


Karen Hohne and
Helen Wussow, editors



A Dialogue of Voices

Feminist
Literary Theory
and Bakhtin



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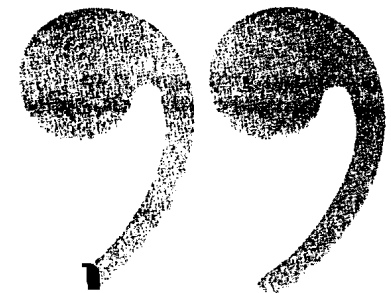


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“The Locus for the Other”: Cixous, Bakhtin, and Women’s Writing

Lisa Gasbarrone

There is hidden and always ready in woman the source;
the locus for the other . . .

As it happens, I was a college student in Paris in 1975, the year in which Mikhail Bakhtin died and Hélène Cixous first published “The Laugh of the Medusa.” I had barely heard of either of them at the time. It wasn’t until a few years later that I encountered first their names and then some of their writings in the course of my graduate studies at Princeton. I dutifully read the assignments in each, in the context of different seminars: Bakhtin’s book on Rabelais for a class in Renaissance literature; and *La Venue à l’écriture*, as I recall, because it was suggested additional reading in another class. I didn’t truly grasp the former, I remember being very moved by the latter, and certainly I perceived no connection between them. It is only with the distance of a few years, with the greater range of my own reading, and through the back door of other projects, that I found myself reading both authors again. This second time around I, like many others, noted the tantalizing resonance between the two.¹ It was immediately very exciting.

As I set about attempting to understand and adapt the resemblance I perceived for the purposes of my own project, that resemblance began to unravel. As I read more of Bakhtin, and more about both him and Cixous, I began to hear discord rather than a harmonious convergence of voices. The tantalizing resonance lingered in phrases like the following, from “The Laugh of the Medusa”:

Writing is . . . undoing the work of death—to admit this is to want the two, as well as both, the ensemble of the one and the other, not fixed in sequences of struggle and expulsion or some other form of death but infinitely dynamized by an incessant process of exchange from one subject to another.²

A distinctly Bakhtinian note is sounded in passages such as this. Yet, as I listened closer, I heard more dissonance than the productive dialogic exchange I had anticipated. What I hope to outline here, chiefly through my reading of "The Laugh of the Medusa," is the nature of the conflict I perceive.

The discernible similarities—the echoes, if you will—between Bakhtin's theories and Cixous's writings remain striking. As Cixous describes feminine *écriture*, "women's writing" or the feminine practice of writing seems to embody many of the characteristics of what Bakhtin called dialogic discourse. As the earlier quotation suggests, the resemblance is especially apparent in those moments in which Cixous and other theorist/practitioners of women's writing describe the new relationship between self and other that they seek to establish through literary expression. Cixous writes in "The Laugh of the Medusa" that "there is hidden and always ready in woman the source; the locus for the other" (245). Playing on the metaphor of womb and text, she invites women to engage in a type of writing—a feminine *écriture*—that would cultivate this "locus," that would defy the monologue of patriarchy and express, through language, a relationship between self and other that might be called dialogic. For those who have sought or simply perceived a convergence of Bakhtinian theory and the feminist project of feminine *écriture*, such a "locus for the other" seems promising. Yet this promise remains, in Cixous's "Laugh of the Medusa," largely unfulfilled. As I hope to demonstrate, too much in Cixous's text is antithetical to Bakhtin. If there is indeed a "feminist dialogics," as many have suggested, I will argue that it is not to be found here.³

My purpose, then, is not to propose a Bakhtinian reading of Cixous's text, but rather to offer what might be called a Bakhtinian critique. I propose to read "The Laugh of the Medusa" principally for Cixous's model of the relationship between self and other, which reveals, through her expression of it, a promise of dialogue that feminine *écriture* does not in this instance fulfill. By setting Bakhtin's model here in opposition, I hope to suggest not only the important contribution, but also what I would call the necessary corrective, his thinking has to offer to theorists of women's writing.

To write and thus forge for herself the antilogos
weapon . . .

Hélène Cixous's "Laugh of the Medusa" has been considered variously a manifesto, an exemplar, and an expression of utopian longing. In many respects, it is all three. From the very first lines of her essay, in which Cix-

ous calls for the creation of a new literary movement, a revolution in writing, "The Laugh of the Medusa" is rousing, irreverent, joyous, disturbing, and willfully inconsistent. Cixous issues a call to women, to bring them to writing; she seeks to demonstrate by her text both what women's writing *is* and "*what it will do*." This call to letters has been celebrated for its effort to break from official (and, by definition, masculine) control of writing, to break with what Cixous calls "an arid millennial ground" (245). The thousand-year literary tradition against which Cixous is writing, a tradition ironically rich in manifestos such as hers, must be abandoned, she claims, if women are to speak finally in their own voice: "Anticipation," she writes, "is imperative" (245). In place of the repressive past, women will, through their writing, "foresee the unforeseeable" (245), uncover the *féminin futur*, for which "The Laugh of the Medusa" serves as both a model and an invocation.⁴

Cixous's call to writing is framed figuratively as a call to arms. There can be no mistaking her assertion that the break with the past must be immediate, violent, and complete. Women's writing must not reinforce the mistakes of history "by repeating them" (245). Her look to the future, to a time when feminine *écriture* in all its promise may be fully realized, is all the more significant in that she believes no dialogue with the past is possible. The "(feminine) new" must be brought forth from the "(masculine) old" ("la nouvelle de l'ancien"), definitively and absolutely: "there are no grounds for establishing a discourse" between the two (245). The relationship between women's writing and the masculine order of both history and literature is thus more than confrontational; it is openly combative. The language Cixous uses to describe the "struggle" of women's writing is suffused with violence: "We must kill the false woman who is preventing the live one from breathing. Inscribe the breath of the whole woman" (250). The whole woman emerges only with the violent death of her false counterpart, and women's writing with the toppling of the male literary order. Woman must make "her shattering entry into history, which has always been based on *her suppression*. To write and thus forge for herself the antilogos weapon" (250; emphasis in the original).

"The Laugh of the Medusa" is presumably a prototype of this weapon, and its effect is meant to be sweeping, cataclysmic. Indeed the only affinity Cixous acknowledges between woman and the old order is located in brief moments of (poetic) catastrophe: "At times it is in the fissure caused by an earthquake, through that radical mutation of things brought on by material upheaval when every structure is thrown off balance and an ephemeral wildness sweeps order away, that the poet slips something by, for a brief span, of woman" (249). Earthquake, upheaval,

fissure, death—only in the imagery of such moments of separation, each of an extreme and violent nature, can femininity be inscribed: “Now, I-woman am going to blow up the Law; an explosion henceforth possible and ineluctable; let it be done, right now, *in language*” (257; emphasis in the original). This linguistic razing is what Cixous pronounces necessary if the masculine hegemony or “phallogocentrism” is to be overturned.

It is precisely in sentiment, if not in language, such as this, that readers have perceived an initial affinity between the feminist project of feminine *écriture* and the literary theory of Mikhail Bakhtin. The observation is not farfetched. Bakhtin locates the beginnings of the novel, the privileged form of dialogic exchange, in a definitive break with the patriarchal world of myth and epic. In his essay “Epic and Novel,” Bakhtin writes that the novel was “powerfully affected by a very specific rupture in the history of Western civilization.” He traces this rupture, and the novel’s subsequent emergence, “from a socially isolated and culturally deaf semi-patriarchal society.”⁵ In “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Cixous also writes of a cultural (and here gender-specific) deafness: “the deaf male ear, which hears in language only that which speaks in the masculine” (251). Cixous’s phallogocentric order, the “millennial arid ground” she seeks to break, has much in common with Bakhtin’s world of the epic. Both are types of what Bakhtin would call monologic discourse, grounded in patriarchal myth, deaf to other voices and discourses, and subvertible only through transgression of the linguistic and literary laws that govern them.

Feminist critics have duly noted the resemblance. Novelistic discourse for Bakhtin, like feminine *écriture* for Cixous, attempts to subvert the monologic world of patriarchy through various forms of transgression. Clair Wills, for example, perceives “an analogy between Bakhtinian carnival, hysteria and women’s texts in terms of their capacity to disrupt and remake official public norms.”⁶ Cixous’s repeated attempts at subverting masculine myths (the Medusa is one such myth; the Freudian account of female sexuality would be another) are consistent with Bakhtin’s prescription for dialogic discourse. Myth and epic exert what Bakhtin calls a “homogenizing power . . . over language” (“From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse,” 60). They transform events, the dynamic world of exchange and experience, into an absolute fixed past, “attaching them to the world of fathers, of beginnings and peak times—canonizing these events, as it were, while they are still current” (“Epic and Novel,” 14-15). Like Cixous, Bakhtin celebrates the unraveling of this “world of fathers.” The desired end in each case, whether dialogic discourse or women’s writing, is expressed in remarkably similar terms. The means of achieving this end vary greatly, however. Despite Cixous’s explosive language, it is

not at all clear that “The Laugh of the Medusa” announces a type of discourse that Bakhtin might have called dialogic, or even transgressive.

Dialogic discourse overturns the world of the fathers not through violence, but through laughter.⁷ In its emphasis on the present, on concrete human history and becoming, Bakhtin’s dialogue looks neither to a hidden origin or source, nor to a utopian future of language and literary expression.⁸ Dialogic discourse is radically *present*, a “living mix of varied and opposing voices,” a process of “interanimation” in which self and other create one another continually (“Prehistory,” 49, 47). Bakhtin welcomes rupture, transgression, and subversion of the language of authority. He sees in the novel, or rather in novelistic discourse, a demystification not only of epic and myth but also of an idea of language as unitary and timeless, exclusive and transcendent. Language and literature so conceived are ultimately incompatible with feminine *écriture* as Cixous describes and practices it. Women’s writing in “The Laugh of the Medusa” is presented as both a return to origins—now a world of mothers, not fathers—and a hope for future deliverance.⁹ Either chronology, the mythical past or the utopian future, recasts language in an idealized monologue, set apart from the Bakhtinian world of “concrete human historical discourse” (“Discourse in the Novel,” 279).

According to Bakhtin, any type of discourse that proclaims itself “special,” a language apart, risks becoming “a unitary and singular Ptolemaic world outside of which nothing else exists and nothing else is needed” (“Discourse,” 286). The very idea of such a language is, Bakhtin writes further, “a typical utopian philosopheme of poetic discourse” (“Discourse,” 288). Cixous’s longing for women’s writing and “*what it will do*” is clearly an expression of such a utopian desire. It is small comfort that Cixous anticipates precisely the point I am raising: “Once more you’ll say that all this smacks of ‘idealism,’ or what’s worse you’ll splutter that I’m a ‘mystic’ ” (262). There is no question that her description of feminine *écriture* idealizes and mystifies the practice of writing, albeit in an idiom distinct from those against which she is struggling. For Bakhtin, however, it is not enough to demystify the monologic language of authority, if one merely sets another type of myth or monologue in its place.

In “The Laugh of the Medusa” Cixous writes that “it is impossible to *define* a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded” (253). Despite this declaration of openness, Cixous assigns a number of rather exclusive qualities to women’s writing: it is fluid, vibrant, dynamic. It overflows in floods and streams and waves. It enjoys a “privileged relationship with the voice” (251), and not merely the voice, but the “equivoice” (252). Unlike the phallogocentric system it overturns, feminine *écriture*

ture writes the (female) body: "the rhythm that laughs you; the intimate recipient who makes all metaphors possible" (252). Alongside these seemingly indeterminate qualities, Cixous offers a very appealing, and in many respects very Bakhtinian, account of the promise such writing holds:

Writing is precisely working (in) the in-between, inspecting the process of the same and of the other without which nothing can live, undoing the work of death— . . . infinitely dynamized by an incessant process of exchange from one subject to another. (252)

The feminine practice of writing will reveal writing's true nature: it is gendered, but nonetheless radically inclusive. Where difference is freely admitted rather than erased, feminine and masculine coexist in writing. Feminine *écriture* is thus, ideally, bisexual. By this Cixous means not the traditional bisexuality, in which masculine and feminine are diluted to become *nèuter*, but rather what she calls "the *other bisexuality*," in which difference is preserved. Woman is privileged to imagine this new relationship to the other—for the first time not based on opposition, hierarchy, and ultimately domination—because she has always lived it. Beneath her apparent acquiescence to the masculine order, woman has always lived by an alternate and subversive law: "To love, to watch-think-see the other in the other, to despecularize, to unhoard . . . a love that rejoices in the exchange that multiplies" (264). Such phrases are very much in the spirit of dialogic discourse, with its "living mix of varied and opposing voices"; but despite these claims, Cixous's privileging of feminine *écriture* confers upon it an exclusive "official" status inconsistent with the open and transgressive nature she declares it to have.

Unlike Bakhtin, who sees literary transgression as possible primarily through novelistic discourse, Cixous explicitly privileges the poetic. For Bakhtin, poetic discourse (which is, as for Cixous, by no means limited to poetry) inevitably restricts language by elevating it to a special status, assigning it rules, and granting it a fixed and transcendent value: "the language of poetic genres, when they approach their stylistic limit, often becomes authoritarian, dogmatic and conservative" ("Discourse," 288). I am not the first to suggest that a certain kind of dogmatism emerges inevitably from what is called women's writing; for in describing its achievements and effects, theoreticians of feminine *écriture* cannot avoid becoming prescriptive. Women's writing will have a certain *style*, which some writers, male or female, will exhibit to a greater or lesser degree than others. Those who conform to this style are judged to be within the feminine practice of writing (Cixous's own list in "The Laugh of the Medusa" includes Colette, Duras, and Genet); those who do not, by infer-

ence, must remain outside. So women's writing establishes a new and inclusive relationship to the other, but only, it seems, to a certain kind of other.¹⁰

In a particularly lively essay entitled *Femmes écrites*, Laurence Enjolras has noted the irony of a feminine *écriture* that becomes exclusive, even repressive in its turn.¹¹ In its claim to authenticity, to an unmediated feminine truth, women's writing repeats a gesture uncomfortably similar to the tradition with which it seeks definitively to break. For Bakhtin, such an absolute departure, whether patriarchal or feminist, is bound to fail. There can be no clean slate like the one Cixous imagines. "Only the mythical Adam . . . could really have escaped from start to finish this dialogic inter-orientation with the alien word that occurs in the object," Bakhtin writes. "Concrete historical human discourse does not have this privilege: it can deviate from such inter-orientation only on a conditional basis and only to a certain degree" ("Discourse," 279). As Cixous approaches the object and its alien word, she imagines that it is already feminine. In place of a mythical Adam, "The Laugh of the Medusa" proposes a mythical Eve.

Beyond the "singular Ptolemaic world" she creates for women's writing, Cixous's preference for the poetic reveals an even greater distance between her thinking and Bakhtin's.¹² Only poets, Cixous writes, have been able thus far to break free of the dominant male discourse:

But only the poets—not the novelists, allies of representationalism. Because poetry involves gaining strength from the unconscious and because the unconscious, that other limitless country, is the place where the repressed manage to survive: women, or as Hoffman would say, fairies. (250)

Poets and practitioners of feminine *écriture*, like their compatriots—witches, fairies, hysterics—speak from the unconscious, a place that is secret, hidden, and repressed.¹³ It is this "limitless country" that Cixous calls forth in women's writing. By contrast, the Bakhtinian model is never that of the private inner voice, but rather of the public conversation. An individual's "inner speech" enters into dialogue with the outside world, but it does so at the level of consciousness, in the reality of "concrete historical human" exchange.¹⁴ Knowledge, expression, even being, for Bakhtin, stem from conscious interaction with the other, the alien word, that which is outside the self. The relationship is symbiotic, to be sure. The other is constitutive of the self, and vice versa; in this sense, there is always something of the other within each of us. But this other, without whom there can be no self, remains, nonetheless, necessarily separate; or in Bakhtin's idiom, "alien." Dialogic exchange occurs only among individuals (or texts) that possess an identifiable degree of autonomy. Other-

wise there can be no difference, and no need for exchange. The self/other relationship is conceived then not as a convergence of difference emerging from within, but rather, as Michael Holquist has phrased it, "as *different degrees each possesses of the other's otherness*."¹⁵ Though Cixous expresses the desire for a dialogic relationship between self and other, the method she prescribes for its realization produces a very one-sided conversation. As I shall argue, Cixous's location of otherness totally within the parameters of the self results in its negation. In short, she cancels otherness out.

Her libido is cosmic, just as her unconscious is
worldwide.

In the new relationship between self and other that Cixous describes in "The Laugh of the Medusa," the other's otherness, or "difference," is ideally that which should be preserved. "In the beginning," Cixous writes, "are our differences" (263); and this is the premise on which the new history, which women (and eventually men) will write, is to be founded. Each of us, male and female, is invited to consider the presence of the other within. Cixous describes this dynamic in terms of the "other bisexuality" mentioned briefly earlier:

Bisexuality: that is, each one's location in self (*repérage en soi*) of the presence—variously manifest and insistent according to each person, male or female—of both sexes, non-exclusion either of the difference or of one sex, and, from this "self-permission," multiplication of the effects of the inscription of desire, over all parts of my body and the other body. (254)

This attempt to locate the other within carries with it a certain risk: in the effort to avoid exclusion, the self may become all-encompassing. Though the desired relationship is one that admits and even welcomes difference, rather than erasing or "castrating" it, Cixous's ideal of nonexclusion recreates, albeit inadvertently, the very threat to otherness that it is designed to contain. The risk to the other is particularly great when expression originates with the unconscious, as Cixous claims it does. Inner speech, with its fluid and ever-expanding boundaries, may drown out the conscious world of social interchange. There is much by way of analogy, metaphor, and allusion to suggest that this is precisely what takes place in "The Laugh of the Medusa." Cixous's disclaimers notwithstanding, the primary relationship celebrated here is less that of self to other, Bakhtin's dialogue, than that of self to self. If the "false theater of phallogocentric representationalism" has staged a drama of exclusion, the new wave of women's writing offers in its place a drama of limitless containment.

The elements of "The Laugh of the Medusa" that prove most troubling from a Bakhtinian perspective all reflect a look inward, an endless return to the self. This is neither surprising nor necessarily lamentable. The project of women's writing is a retrieval of feminine identity: it is, therefore, a project of *self-knowledge*, *self-awareness*, and *self-expression*. The need to establish feminine identity through women's writing accounts in part for Cixous's references to autoeroticism, narcissism, homosexuality, and—the predominant and most problematic of images—the womb. All of these imply relationships that are directed more toward self and sameness than toward the "alien word." All are related, as Cixous evokes them, to the private inner voice of desire. "Break out of the circles," she urges women; "don't remain within psychoanalytic closure" (263). Yet Cixous's incessant return to the libido, to the body and its relation to the unconscious, serves more to enclose her within official discourse than to free her from it.

In her deliberate effort to break with traditional male psychoanalysis, Cixous celebrates the richness of female sexuality.¹⁶ It is multiple: "inexhaustible, like music, painting, writing: [the] stream of phantasms is incredible" (246). To illustrate this multiplicity, this sexual and aesthetic inexhaustibility, Cixous turns ironically to a world "all her own," one that is private, hidden, and self-reflective. She uses the image of masturbation, of erotic self-fulfillment, as emblematic of the knowledge and awareness women seek:

I have been amazed more than once by a description a woman gave me of a world all her own which she had been secretly haunting since childhood. A world of searching, the elaboration of a knowledge, on the basis of a systematic experimentation with the bodily functions, a passionate and precise interrogation of her erotogeneity. This practice, extraordinarily rich and inventive, is prolonged or accompanied by a production of forms, a veritable aesthetic activity, each stage of rapture inscribing a resonant vision, a composition, something beautiful. (246)

Autoeroticism is thus an expression not only of sexuality but also of spirituality; it is a science, an epistemology, and an aesthetics, all rolled (significantly) into one. However worthy, rich, and inventive this practice may be, I feel certain that it is not dialogic. The autoerotic model, offered here as an alternative to the traditional, repressive hierarchy in which the feminine self is subordinated to the masculine other, is one in which the other has become superfluous.

Autoeroticism and homosexuality ("The Americans remind us, 'We are all Lesbians'; that is, don't denigrate woman, don't make of her what men have made of you" [252]) are necessary elements in the project of

self-discovery and self-expression that is women's writing. Woman has, up until now, been "kept in the dark about herself, led into self-disdain by the great arm of parental-conjugal phallocentrism" (246). Men have created an "antinarcissism" (248) in which women have languished. For Cixous, the remedy lies apparently in another form of narcissism, one in which the self is elaborated not to exclude, but rather to *include* others: "[Woman's] libido is cosmic, just as her unconscious is worldwide" (259). Woman *becomes* the world, the world is woman: "Our glances, our smiles, are spent; laughs exude from our mouths; our blood flows and we extend ourselves without ever reaching an end" (248). Everywhere she looks, then, Cixous is looking in the mirror. Any encounter with the other is by definition an encounter with the self. Cixous's stated, and very Bakhtinian, goal is the preservation of otherness in relationship to the self, once the true feminine self has been articulated. Yet it is difficult to see how difference is *not* erased in her formulation, where there is most certainly a blurring of the distinction between self and other. Where nothing is alien, to use Bakhtin's terms, there can be no alien word. In Cixous's unreserved flow between self and other, the dyadic tension necessary to Bakhtin's dialogue is lost. The "cosmic libido" is all-encompassing, and therefore ultimately circular, solipsistic, monologic. In a parody of the scene on the analyst's couch, Cixous ends up (like Dora?) talking only to herself.

The womb serves as the organizing metaphor for the dynamic described. It is, precisely, the "locus for the other" that Cixous claims is hidden and always ready within every woman. But it is also, significantly, the locus within which the other is wholly contained. Even, or perhaps *especially*, in its spatial arrangement, the image of the womb conflicts with Bakhtin's concept of the dialogic self, in which "outsideness" (often rendered from the French as "exotopy") remains such an important category. No event, no person can be known or experienced completely from within, *not even* the self. As Michael Holquist explains, "It is only from a position outside something that it can be perceived in categories that complete it in time and fix it in space."¹⁷ My existence depends in part on the ability of those outside myself to perceive me in the context of that which I myself am unable to see. The relationship is neither hierarchical, as Cixous interprets the traditional male version of it, nor coextensive, as in the image of the womb; it is based on reciprocity, rather than on domination or containment.

Bakhtin is surely among a very few male writers who have invoked and elaborated images of pregnancy and the womb. He does so most extensively in *Rabelais and His World*, where the womb is depicted, as Mary Russo has phrased it, as an element of Bakhtin's "semiotic model

of the body politic."¹⁸ I would take this image a step further and say that the womb represents something larger even than the body politic. For Bakhtin, it serves as a model for our very being. As such, it is both a liberating and disquieting figure. Fullness, swelling, childbirth, and procreative power have invariably positive associations in Bakhtin's repertoire of the body. But the image of the womb is a grotesque—which is to say, double-edged, both regenerative and frightening:

All unearthly objects were transformed into earth, the mother which swallows up in order to give birth to something larger that has been improved. There can be nothing terrifying on earth, just as there can be nothing frightening in a mother's body, with the nipples that are made to suckle, with the genital organ and warm blood. The earthly element of terror is the womb, the bodily grave, but it flowers with delight and a new life.¹⁹

For Bakhtin, the ambivalence of the womb—its terror and delight—is precisely what defines it as a grotesque. Without this ambivalence, without the suggestion of both destructive and regenerative potential, the image cannot function, as Bakhtin writes of Don Quixote's death, to apply "the popular corrective of laughter" to a world in which the deadliest risk is the "narrow-minded seriousness" of "idealistic and spiritual pretense" (*Rabelais*, 22). Cixous, like other feminists, succumbs to this risk in her appeal to pregnancy and the womb as models for human relationships.

In her essay, "Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory," Mary Russo discusses at some length Bakhtin's formulation of the womb and pregnancy as grotesque images. As Russo adapts Bakhtin's theories of carnival and the grotesque to feminist analysis, her discussion is appreciative, though occasionally disapproving. Although she acknowledges that "there are many reasons for questioning the use of the maternal in recent French criticism" (she cites specifically the tendency to portray motherhood as an "idealized category"), she remains suspicious of anything potentially negative in Bakhtin's appropriation of the imagery of childbearing. Bakhtin is useful to feminism insofar as his formulations conform to those of recent feminists: "In terms strikingly similar to Bakhtin's formulation of the grotesque body as continuous process, Hélène Cixous calls this body 'the body without beginning and without end'" (Russo, 221). Bakhtin is suspect, however, because, like most male theorists of his time, he "fails to acknowledge or incorporate the social relations of gender" in his analysis (Russo, 219).

Russo focuses her criticism of Bakhtin on his treatment of the figure of the "pregnant hag," the terracotta figurines that he discusses in his intro-

duction to *Rabelais and His World*. As Bakhtin explains these figurines, he emphasizes again their ambivalent quality:

In the famous Kerch terracotta collection we find figurines of senile pregnant hags. Moreover, the old hags are laughing. This is a typical and very strongly expressed grotesque. It is ambivalent. It is pregnant death, a death that gives birth. There is nothing completed, nothing calm and stable in the bodies of these old hags. They combine a senile, decaying and deformed flesh with the flesh of new life, conceived but as yet unformed. Life is shown in its two-fold contradictory process; it is the epitome of incompleteness. And such is precisely the grotesque concept of the body. (25-26)

The ambivalence of the figure centers, for Bakhtin, not on the female grotesque, but rather on the aging body. It is a mistake to assume, as I believe Russo does, an implicit fear or contempt in Bakhtin's interpretation of these objects. She explains that "for the feminist reader, the pregnant hag is more than ambivalent. It is loaded with the connotations of fear and loathing associated with the biological processes of reproduction and aging" (Russo, 219). My quarrel with Russo's reading is that I am not convinced Bakhtin experiences "fear and loathing" in the contemplation of these figures, or indeed of any biological processes, whether copulation, defecation, childbirth, or even death.

To characterize the hags as "old, senile, decaying and deformed" is to call them what they are, or at least what they are meant to appear to be: they are grotesques, after all.²⁰ We assume an absolutely negative connotation in our reading of these adjectives; but, although the assumption is more than understandable (and I don't wish to appear either disingenuous or hopelessly naive), I don't think we can transfer our own assumptions to Bakhtin. A balanced reading of the passage shows that the old hags are explicitly positive figures. They are "the epitome of incompleteness," as Bakhtin says. They celebrate life in its extreme intermediacy, in the fullness of its indetermination. Russo herself makes this very point, hesitantly, when she reminds us that "Bakhtin's description of these ancient crones is at least exuberant" (Russo, 219).

Russo's ultimate reproach to Bakhtin is the question she asserts "never occurred to [him] in front of the Kerch terracotta figurines—Why are these old hags laughing?" (Russo, 227). In my reading of the passage, the question has not only occurred to him, he has already answered it. Their laughter is the "popular corrective" that prevents us from taking them too seriously. Bakhtin's description of the terracotta figurines constitutes a defense of ugliness or deformity—the grotesque—against what he considers to be the lifeless quality, the absolute stasis, of the classical aes-

thetic. It is a mark, I think, of our implicit adherence to this aesthetic that we cannot even entertain the notion that Bakhtin's description of the hags is positive. I would suggest that age and ugliness become undesirable attributes through our eyes, more than through his. By extension, then, his depiction of the figurines seems to us imbued with the "fear and loathing" characteristic of misogyny. Like Cixous, whom she quotes, Russo conveys the idea that fear is the only response men have to pregnancy and the womb. In Bakhtin's case, I believe a more subtle reasoning applies.

The source of fear in Bakhtin's discussion of the womb is neither woman per se, nor the maternal, nor the supposed mysterious power of pregnancy. Carnival functions, according to Bakhtin, precisely to place the body, male and female, on demystifying display: there can be, as I quoted earlier, "nothing frightening" in it (*Rabelais*, 91). If the womb is "the earthly element of terror" in Bakhtin's account, it is not because, as Cixous writes, "it has always been suspected that, when pregnant, the woman . . . takes on intrinsic value as a woman in her own eyes and, undeniably, acquires body and sex" (261-62).²¹ The source of terror in the image of the womb is spatial: the fear of being swallowed up, the loss of "outsideness" that is essential to selfhood as Bakhtin defines it. To equate this fear with an intrinsic fear of woman is to restrict the definition of femininity to the functioning of the womb, which is indeed a definition that many thinkers, feminist and antifeminist alike, endorse. Cixous, in certain passages of "The Laugh of the Medusa," seems to me to be among those who define the feminine in this way; Bakhtin, in my view, is not.

Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the
immense resources of the unconscious spring forth.

Much as the womb defines the relationship between self and other that Cixous proposes, the body defines woman's relationship to language. "Her flesh speaks true," Cixous writes. "She lays herself bare. In fact, she physically materializes what she's thinking; she signifies it with her body" (251). Writing the body is a matter of calling forth the unconscious, that which has been kept hidden. The expansive (female) body is riddled with ever-multiplying desire; and when this immense source of libidinal, linguistic expression has been unleashed, its force (it comes as no surprise) is "explosive, utterly destructive, shattering" (256; emphasis in the original). In reclaiming the body through language, women's writing visits yet again the scene of a violent and shattering confrontation.

As Cixous sets out to write femininity, in open defiance of the way in which Freud and other fathers have written it, she insists on the trans-

gressive nature of her undertaking. "The Dark Continent," she declares, "is neither dark nor unexplorable" (255). Yet this continent, once illuminated through feminine *écriture*, looks like a rather familiar place. In claiming a privileged relationship to it, Cixous does no more than confirm what male theorists have claimed for centuries.²² Though Cixous writes that this is a "body without end, without appendage, without principal 'parts'" (259), nonetheless a great many parts are on display; and all of them—nipples, breasts, womb—are either uniquely feminine or have served traditionally to define femininity.²³ Attempting to subvert the "phallic mystification" of writing, Cixous produces, in a sense, its mirror image: writing is no longer seminal, she claims, it is lactic. Merely interchanging body parts or fluids does little, however, to upset the Freudian framework, the relationship between writing and the unconscious, which Cixous retains virtually intact.

In a chapter of *Sémiotikè* entitled "Le mot, le dialogue, et le roman," Julia Kristeva draws a distinction between truly subversive discourses and those that are merely parody.²⁴ Explicating and developing certain ideas drawn from her reading of Bakhtin, Kristeva defines dialogic discourse as "*une transgression se donnant une loi*"; that is, a transgression that creates or provides its own law (Kristeva, 152). Women's writing, as Cixous demonstrates repeatedly in "The Laugh of the Medusa," presents itself as such a discourse. In practice, however, feminine *écriture* seems more reminiscent of what Kristeva calls a "pseudo-transgression," or "*la loi prévoyant sa transgression*"; that is, a law that anticipates its own transgression (Kristeva, 152). Such a pseudo-transgression remains in the realm of the monologic, for it upholds the official discourse it claims to subvert.

If the source of writing is the unconscious, as Cixous claims, if true expression lies exclusively within or upon or across or through the body—even the cosmic "body without end"—then the "locus for the other" remains obscure. In valuing the unconscious, that which is hidden and unspoken, Cixous admits the existence of a dark continent, in her words the "limitless country," where the other is ultimately an unnecessary, if not unwelcome, intruder. Cixous's professed alternative to the dialectic, to the phallogocentric values of opposition and hierarchizing exchange, is scarcely better. The limitless, all-inclusive, multiple, and multiply desiring self simply allows no place "outside," precisely where difference must be located. The other's otherness could hardly be problematic according to this schema, which doesn't allow it to exist.

Cixous's desire for "the new love" that "dares for the other, wants the other" might be considered an admirable, if somewhat suffocating, ideal, were it not undercut by the climate of hostility that pervades "The Laugh of the Medusa." The repeated violent imagery to which Cixous has re-

course sets a jarring context for "a love that rejoices in the exchange that multiplies" (264). The violence of her text is reserved, of course, for the others who have come before, those who are part of the patriarchal history with which she seeks to break. It is ironic, then, that she shares this climate of hostility with a variety of "fathers" against whose vision she is writing: Freud is certainly one; Jean-Paul Sartre is arguably another.

Paranoia has occasionally been called a twentieth-century disease. A glance at some of the century's most influential models of human interaction tends to reaffirm this. Whether the scenario is the family romance or the existentialist search for authenticity, the other is often viewed with wariness and distrust, if not outright hostility. That which is encountered outside the self, in the conscious world of human exchange, may prove to be the source of neurosis or bad faith. In either case, the other is viewed in some sense as an obstacle to self-fulfillment.²⁵ A brief consideration of the dynamics of the Oedipal complex for all concerned, including the excluded little girl, may lead one to concur readily with Sartre that Hell is indeed other people.²⁶ It is small wonder, then, that Cixous's solution to this very real dilemma is to expand the self to preclude any form of opposition, as the only opposition she can imagine is one in which the self is threatened. Bakhtin offers another and, in my view, more viable alternative to this hostile climate, one that may fulfill the promise of the Medusa's laughter better even than Cixous herself.

You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing.

"Laughter," Bakhtin writes, "demolishes fear and piety before an object" ("Epic and Novel," 23). What I have tried to argue here is that the Medusa is not truly laughing, not in the Bakhtinian sense, for the Medusa's laughter replaces whatever myth it subverts with another version of the same pious, perhaps even frightening, image. According to the myth, the monster is deadly. Merely to look upon her reduces the observer to silence, turns him to stone. Cixous encourages the look with inviting reassurance: "You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing" (255). But Perseus, in Cixous's schema, meets the fate with which he was initially threatened. As the representative of official discourse, he remains precisely that which must be exploded, swept away, if the "new history" of feminine *écriture* is to be written. I am, of course, no more inclined than Cixous to preserve the old myth; but what troubles me in her text is the way in which the new myth resembles the old. In the official version, the sword-wielding Perseus silences the Medusa for fear of being silenced

himself. In the subversive "unofficial" version, the Medusa's laughter, a product not of the masculine province of history but of the limitless feminine country of desire, includes (and thereby preempts) whatever Perseus may have to say. In either case, someone is silenced. In either version of the myth, no true dialogue can be maintained.

Bakhtin imagines a relationship between self and other in which silence is truly, reciprocally deadly. The moment the dialogue ends, whether violently or gently, both other and self have ceased to be. Bakhtin believes that official discourses can and should be subverted; the "culturally deaf semipatriarchal" world, like Cixous's deaf male ear, must, even for its own sake, be made to hear. But history cannot be rewritten in the way that Cixous proclaims. To attempt to do so is always to accept more of the language of authority than one rejects. Cixous's feminine *écriture* remains monologic because it seeks the unconscious, the other within, a presence internalized and therefore precluded, rather than the "living mix of varied and opposing voices," the conscious external conversation in which tension is not diffused and in which opposition is neither forestalled nor contained.

If we attempt, Tzvetan Todorov has written, "to grasp in a single glance the whole of Bakhtin's intellectual itinerary, we note that its unity is achieved in the conviction . . . according to which *the interhuman is constitutive of the human*."²⁷ The space between self and other, the "difference" that Cixous would seek through women's writing to preserve, is irreducible, absolute, and—this is key—productive. The distance between self and other is not a gap to be bridged or a void to be filled, either through domination or inclusion; for it is in this very space that "interanimation" occurs, that we as humans exist. To illustrate the originality of this position, Todorov compares Bakhtin to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who "sees the other as necessary only in the process of coming to know a preexisting entity" (Todorov, 85); that is, the self. Cixous's feminine self is also a preexisting entity. Silenced up until now, she has always been there, beneath the surface. Once this silence is broken, the "whole woman" erupts in violence ("volcanic . . . an upheaval of the old property crust") and promptly submerges everything in her path in a wave of desire.

My preference for Bakhtin over Cixous, for his concept of dialogic discourse over her definition of feminine *écriture*, stems in part from my initial enthusiasm for her work. Her vision of "the one and the other, not fixed in sequences of struggle and expulsion . . . but infinitely dynamized by an incessant process of exchange" remains as compelling for me as the first time I read it. My purpose here has not been to question the redefinition of the relationship between self and other that Cixous proposes,

but rather to suggest that Bakhtin offers a necessary corrective to her vision for women's writing. Indeed her "new" model, the one she claims women have always lived, finds its more benevolent expression in Bakhtin, whose rhetoric is considerably less violent and whose laughter is more welcoming than Cixous's. Her self-styled "self-seeking" text celebrates a union with the other for whom Cixous has no need and to whom, in the end, she has left no place. Reading "The Laugh of the Medusa," I must conclude with Todorov that Bakhtin's vision is "not only more generous than the other, it is more true" (Todorov, 85).

Notes

1. A number of publications have appeared in the past few years addressing the topic of Bakhtin and feminism. These include Mary Russo, "Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory," in *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986); Dale M. Bauer's *Feminist Dialogics: A Theory of Failed Community* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988); *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory*, ed. Ken Hirschkop and David Shepherd (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1989); and David Lodge, *After Bakhtin: Essays on Fiction and Criticism* (London: Routledge, 1990).

2. Unless otherwise stated, Cixous's essay is quoted from "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Schocken, 1981), 245-64.

3. My reference is to the title of Dale Bauer's book cited in note 1. In the introduction to a subsequent collection of essays, *Feminism, Bakhtin, and the Dialogic*, ed. Dale M. Bauer and Susan Jaret McKinstry (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), Bauer and McKinstry offer various (often negative) definitions of a feminist dialogics: "Dialogic consciousness or standpoint depends neither on essentialism nor truth, but on context and condition. A feminist dialogics is not just agonistic or oppositional; it also suggests an identity in dialectic response, always open and ongoing" (3). "For the object," they write further, "is not, ultimately, to produce a feminist monologic voice, a dominant voice that is a reversal of the patriarchal voice (even if such a project were conceivable)" (4). By such criteria, Cixous's endeavor fails.

4. See Verena Andermatt Conley, *Hélène Cixous: Writing the Feminine* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 77-78.

5. M. M. Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 11. Quotations from this essay and others in the volume are cited in the text by title and page number.

6. Clair Wills, "Upsetting the Public: Carnival, Hysteria, and Women's Texts" in Hirschkop and Shepherd, *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory*, 130-51. Feminist critics have adopted Bakhtin's theory of carnival more readily than his theory of the novel, though both function dialogically and may be equally subversive.

7. I shall return to this point later in my essay, as laughter is announced in her title and Cixous also prescribes a form of laughter, designed "to blow up the law, to break up the 'truth'" (258).

8. As Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson have pointed out in *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1991), there is a utopian

strain to laughter as Bakhtin describes it, particularly in *Rabelais and His World*. The idea of a utopia—a place out of time, out of history—is ultimately foreign, however, to Bakhtin's world of becoming. As Morson and Emerson phrase it, laughter and carnival are "the utopia of an anti-utopian thinker" (94).

9. Consistent with her call for an "other bisexuality," Cixous urges that we get past the opposition mother/father: "Let us dematerpaternalize rather than deny woman. . . . Let us defetishize. Let's get away from the dialectic which has it that the only good father is a dead father" (261). Earlier in the essay, however, she proclaims the primacy of the mother: "A woman is never far from 'mother' (I mean outside her role functions: the 'mother' as nonname and as source of goods). There is always within her at least a little of that good mother's milk. She writes in white ink" (251).

10. Indeed, feminist readers often relegate Bakhtin to the outside for not having been (I am distilling the argument) a feminist. Such judgments are decidedly "agonistic and oppositional"; they serve "to produce a feminist monologic voice, a dominant voice that is the reversal of the patriarchal voice"—a project, it turns out, that is readily conceivable. (I am quoting here from Bauer and McKinstry, *Feminism, Bakhtin, and the Dialogic*, 4.)

11. Laurence Enjolras, *Femmes écrites: Bilan de deux décennies*, in Stanford French and Italian Studies (Saratoga, Calif.: ANMA Libri, 1990). Enjolras adopts what she calls an impudent, polemical tone to describe her frustration with apologists of feminine *écriture*, who remain somehow oblivious to the paradox of their own writing. Texts like "The Laugh of the Medusa," she writes, "convey nonetheless, even as they claim to denounce, undo, annihilate them—and it's perhaps the enormity of the paradox that is so infuriating—the same repressive elements, intrinsic to the system and established by men, which have allowed the latter, since time began, to keep women in a subordinate position" (4; my translation).

12. In Bakhtin's cosmos, the ideal is the outward-looking Copernican model, as opposed to the "singular Ptolemaic world" in which everything is seen to revolve around the self. Cixous's is rather, as she phrases it, "a cosmos tirelessly traversed by Eros, an immense astral space not organized around any one sun that's any more of a star than the others" (259). But it is a cosmos in which everything returns ultimately to the "body without end." No one star is dominant, but all are contained within the "immense astral space" of the (woman's) body.

13. Clair Wills sees these different female types on a continuum. All of them represent a feminine energy (what Cixous sometimes calls "libido") that has been traditionally beyond male control, outside of the public order. This is, of course, an idea that men have held for years.

14. For a discussion of the relationship between inner and outer speech, see Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World* (London: Routledge, 1990), 51-55, in particular. For a discussion of Bakhtin's critique of the Freudian idea of the unconscious and the individual psyche, see Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), 171-85. Bakhtin's quarrel with Freud rests in part on his perception of the unconscious as an ahistorical category, and of Freud's idea of language as a predominantly "natural" rather than social activity. In *Freudianism: A Critical Sketch*, Voloshinov detected in Freud a "*sui generis* fear of history, an ambition to locate a world beyond the social and the historical, a search for this world precisely in the depths of the organic" (cited in Clark and Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 176). Whatever Bakhtin's role in this book, the sentiment is surely one he endorsed. Cixous's adoption of the unconscious opens itself to criticism on similar grounds.

15. Holquist, *Dialogism*, 51; emphasis in the original.

16. And she does so, ironically, as Laurence Enjolras has pointed out, at Lacan's bidding. See Enjolras, *Femmes écrites*, 30-31.

17. Holquist, *Dialogism*, 31.

18. The phrase is from Russo's essay "Female Grotesques," 219. Subsequent quotations from this essay are cited by author and page number in the text.

19. M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 91. Subsequent quotations from this essay are cited by title and page number in the text.

20. Although a good case can no doubt be made for the misogyny of the originals, I think that is another question altogether.

21. Cixous suggests here that what has always been "suspected" about women is true: they do take on an "intrinsic value" when pregnant, even, and perhaps especially, in their own eyes. I find this assertion deeply troubling. The notion that a woman "acquires body and sex" if not solely, then somehow more rapidly and truly, through the experience of pregnancy serves to link feminine identity yet again to a reproductive function that has so often served as a justification for the subordination of women. The strain of "women's writing" that celebrates, even figuratively, the experience of pregnancy as a source of feminine power excludes by inference, and rather cruelly, women who have not borne children. What is the source of femininity or power for women who cannot become pregnant or who are unable to carry a child to term? The issues, according to Cixous's own terms, become even murkier when abortion enters the picture. If the womb is—again, even figuratively—the "locus for the other," a model for nonthreatening human relationships, how should we then characterize the act of voluntarily terminating an otherwise healthy pregnancy?

22. Enjolras, in *Femmes écrites*, 30-31, cites Lacan: "Women's power is infinitely beyond all of these male categories, of power, of knowledge, which are mere nonsense, nonsense which doesn't concern them. . . . Must women attempt to integrate male categories, they who are more at ease in the realm [lit: place] of the unconscious?" (my translation).

23. Again, Laurence Enjolras points out that all the female parts are present and celebrated, except the one that is traditionally absent: the head. See her chapter "Pour un corps décapité" ("For a beheaded body") in *Femmes écrites*. In light of this observation, the Medusa is an interesting choice of figure. Cixous wishes to rewrite the myth; but in her new version of it, the head still goes missing.

24. Julia Kristeva, *Sémiotikè, Recherches pour une sémanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 1969), 143-73. Subsequent quotations from this work are cited by author and page number in the text.

25. This idea could have no meaning for Bakhtin, for whom the other, even in disagreement, serves as the vehicle for self-fulfillment.

26. From the famous last lines of *Huis clos*: "L'enfer, c'est les Autres."

27. Tzvetan Todorov, *Literature and Its Theorists: A Personal View of Twentieth-Century Criticism*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987), 81; emphasis in the original.

The Historical Poetics of Excrement: Yeats's Crazy Jane and the Irish Bishops

Elizabeth Butler Cullingford

In 1930 Yeats suggested a paradoxical similarity between the Bolshevik cultivation of mass emotion and his own imaginative return to the oral popular culture of the Irish peasantry:

"Is not the Bolshevik's passion for the machine, his creation in the theatre and the schools of mass emotion, a parody of what we feel? We are casting off crown and mitre that we may lay our heads on Mother Earth."¹

Yeats's metaphor of "discrowning" also permeates *Rabelais and His World*, on which Bakhtin worked from 1934 to 1940 during the expropriation of the Russian peasant farmers and the Stalinist terror.² Although the historical analogies between Bakhtin's Marxist espousal of the folk and Yeats's aristocratic "Dream of the noble and the beggarman"³ cannot be pressed too far, their juxtaposition is suggestive. Yeats, who had a lifelong interest in Sir James Frazer's *Golden Bough* and in popular folklore, was thoroughly familiar with the concept of carnival.⁴ The "discrowning" populism he shares with Bakhtin defines itself in opposition to the social and political repression that followed the Irish and Bolshevik revolutions. When the Russian peasants were resisting forced collectivization, Bakhtin celebrated the spontaneous collectivity of folk festival and humor. According to Terry Eagleton, "Bakhtin pits against that 'official, formalistic and logical authoritarianism' whose unspoken name is Stalinism the explosive politics of the body, the erotic, the licentious and semiotic."⁵ In posttreaty Ireland, the conservative and petit bourgeois politicians of the new Free State allied themselves with the clergy to construct a monologic and humorless version of Irish postcolonial identity as Gaelic, Catholic, and sexually pure. In the late 1920s and

early 1930s Yeats, who had supported the nationalist rejection of the imperial crown, now opposed the Irish miter, the power of what he called the "ecclesiastical mind, Protestant and Catholic."⁶ An erotic and licentious female figure, the old madwoman Crazy Jane, disputes through her ballad poetics and carnivalesque insistence on the grotesque body the chaste national identity constructed by a celibate clergy.

Robert Young has cautioned that "just about anyone can, and probably will, appropriate Bakhtin for just about anything." He argues that, while the *Rabelais* study is the most attractive of Bakhtin's works for Marxists, "carnival offers a liberal rather than a Marxist politics."⁷ Tony Bennett, however, claims that "Bakhtin's study of *Rabelais* would seem fully to exemplify what a Marxist—that is, a historical and materialist—approach to the study of literary texts should look like."⁸ But what if one is looking for a *feminist*, historical, and materialist approach to literary texts? Can Bakhtin, master of disguise, alias, and multiple voices, but, as Wayne Booth puts it, practically tone-deaf to female intonations, be recuperated for feminist criticism?⁹ And if he can be so easily appropriated, is he worth appropriating?

Reading Yeats through the lens of carnivalesque dialogism demonstrates both the advantages and limitations of Bakhtin's method. A historical poetics reveals Crazy Jane not as the eccentric spokeswoman for Yeats's private desires, but as the figure for an eroticized politics of female transgression. Yeats's contention that the removal of crown and miter allows us to "lay our heads on Mother Earth" provides a metaphorical starting point for an investigation of the relation of Bakhtinian carnivalesque and Yeatsian female masquerade both to each other and to feminism.

The rhetorical invocation of "Mother Earth" is problematic. Is it the familiar symbolic containment of women within the stereotype of maternity and materiality or a challenge to male transcendence through the generative power of female immanence? Bakhtin's work is permeated by an uncritical equation of woman with womb, grave, and excrement. In celebrating the regenerative capabilities of the grotesque carnival body, he continually tropes that body as female, without interrogating the gender implications of his metaphors. In a rare intervention on the subject of gender, Bakhtin admits that *Rabelais* did not take a progressive position in the sixteenth-century *Querelle des Femmes*: "*Rabelais* . . . did not take the women's side. How can his position be explained?"¹⁰ Bakhtin naively supposes that "the women's side" is adequately represented by the Platonizing male poets descended from the courtly tradition; the opposition is represented by clerics hostile to the female body as the incarnation of sin. Bakhtin distances *Rabelais* from the tradition of medieval religious

misogyny and presents him as adhering to the comic, folk view of woman:

The popular tradition is in no way hostile to woman and does not approach her negatively. In this tradition woman is essentially related to the material bodily lower stratum; she is the incarnation of this stratum that degrades and regenerates simultaneously. She is ambivalent. She debases, brings down to earth, lends a bodily substance to things, and destroys; but, first of all, she is the principle that gives birth. She is the womb. Such is woman's image in the popular comic tradition. (*Rabelais*, 240)

Bakhtin is so firmly wedded to the virtues of degradation that he cannot imagine a woman objecting to his characterizing her as the mindless representative of the lower body: the endlessly reproducing womb.

Stallybrass and White correct Bakhtin's joyfully positive celebration of carnival by reminding us that "the politics of carnival cannot be resolved outside of a close historical examination of particular conjunctures: there is no a priori revolutionary vector to carnival and transgression." The same is true of the sexual politics of festivity. The female role in Renaissance carnival was indeed ambivalent: in the process described by Stallybrass and White as "displaced abjection," carnival's violent energies might be turned not against the official hierarchy but against powerless marginal groups like Jews or women.¹¹ The woman's *symbolic* role in carnival practices, however, was central. Men dressed as dominant, unruly viragos, and "in hierarchical and conflictful societies that loved to reflect on the world-turned-upside-down, the *topos* of the woman on top was one of the most enjoyed."¹² Virginia Woolf suggests that such symbolic use of the female serves only to reinforce her social marginality: "Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant."¹³ Her objection speaks to Bakhtin's idealization of carnival; as a licensed transgression and inversion it is no more than a "permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow-off."¹⁴ Simple inversion of categories reinforces hierarchy. As Shakespeare acknowledges, "There is no slander in an allow'd fool" and, Woolf would add, no threat in the representation of a woman ruling a man.¹⁵

Yet Davis provides an optimistic reading of the trope of the unruly woman that may be applied to Yeats's Crazy Jane. She argues that the representation of the disobedient, transgressive, verbally abusive female may offer a politically useful model for domestic and public behavior. The model operates positively only in specific historical contexts, where

sexual symbolism has a close connection with questions of order and subordination . . . [and] the stimulus to inversion play is a double one —

traditional hierarchical structures *and* disputed changes in the distribution of power in family and political life.¹⁶

Both of these conditions applied to posttreaty Ireland, where woman had traditionally been represented as virgin or mother, an image deployed to generate sacrificial idealism in patriotic males but seldom to incite women to independent action; and the pressures to modernize social and sexual life were resisted by government and clergy as emanating from the political enemy, England.

Yeats's early project had been the formation of Irish patriots through a poetics of desire for the free nation, imagined as a woman. As heir to the long generic confusion between the Virgin and the Beloved that originated in troubadour love poetry, however, Yeats envisaged such desire as ungratified except in death. His Cathleen ni Houlihan, "purer than a tall candle before the Holy Rood" (82), has had many admirers but "never set out the bed for any."¹⁷ This idealization of the unattainable female and sublimation of sexual into political desire persisted in Irish cultural consciousness long after the need for it had disappeared with the establishment of the Irish Free State. It was maintained by a devotion to the Virgin Mary with which it had always been intertwined.

The establishment of the nation turned Cathleen ni Houlihan into a pious housewife. Yeats saw the Irish hierarchy and the politicians conspiring to impose censorship in order to deny and cover up the "life of the belly and the reproductive organs" (*Rabelais*, 21). He was inspired to poetic and political resistance by the bishops' Lenten pastorals of 1924; the agitations of the Irish Vigilance Association and the Catholic Truth Society; the train holdups by "holy gunmen" in search of filthy English newspapers;¹⁸ the Christian Brothers' public burning of the old folk ballad about the pregnant Virgin, "The Cherry Tree Carol";¹⁹ the setting up of the Committee of Enquiry into Evil Literature in 1926; and the Censorship of Publications Bill in 1929.

Mary Douglas argues that fetishization of purity is characteristic of threatened minorities, whose concern with political boundaries is displaced into an obsession with bodily orifices.²⁰ Ireland's boundaries were compromised from without by continued British presence in the treaty ports and from within by partition and the bitter legacy of civil war. The revolution was unfinished. Although the Catholics were not a minority within the Free State, insecurity about boundaries combined with the desire of the newly empowered to assert control at home. Attention was diverted from rural and urban poverty by a public obsession with sexuality, defined as "dirt." In their 1924 Lenten Pastorals, which Yeats described as "rancid, coarse [*sic*] and vague,"²¹ the bishops lambasted "women's

immodest fashions in dress, indecent dances, unwholesome theatrical performances and cinema exhibitions, evil literature and drink." Their leading obsession was "foreign corrupting dances," which were not "the clean, healthy, National Irish dances . . . [but] importations from the vilest dens of London, Paris and New York—direct and unmistakable incitements to evil thoughts, evil desires, and grossest acts of impurity."²² *The Catholic Bulletin* described "Leda and the Swan" as "the filthy Swan Song of Senator Yeats."²³ In "The Three Monuments" Yeats responded by mocking the idea "That purity built up the State / And after kept it from decay," (227) but the establishment was bent on eradicating filth, censoring and silencing heteroglossic voices.

State regulation of sexuality through the refusal of divorce and contraception and the promotion of motherhood as a full-time occupation weighed heavily on Irish women.²⁴ In their 1927 pastoral the bishops reiterated that "in woman, especially, purity is the crowning glory."²⁵ In the Senate Yeats defended divorce, supported women's right to work outside the home, and opposed a censorship that, devised in part to ban periodicals that advertised contraceptives, would also exclude from Ireland "all great love poetry."²⁶ In an erotophobic culture that tried to define indecency as "calculated to arouse sexual passion,"²⁷ he deployed the love lyric as a strategy of poetic resistance; in a bourgeois culture he marshaled the popular resonances of the ballad. Throughout the Crazy Jane poems, the symbiosis between the pure woman and the nation, a product of male fantasy, is ironized and ruptured.

Crazy Jane speaks as a sexual woman, but also as one of the disenfranchised subaltern groups ignored by the new state: the rural poor. Class and gender issues meet in the personae of the defiant old peasant woman and her lover Jack the Journeyman. The cultural values of the new state after 1922 not only were Catholic, they were rural petit bourgeois. After the famine of 1848 small farmers increasingly adhered to the social system known as familism, which ensured the continuity of inheritance and prevented the splitting up of farms. The male heir married at a later age than before the famine; unwed daughters could enter the convent, domestic service, or emigrate; noninheriting sons could become priests or move to town. Sexual independence was discouraged as likely to lead to economic disaster. Arensburg and Kimball note that the small farmers of Clare in the 1930s identified violations of the familistic pattern with "the debased conduct of the lower ranks of the landless and disreputable of the countryside."²⁸ Yeats posited an image of the class below the farmers, the landless peasantry and migrant laborers or journeymen (a group that rapidly declined after the famine), as preoccupied with desire and sexuality. The journeyman, a craftsman who hires himself out

for a day's wages, is a man of no property, free of the conservatism that springs from land ownership. Yeats intuits that, because the landless had nothing to inherit or bequeath, sexual caution was not economically mandated. Introducing Merriman's grotesque and bawdy Gaelic poem "The Midnight Court," in which an assembly of women demands that men satisfy them physically and that the celibate clergy marry, Yeats links the frank expression of female desire with carnival, with "the free speech and buffoonery of some traditional country festival."²⁹ Yeats's aristocratic populism constructs the landless peasantry as desiring subjects, and the new Free State as a political body open to desire.

Yeats's conception of the peasantry parallels Bakhtin's vision of the early Renaissance folk in that both serve contemporary political ends. Although in his youth he had accompanied Lady Gregory from cottage to cottage collecting folklore and fairy tales, the middle-class poet had never undertaken serious anthropological research. His attempt to combine the oral folk tradition with sophisticated poetic techniques resulted in a generic hybrid. There is no reason, however, to deplore this procedure. Jameson endorses "the reconstruction of so-called popular cultures . . . from the fragments of essentially peasant cultures: folk songs, fairy tales, popular festivals, occult or oppositional systems of belief such as magic and witchcraft."³⁰ As opposed to Nazi *Völkisch* propaganda or what Holquist describes as the "Stalinization of Russian folklore," both of which subsume a sanitized idea of the people within the totality of the state, Yeats and Bakhtin emphasized the messy, libidinous, and subversive powers of folk culture.³¹ Yeats opens his sequence with "Crazy Jane and the Bishop," a sustained female curse against patriarchal ecclesiastical authority that begins with verbal abuse:

Bring me to the blasted oak
That I, midnight upon the stroke,
(All find safety in the tomb.)
May call down curses on his head
Because of my dear Jack that's dead.
Coxcomb was the least he said:
The solid man and the coxcomb.

(255-56)

Cursing, however, is not sufficient to express Jane's contempt for official culture. Her final Bakhtinian gesture is to spit at the bishop.

Arguing that Bakhtin's work is "open to feminist inflection," Robert Stam suggests that his categories "display an intrinsic identification with