine* in Children's Literature

The feminine is an exploration of an alternative aesthetics for children's literature that gives voice to some latent silences and apparent absences in a body of children's literature texts, and in the critical discourses about children's literature that have been otherwise unexpressed, unwritten, and therefore unread. The feminine derives from the French school of feminist criticism, especially the works of Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva, and is used here with a very specific meaning, both nominally and adjectively, of an aesthetics of corporeality in speech and writing, appropriated in this case to the writing and reading of children's literature. The entire project, then, serves to extend and widen the critical language and parameters of literary engagement in a body of children's literature texts by reading them in the feminine, and the focus texts introduced in the foreword have been selected to act as paradigms.

The French school of feminist criticism is preferred² because, even while acknowledging the discrete and unequivocally distinct premises from which Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva operate, they are especially relevant in the way each has embraced a sustainable aesthetics of the inscription of human subjectivity in language and the body as an alternative signifying system which is, it is argued, axiomatic to the idea of the especially literary subjectivity and the idea of both the historical and textualized subject of, and in, children's literature that are considered equally here.³ Cixous's idea of "l'écriture féminine," Irigaray's idea of the "le parler femme," Kristeva's interest in the linguistic relations between what she has called the "Semiotic Chora," and the "Symbolic" of the Lacanian definition, which are engaged through the chapters of this book, all share an idea of the possibility of a language that is spoken characteristically in the feminine.⁴