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Versions of Grandeur (and the Defiled): The Ideology of Purity or How Sex Becomes Text

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**I. Versions of Grandeur**

This paper is based on the fact that the male *psycho-sexual economy* has made it acceptable to brutalize women. Having said that, I will avoid any further critiques of that *status quo* but only remind us that the male sexual economy drives the organization of human community from Delaware to Darfur, "from the bedroom to the boardroom," as they say, from educational policy to trade agreements to corporate structure to medical research, and that we know that there are devastating consequences for adapting the framework of the phallus as aesthetic and ethic. So, that's the last I want to say about that, because I believe that the project of understanding male sexuality cannot be provided with any sort of accuracy or *clarity* without the benefit, first, of understanding women's sex for what it is.

I began this work when I designed a course in "feminist re-readings" of texts, and was caught off guard by the degree to which students refused to engage female sexual pleasure. Students were positively disinclined to take seriously female characters who explore their own

sexuality, who celebrate sex, who are, in fact, agents of sexual pleasure. They didn't really want to talk about it and could certainly never embrace the fully sexualized female character as legitimate and whole. Instead, students, in Barbara Herrnstein Smith's language, is it still so *usual*, to easily and swiftly demonize *and* dementize the sexual woman? I recognized my first obstacle fairly quickly: the *sexualized woman* is already defined within the parameters of a masculinist language. The tropes of the virgin/whore are prevalent enough in the very fabric of our society as to be constituent, so the caricatures of the *sexualized woman* had already closed off many possibilities for my students. But, I was doing my best to give them other language, other paradigms by which to read the text, and yet they seemed almost incapable of another vision of sex. There seemed to be a real block, and, there was certainly silence—which always translates as danger.

And this recognition of danger reminded me that, besides having no language with which to talk about the sexual woman, that *to read* new representations within a language governed by the “interdiction of the permutation or transformation of elements,” has always been a deadly business.<sup>1</sup> My students seemed to sense this danger at their core. Academic rhetoricians claim that because the socio-symbolic realm is accessed through language, it is altered through the same medium, and many of us believe that there is no better way to a human ethic than through art. We all take our study of text seriously because we know that amelioration is possible. So now, recall with me Helene Cixous' profoundly poetic call for women to “write about women and bring women to writing from which they have been driven as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goals.” Here, Cixous opened wide the question of the absence of the feminine symbolic, and the possibility of discovering what has become known as the *écriture feminine*. In the French critical sense *Écriture* is not just writing

itself, but the refusal to use the symbolic mediation of language to go along with what merely *is*—it is writing that resists and undermines the normative functions of language.<sup>ii</sup> The *écriture féminine* is a subversive act; it is powerful and threatening precisely because it opposes the given social order so thoroughly.

I have recently begun to posit a concept I call the *a savoir féminine sexuel* to suggest that the power of language embedded in the word *Écriture* can be realized in the *reception* of language as well. The French word *savoir* goes beyond the sense of “to know” that English speakers readily understand. This form of “to know” implies a sense of learning, a reaching, a searching, a becoming, an impatience for perfect closure and a celebration of *the processes of discovery*. These processes are *sensual*, they are a *coming*, a pleasure in *knowing*, a feminine *lingering in the process* as process. The “*a savoir féminine sexuel*” then, is a process that is sister to *jouissance* in that it implies pleasure and knowledge beyond any essentialist version of either, while also answering to the subversive nature of the *Ecriture*. The *a savoir féminine sexuel* stops playing at the game of caricatures and refuses to genuflect at the altar of the “purity.”

I say “purity” because I believe I’m finding that inscriptions of an *ideology of purity* may be more responsible for gross violence against women than any other ideological constraint. This ideology is based on a false dichotomous relationship between the sublime and the profane and it seems to me that a misappropriated idea of “purity” taken to define women’s sex places undue and inappropriate stresses *on all gender locations* and drives misogyny. Purity in and of itself is not a bad thing, I suppose, but when it’s used as a standard by which to value and judge human beings—or, more accurately, I think, a standard by which to pretend to value and judge human beings—it becomes extraordinarily dangerous. Just think of the rape victims in war or religion who are brutalized sexually, left in the gutters by their enemies and then rejected from their own

communities because they are soiled and therefore deemed worthless. I have decided to leave out some of the more gruesome examples of punishment for perceived transgressions of purity today, but if you'll read with me, when you read the newspaper or your next novel, or a Web site, or whatever, for the concept of purity as an ideal human state or quality and that defilement is punishable, you will discover your own examples very quickly. Newspaper accounts, for example, often focus not on the brutality of the violence of the male crime, but on whether or not the young woman beaten to death had had sex with anyone, including her boyfriend.

The representations of women's sex that students have come to rely upon for their reading have the status of ideology very specifically: "the *imaginary* relationship of the individual to their *real* conditions of existence." Usually posing as either an "honor" or a "protective" device, the hegemonic discourses which claim women's bodies as an embodiment of an ethic of purity, are actually used to maintain lines of ownership and male domination. This imaginary relationship is imbedded in text and has wrought bizarre characterizations of the sexual female. And, of course, the image of the over-sexed (or alternately, "frigid"—either way, "unnatural") representation of woman is never confined to the text, emerges from the text and is superimposed on real women in the world and used as prototypes to evaluate and to condemn. And these representations—these *fabrications*—of the crazed or irresponsible or sullied or, alternately, virtuous, or ennobled, or wholesome, sexual woman are manifestations, *domestications* if you will, of the fear of imagining the *true erotic name* of the real sexual woman and the pleasures of female sex.<sup>iii</sup> The adaptability and ubiquity of these discourses present a very plastic site for both male judgment and male redemption.

I think of these representations as "versions of grandeur" because as they are repeated throughout the stories we tell about ourselves, they simultaneously render women

*extraordinarily powerful and dangerous* (responsible for The Fall!) and *outrageously insignificant* (unable to make decisions about their own bodies). In addition is the perhaps surprising truth that versions of women's "sex" actually adjudicate a civic ethic. By "sex" here, I mean the undetermined set of physical, mental, and emotional activities that seem to differentiate human beings from other life forms by virtue of the fact that human agents engage in sex primarily for pleasure. So, when I say that women's sex mediates civil society as a ethical system, I literally mean the female body and its relationship to relationship—that is, women having sex, women as receptacles of sex, women enjoying sex, women as agents of sex, the resulting "proof" of sex on women's bodies, women's sex as redemption for sin, as justification for sin, and as the definition of sin itself. And in all these places, the ethic of purity adjudicates.

Perhaps the ways that we read texts—and how we teach them—can instead be used to explore woman's sexual pleasure as a positive ethical value as opposed to a negative constraint of shame. Taking storytelling as my object of study, I'm interested in the "gaps" and "silences" that tell us something about the systematic and institutionalized oppression of women and other marginalized groups based in this ideology of purity *and* I'm especially interested in whether the interrogation of this system can decrease suffering and violence.

This sounds, even to me, a tad hyperbolic. But, it only sounds over-spoken until one is convinced, as I am, that language *is* ideology.

As Cixous called for writing, then, I am looking for evidence of *reading* and understanding the radical nature of women's sex itself. I believe that a "knowable" (in the French sense) feminine symbolic exists. That is, it can be "read" created, not just "written," even taking Cixous' warning that the language itself is an andocentric system. The *a savoir feminine sexuel* has not been silent, I'm claiming, even though it has been silenced; it is not invisible even if it

has been made opaque; it does not lack presence and significance within the symbolic even if it has been forced underground. We have only to listen a little more attentively, explore with honest and celebratory curiosity, I think, and decipher with our full critical, emotional, and sensual powers, even if, as Cixous writes, women's bodies have been written in "white ink."

Added to the general framework provided by Cixous, I want to mention four more related ideas that inform my sense of the *savoir* here.

- First, I need to mention Luce Irigaray's observation that Karl Marx knew that the exploitation of man over man was secondary to exploitation based on sex, but did not set his great mind to the problem. She laments that "He perceived the root of all evil but he did not treat it as such. Why not?" I consider this a call to work, a call to begin to discover the shape of a feminine psycho-sexual imaginary outside of the phallic economy.
- Further, to guide my thinking, I am inspired by Foucault's idea of the "proliferation of discourses," which gives the lie to the idea that our communities have been silent on the issue of sex – that even in the taboos against talking about sexuality we find another manifestation of discourses about sex. But, we must undertake this investigation as women coming together, refusing to explore our sex in hushed, transgressive tones built upon the idea of shame, a concept that neither Freud nor Foucault could do without.
- In addition, my critical framework takes very seriously Amber Hollibaugh's warning that "A feminism that does not speak to sexual pleasure has little to offer woman in the here and now."

- Fourth, my own work is inspired by Ayaan Hirsi Ali who is very explicit about that fact that there is a direct positive correlation between the status of women in any given political economy and the health of that society.
- I also find a lesser German philosopher particularly useful to help me tie together Cixous, Irigaray, Foucault, Holligbaugh, with Hirsi Ali. Nicolai Hartmann suggests that “purity” is a value within a particular ethical system built on faith and intended for a “higher realm.” But for human subjects he suggests that “ethical greatness in the sense of spacious capacity for everything that is in itself valuable,” that a “positive breath of valuational judgement” might be called upon which he describes as “fullness of experience.”

So, let me use the second half of this paper to give a few quick examples of the sorts of “readings” that I believe help actively undermine the “ideology of purity,” and perhaps, even, suggest “fullness of experience,” as a positive ethical value. The readings I want to foreground, demonstrate the ways the *a savoir* can be deployed to resist the ideology of purity and to highlight the sensuous woman. If ideology can be altered, it’s time to turn our critical readings to telling stories about representations of women’s sex that not only point out, but *actively undermine* the cult of purity.

For instance, Cixous finds evidence of “the new writing” in Joyce’s Molly Bloom. The last chapter of *Ulysses*, the “Penelope” chapter, has inspired a virtual cottage industry built up around Molly’s sexuality. Much of it is devoted to the idea—either the fear of the idea or the celebration of the idea—of Molly’s “dirty girl” image, based in her “yes-ing.” I love the “yes,” myself, but I believe *what is most at stake* includes not only the affirmative expectant, “Yes,” but, also the open, iconoclastic example of female pleasure: the “O” itself. Besides the “Yes,” the

“O” (not at all the “oh”) occurs more than 50 times in the Penelope monologue. I’m convinced that the final eight words of this monologue are genius (and yes I said yes I will Yes), but I also want to think about those 50 “O’s.” In them is the affirmation of presence *and of openness*. Not presence and absence, you see, not the epistemology based on strict dichotomy. Rather, that in the openness of words to *project* feminine pleasure—there is no lack at all, but a contradiction-less paradox, a powerful instance of writing woman’s pleasure.

O that awful deepdown torrent O and the sea the sea crimson sometimes like fire and the glorious sunsets and the figtrees in the Alameda gardens yes and all the queer little streets and pink and blue and yellow houses and the rosegardens and the jessamine and geraniums and cactuses and Gibraltar as a girl where I was a Flower of the mountain yes when I put the rose in my hair like the Andalusian girls used or shall I wear a red yes and how he kissed me under the Moorish wall and I thought well as well him as another and then I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes

The O is not a lack as long as no one tries to fill it with a presence beyond itself or separate from itself—as long as no one attempts to fill it, that is, as *a target*. The O must be understood as already filled, as already alive, as already *ready to define* not only space but pleasure. This sexed and unsexed open O, this sometimes surprised O, this *expiratory* O; this head thrown back, chin proudly raised; this sweet song of the O, defines on its own terms.

Within the “*a savoir feminine sexual*,” then, is the paradox that women know to not only be the silence of a scream, but also the excruciating, affirming power of a moan carried on the invisible thread of breath, the expiration, exhalation, exhilaration of breath. The near invisible, inaudible and audible breath of pleasure. The death of living; the life of dying to pleasure, a *jouissance* that perhaps only women know in its true form, the form of the O.

In the re-visionary tale, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, this O-giving, life-affirming, yes-experiencing woman, is Antionette. Jean Rhys gives us the story of Annette and Antionette.



Antionette is the woman who appears at the end of *Jane Eyre* as the lunatic wife of Edward Rochester. In *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë tells us that Bertha as a cross between an animal and a human. This “Bertha” was mentally unstable in one of the surest ways that women were insane by proper Victorian standards: she liked sex. “Debauchery,” as Rochester calls it. Jean Rhys transforms Bertha into Antionette and “debauchery” into the truth her sexual pleasure held. What Rhys knows, and this is the piece that students seem to miss, regardless, is that this wild sexuality, even as it disgusted, at once gave her husband great pleasure. But “honor,” that sibling of purity, that learned economy of virtue and vice, meant denying pleasure as wicked. Rhys picks up on this pleasure, and writes a book about it; Rochester, Rhys recognizes, forced himself to loathe this Bertha *and his own pleasure*. Because in the form of woman, the taking and giving of pleasure is the true sign of an hysteric.

Antionette provided a wild, sensuous, pleasure filled revelry—an unseemly, ungodly pleasure—for the very English Mr. Rochester. She embodies that life that “borders on riot,” a life that Rochester at once demands and denies.

**SEE: .... Everything is too much, I felt as I rode wearily after her.**

In Antionette, we find a woman destroyed by a *foreign economy* in which loving and willing to be loved was considered unseemly at best, wicked in form, and in function dangerous to self and others. Nowhere could this be truer than in the unbridled passion of woman, because within the energy the sexual relationship obtained, a “virtuous” man could be turned mad with desire.

**AND SEE:** One afternoon, the sight of a dress....

Here is Edward Rochester, full of passion for his young sensual wife, drawing her into the world of the flesh, loving her carelessly even as he draws her in, and finding as he initiates her to the sensuality as sexuality, as they move together toward understanding suggested by him, realized

by her, that he must despise her for it all. Rhys' Rochester condemns his lover for her eagerness, her willingness to please, her conjugal desire, her ability to embrace supplication simultaneous with a choosing dominance in the erotic life of the mind. Repulsion, or fear, or cultural conditioning, the effect is the same.

Antionette, fully grasping the possibilities, embraces *la petite morte*, because she imagines they share it.

SEE: "then one night she whispered"

And, here is Rochester, understanding the possibility of death in life and escaping *merely* with his life (even as he imagines himself to be the source of mortality, the assassin).

Instead of the story of infidelity and mental cruelty that Rochester might well tell about his young wife's undoing, there is a troupe on which he can rely, the same troupe my students find so compelling: the overripe monster who while defined solely by her sex, must be retooled not as frankly sexual and loving but as wicked, corrupt, dangerous, and most curiously—mysterious, unreal. Rochester's final destruction, a destruction that he wields onto Antionette, is when, like Othello, he is accosted by an Iago that tells him his flower, this mysterious flower, is not only dead but *used*, rotting. *This* is real enough for Rochester, something he seems to have anticipated when he taunts Antionette on the morning after their first lovemaking: "Rose has lived as roses live / for one morning." Rochester, making the woman of love transitory, as he had always expected, asks his lover "Is that poem true? Have all beautiful things sad destinies?" (51). And she answers simply "No, of course not." As Cixous writes, Beauty will no longer be forbidden, in the female economy, no longer love and death a dying, but a *coming*.

In Anita Diamant's popular novel, The Red Tent, students also experience a very difficult dissonance when they are faced with the practices of a woman's community celebrating

woman's life and woman's body before ever sharing it—or even instead of sharing it—with the male community. It is especially difficult for students to understand anything appropriate and good about the “blood-moon” rituals in which the newly menstruating girl, fêted with wine and anointed with sacred oils, is taken out to lie with the earth, to merge her life-blood with that of mother earth. The culmination of the blood-moon ceremony is the piercing of the hymen with a small, smooth amulet. Students are disgusted at this woman's ceremony which effectively celebrates women on their own terms and assures that no girl will be traded for her “virginity.” But students read the piercing of the hymen as a thing “to be saved for marriage,” a man's right. The story of the “pure” virgin bride, complete with the successful tearing by force and the “proof” left on bloody sheets, is a story much more predictable, comfortable, and palatable.

In a story of a coming-to-consciousness through an openness to sensuality, Jane Campion and Kate Pullinger's The Piano is a novel rooted in sensuality and its explicit rejection of the enforcement of an ideology of purity. What I love about the *a savoir feminine sexual* of this story is its attention to the power of personal resistance within servility; the extraordinary will to *full life*; the tensions between violence and sensuality; and especially, the importance of vision and sound—art and music—to physical ardor. This story breaks the back of an ethic based purity: even the presence of a woman with a child—an “illegitimate” child no less—does not terrify when the community's attention is engaged by the struggle to survive, as if the judgment doesn't really matter after all.

Marguerite Duras' autobiographical novel The Lover confronts the male economy of sex head-on by challenging systems which define the age of reason via one-size-fits-all “standards” of moral decency that are applicable only to girls. Duras writes a story of her first love affair at the age of “fifteen and a half.” It is a complex story of class, rebellion, regret, desire, and

opportunism. And it's also a story that is extraordinarily aware of the fact that the idea of "defilement" of the body is merely an *idea*.

Perhaps my favorite, and perhaps the book with the most complex relationship to the *a savoir feminine sexuel* is a story of traditional lovers—a husband and wife on their honeymoon—that quickly become non-traditional lovers through the woman's experimentation. Among other things, Ernest Hemingway's *The Garden of Eden*—is about sex, experimentation, androgyny, gender bending, women loving women, and invitations extended and rejected. Catherine Bourne's sexual desire is complex and equally impossible to "read" if we exercise only the puritanical, hetero-valorizing, one-way-only-dominance sexual "terministic screen."<sup>iv</sup> Catherine knows that to love one's self is sometimes in contradiction with loving another, but it doesn't have to be. In fact, sometimes loving oneself is quite complementary with loving another. Like Antoinette, Catherine—though newly married and initiating herself into the pleasures of the flesh—disputes and disdains her place of consumption and contract within the traditional marriage relationship. Unlike Antoinette, however, Catherine was not already written-in to her fate and did not, therefore, have a literary obligation to insanity and death by burning at the hands of her captor. She simply left him. This story is very much about heterosexual love and the pleasures of sex; but heterosexual "love" here is fluid and stretched, explored in ways that do not distinguish or obtain strenuously as different from the homoerotic.

*Garden of Eden* is a difficult story, and I can't do it justice in the time we have left, except to say that I believe it is another story about women's desire, about female sexual agency, about woman's consumption of sex, about women loving other women, about women knowing that loving themselves is a prerequisite to full loving, and about dis-integrating traditional notions of the sexual roles, sexual norms, the boundaries between heterosexual sex and

everything else, and the idea of commitment to the marriage contract. In Catherine is the possibility of a sexual woman who very much understands what she wants, is in control of her sexual life, and demonstrates an appetite for fragmentation and inclusivity and/or synthesis that allows for a shifting, proliferating self. She represents a female sexuality aware of circularity, of ambiguity and androgyny, of division, fragmentation, plurality, and no attempt at ultimate reconciliation. She represents the tactile and the pleasure of words, of speaking words, hearing words, of play and change and abandon, a sexual economy very different from the male drive.

It is also a story, it seems to me, of a man who almost comes to the place where his partner wants to go, until, again, the light of day—when he simply cannot rationalize the reasons *nor the propriety*, or rather, he cannot imagine the reasons *because* he cannot imagine the propriety. He will follow her desire only until his fear and cynicism drive him away. Like, Rochester, David likes it too; he likes it, he simply won't *allow* it.

For me, the point is that if we're going to teach women's texts, feminist texts, revisionary texts, postcolonial texts, postmodern texts, *and we must*, then the reason we're doing so is not because of something like "equity" or "multiculturalism" or "equal opportunity," but because we recognize that the idea of sex, which drives so much of the social and material economy must be expanded to include female desire and pleasure in ways not defined by male fear and male guilt, but by *female* sexuality itself. We must work to read women's sexuality and all the coherence and contradiction that sex supplies. We must read the subtle transformations, the permissions and restrictions; we must read about retreating, eruption, delicacy, and textures upon textures. We must read the self revelation and outward pouring and the withholdings; the soft and wet and dry and the hard and fast. We must read active desire and passive desire, whole languages of sex and the resounding silences; sex that rocks, that undulates, that quivers. That

stops. Sex that gives up and over and in, sex that allows and disallows, sex that is about contrast and exposure, about openings and resistance, about sight and smell and touch and when all those things come together at once. If the “outing” of women’s sexuality, in its experimentation and intimacy and sensuality, is opposed to the cruelty and irresponsibility and “mereness” of mere titillation and taboo, then perhaps it’s time to move on to the bold and explicit, the possibly even profane.

Like Whitman, we know that loving and living are not *exclusive*, but *expansive*.

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<sup>i</sup> I’m referring to the Derridian theory of the “differance” and the power of the “transcendental signified.” See “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences.”

<sup>ii</sup> Roland Barthes; *Writing Degree Zero*

<sup>iii</sup> Roland Barthes in *Writing Degree Zero* (1953) adapts the French *Écriture* to signify not only writing but that which makes writing distinct from the writer and from what is written. This is to usher in the structuralist movement in literary criticism, but also to invite post-structuralism. So that in the *Écriture classique*, for instance, when the conventions practiced by French writers from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, for instance, “had to rely for its effectiveness upon unquestionable truths of the social order which it mirrors,” Barthes’s ideas make the turn to what we might call “post-structuralists” notions by recognizing that consequently, when a writer were to go beyond this idea of reflecting reality and toward her or his own style or statement, it must set itself against the given social order even though it enters in via an inherited language. *Écriture*, therefore is (see *The Norton Dictionary of Modern Thought*, entry: “Écriture”).

<sup>iv</sup> Kenneth Burke