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Emphasis Added: Plots and Plausibilities in Women's Fiction

Nothing came down the street; nobody passed. A single leaf detached itself from the plane tree at the end of the street, and in that pause and suspension fell. Somehow it was like a signal falling, a signal pointing to a force in things which one had overlooked.

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*[1]

IF WE TAKE *La Princesse de Clèves* as the first text of women's fiction in France, then we may observe that French women's fiction has from its beginnings been *discredited*.[2] By this I mean literally and literarily denied credibility: "Mme de Clèves's confession to her husband," writes Bussy-Rabutin to his cousin Mme de Sévigné, "is extravagant, and can only happen [*se dire*] in a true story; but when one is inventing a story for its own sake [*à plaisir*] it is ridiculous to ascribe such extraordinary feelings to one's heroine. The author in so doing was more concerned about not resembling other novels than obeying common sense."[3] Without dwelling on the local fact that a similarly "singular" confession had appeared in Mme de Villedieu's *Les Désordres de l'amour* some three years before the publication of Mme de Lafayette's novel, and bracketing the more general fact that the novel as a genre has from its beginnings labored under charges of *invraisemblance*,[4] let us reread Bussy-Rabutin's complaint. In a true story, as in "true confessions," the avowal would be believable because in life, unlike art, anything can happen; hence the constraints of likeliness do not apply. In a made-up story, however, the confession offends because it violates our readerly expectations about fiction. In other words, art should not imitate life but *re*inscribe received ideas about the representation of life in art. To depart from the limits of common sense (tautologically, to be extravagant) is to risk exclusion from the canon.[5] Because—as Genette, glossing this same document in "Vraisemblance et motivation," puts it—"*extravagance is a privilege of the real*,"[6] to produce a work not like other novels, an original rather than a copy, means paradoxically that its literariness will be sniffed out: "The first adventure of the Coulommiers gardens is not plausible," Bussy-Rabutin observes later in his letter, "and reeks of fiction [*sent le roman*]."

Genette begins his essay with an analysis of contemporary reactions to *La Princesse de Clèves*. Reviewing the writings of seventeenth-century poeticians, Genette shows that *vraisemblance* and *bienséance*, "plausibility" and "propriety," are wedded to each other; and the precondition of plausibility is the stamp of approval affixed by public *opinion*: "Real or assumed, this 'opinion' is quite close to what today would be called an ideology, that is, a body of maxims and prejudices which constitute both a vision of the world and a system of values" (p. 73). What this statement means is that the critical reaction to any given text is hermeneutically bound to another and preexistent text: the *doxa* of socialities. Plausibility then is an effect of reading through a grid of concordance:

> What defines plausibility is the formal principle of respect for the norm, that is, the existence of a relation of implication between the particular conduct attributed to a given character, and a given, general, received and implicit maxim. . . . To understand the behavior of a character (for example), is to be able to refer it back to an approved maxim, and this reference is perceived as a demonstration of cause and effect. (pp. 174–75)

If no maxim is available to account for a particular piece of behavior, that behavior is read as unmotivated and unconvincing. Mme de Clèves's confession makes no sense in the seventeenth-century sociolect because it is, Genette underlines, "*an action without a maxim*" (p. 75). A heroine without a maxim, like a rebel without a cause, is destined to be misunderstood. And she is.

To build a narrative around a character whose behavior is deliberately idiopathic, however, is not merely to create a puzzling fiction but to fly in the face of a certain ideology (of the text and its context), to violate a grammar of motives that describes while prescribing, in this instance, what wives, not to say women, should or should not do. The question one might then ask is whether this crucial barbarism is in any way connected to the gender of its author. If we were to uncover a feminine "tradition"—diachronic recurrences—of such ungrammaticalities, would we have the basis for a poetics of women's fiction? And what do I mean by women's fiction?

Working backward, I should say first that I do not mean what is designated in France these days as *écriture féminine*, which can be described roughly as a process or a practice by which the female *body*, with its peculiar drives and rhythms, inscribes itself as text.[7] "Feminine writing" is an important theoretical formulation; but it privileges a textuality of the avant-garde, a literary production of the late twentieth century, and it is therefore fundamentally a hope, if not a blueprint for the future. In what is perhaps the best-known statement of contemporary French feminist thinking about women's writing, "The Laugh of the Medusa," Hélène Cixous states that, "with a few rare exceptions, there has not yet been any writing that inscribes femininity."[8] On the contrary, what she finds historically in the texts of the "immense majority" of female writers is "workmanship [which is] . . . in no way different from male writing, and which either obscures women or reproduces the classic representations of women (as sensitive—intuitive—dreamy, etc.)" (p. 878). I think this assertion is both true and untrue. It is true if one is looking for a radical difference in women's writing and locates that difference in an insurgence of the body, in what Julia Kristeva has called the irruption of the semiotic.[9] And it is true again if difference is sought on the level of the sentence, or in what might be thought of as the biofeedback of the text. If, however, we situate difference in the insistence of a certain thematic structuration, in the form of content, then it is not true that women's writing has been in no way different from male writing. I consider the "demaximization" wrought by Mme de Lafayette to be one example of how difference can be read.

Before I proceed to other manifestations of difference, let me make a few general remarks about the status of women's literature—about its existence, in my view, as a viable corpus for critical inquiry. Whether one believes, as does Cixous, that there is "male writing," "*marked* writing . . . run by a libidinal and cultural—hence political, typically masculine economy" (p. 879), or that (great) literature has no sex because a "great mind must be androgynous," literary *history* remains a male preserve, a history of writing by men.[10] In England the history of the novel admits the names of Jane Austen, the Brontës, George Eliot, and Virginia Woolf. In France it includes Mme de Lafayette, although only for *La Princesse de Clèves* and always with the nagging insinuation that La Rochefoucauld had a hand in that. Mme de Staël, George Sand, and Colette figure in the national record, although mainly as the scandalous heroines of their times. Nevertheless, there have always been women writing. What is one to do with them? One can leave them where they are, like so many sleeping dogs, and mention them only in passing as epiphenomena in every period, despite the incontrovertible evidence that most were successful and even literarily influential in their day. One can continue, then, a politics of benign neglect that reads difference, not to say popularity, as inferiority. Or one can perform two simultaneous and compensatory gestures: the archaeological and rehabilitative act of discovering and recovering "lost" women writers and the reconstructive and revaluative act of establishing a parallel literary tradition, as Elaine Showalter has done in *A Literature of Their Own* and Ellen Moers in *Literary Women*.[11] The advantage of these moves is that they make visible an otherwise invisible intertext: a reconstituted record of predecession and prefiguration, debts acknowledged and unacknowledged, anxieties and enthusiasms.

Elizabeth Janeway, by way of T. S. Eliot, has suggested another way of thinking about women's literature. She cites the evolution in Eliot's attitude toward that body of texts we know as American literature. At first he held, as many critics have about women's literature, that it does not exist: "There can only be one English

literature. . . . There cannot be British or American literature." Later, however, he was to acknowledge "what has never, I think, been found before, two literatures in the same language."[12] That reformulation, as Janeway adapts it to delineate the continent of women's literature, is useful because it locates the problem of identity and difference not on the level of the sentence—not as a question of another language—but on the level of the text in all its complexities: a culturally bound and, I would even say, culturally overdetermined production. This new mapping of a parallel geography does not, of course, resolve the oxymoron of marginality: how is it that women, a statistical majority in our culture, perform as a "literary subculture"?[13] But it does provide a body of writing from which to begin to identify specificities in women's relation to writing and the specificities that derive from that relation. Because women are both of the culture and out of it (or under it), written by it and remaining a largely silent though literate majority, to look for *uniquely* "feminine" textual indexes that can be deciphered in "blind" readings is pointless. (Documentation on the critical reception of *Jane Eyre* and *Adam Bede*, for example, has shown how silly such pretensions can be.)[14] There are no infallible signs, no fail-safe technique by which to determine the gender of an author. But that is not the point of the *post*-compensatory gesture that follows what I call the new literary history. At stake instead is a reading that *consciously* re-creates the object it describes, attentive always to a difference—what T. S. Eliot calls "strong local flavor" (quoted in Janeway, p. 344) not dependent on the discovery of an exclusive alterity.

The difficulty of the reading comes from the irreducibly complicated relationship women have historically had to the language of the dominant culture, a "flirtatious" relationship that Luce Irigaray has called mimetic:

> To play with mimesis is . . . for a woman to try to recover the place of her exploitation by language, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It is to resubmit herself . . . to ideas—notably about her—elaborated in and through a masculine logic, but to "bring out" by an effect of playful repetition what was to remain hidden: the recovery of a possible operation of the feminine in language. It is also to unveil the fact that if women mime so well they are not simply reabsorbed in this function. *They also remain elsewhere. . . .*[15]

This "elsewhere"—which, needless to say, is not so easily pinpointed—is, she adds, an insistence of "matter" and "sexual pleasure" ("jouissance"). I prefer to think of the insistence Irigaray posits as a form of emphasis: an italicized version of what passes for the neutral or standard face. Spoken or written, italics are a modality of intensity and stress; a way of marking what has always already been said, of making a common text one's own. Italics are also a form of intonation, "the tunes," McConnell-Ginet writes, "to which we set the text of our talk." "Intonation," she continues, "serves to underscore the gender identification of the participants in certain contexts of communication," and because of differences in intonation, "women's tunes will be interpreted and evaluated from an androcentric perspective."[16] When I speak of italics, then, I mean the emphasis added by registering a certain quality of voice. And this expanded metaphor brings me back to my point of departure.

Genette codes the perception of plausibility in terms of silence:

> The relationship between a plausible narrative and the system of plausibility to which it subjects itself is . . . essentially mute: the conventions of genre function like a system of natural forces and constraints which the narrative obeys as if without noticing them, and *a fortiori* without naming them. (p. 76)

By fulfilling the "tacit contract between a work and its public" (p. 77) this silence both gives pleasure and signifies conformity with the dominant ideology. The text emancipated from this collusion, however, is also silent, in that it refuses to justify its infractions, the "motives and maxims of the actions" (p. 78). Here Genette cites the silence surrounding Julien Sorel's attempted murder of Mme de Rênal and the confession of Mme de Clèves. In the first instance, the ideologically complicitous text, the silence is a function of what Genette calls "plausible narrative"; in the second it is a function of "arbitrary narrative" (p. 79). And the *sounds* of silence? They are heard in a third type of narrative, one with a motivated and "*artificial plausi-*

bility" (p. 79): this literature, exemplified by the "endless chatting" of a Balzacian novel, we might call "other-directed," for here authorial commentary justifies its story to society by providing the missing maxims, or by inventing them. In the arbitrary narrative Genette sees a rejection of the ideology of a certain plausibility —an ideology, let us say, of accountability. This "inner-directed" posture would proclaim instead "that rugged individuality which makes for the unpredictability of great actions—and great works" (p. 77).

Two remarks are in order here. Arbitrariness can be taken as an ideology in itself, that is, as the irreducible freedom and originality of the author (Bussy-Rabutin's complaint, *en somme*). But more specifically, the refusal of the demands of one economy may mask the inscription of another. This inscription may seem silent, or *unarticulated* in/as *authorial commentary* (*discours*), without being absent. (It may simply be inaudible to the dominant mode of reception.) In *La Princesse de Clèves*, for example, "extravagance" is in fact accounted for, I would argue, both by maxims and by a decipherable effect of italicization. The maxims I refer to are not direct commentary; and it is true, as Genette writes, that "nothing is more foreign to the style [of the novel] than sententious epiphrasis: as if the actions were always either beyond or beneath all commentary" (p. 78). It is also true that within the narrative the characters do comment on the actions; and although Genette does not "count" such comments as "chatting," I would suggest that they constitute an internally motivating discourse: an artificial plausibility *en abyme*. This intratext is maternal discourse; and its *performance* through the "extraordinary feelings" of Mme de Clèves is an instance of italicization. The confession, to state the obvious, makes perfect sense in terms of the idiolect spoken by Mme de Chartres: "Be brave and strong, my daughter; withdraw from the court, force your husband to take you away; do not fear the most brutal and difficult measures; however awful they may seem at first, in the end they will be milder in their effects than the misery of a love affair" (p. 68).[17] Moreover, the confession qua confession is set up by *reference* to a "real life" precedent and is presented by the prince himself as a model of desirable behavior: "Sincerity is so important to me that I think that if my mistress, and even my wife, confessed to me that she was attracted by another . . . I would cast off the role of lover or husband to advise and sympathize with her" (p. 76). Seen from this perspective the behavior of the princess is both *motivated* within the narration and supplied with a pre-text: the conditions of *imitation*.

But the confession, which I may already have overemphasized, is not an isolated extravagance in the novel. It is a link in the chain of events that lead to Mme de Clèves's decision not to marry Nemours, even though in *this* instance, the maxims of the sociolect might support, even expect, the marriage. As Bussy-Rabutin again observes, "And if, against all appearances and custom, this combat between love and virtue were to last in her heart until the death of her husband, then she would be delighted to be able to bring love and virtue together by marrying a man of quality, the finest and the most handsome gentleman of his time." Mme de Lafayette clearly rejects this delightful denouement. Now, Stendhal has speculated that if Mme de Clèves had lived a long life she would have regretted her decision and would have wanted to live like Mme de Lafayette.[18] We shall never know, of course, but his comment raises an interesting question: why did Mme de Lafayette keep Mme de Clèves from living in fiction the life she herself had led? The answer to that question would be an essay in itself, but let us tackle the question here from another angle: what do Mme de Clèves's "renunciation" and, before that, her confession tell us about the relation of women writers to fiction, to the heroines of their fiction? Should the heroine's so-called "refusal of love" be read as a defeat and an end to passion—a "suicide," or "the delirium of a précieuse"?[19] Or is it, rather, a *bypassing* of the dialectics of desire, and, in that sense, a peculiarly feminine "act of victory"?[20] To understand the refusal as a victory and as, I believe, a rewriting of eroticism (an emphasis placed "elsewhere"—as Irigaray and, curiously, Woolf say), from which we might generalize about the economy of representation regulating the heroine and her authors, let us shift critical gear for a while.

Claudine Hermann describes the princess as a heroine "written in a language of dream, dreamt by Mme de Lafayette."[21] What is the language

of that dream, and what is the dream of that language? In the essay called "The Relation of the Poet to Daydreaming" (1908), Freud wonders how that "strange being, the poet, comes by his material."[22] He goes on to answer his question by considering the processes at work in children's play and then moves to daydreams and fantasies in adults. When he begins to describe the characteristics of this mode of creativity, he makes a blanket generalization about its impulses that should immediately make clear the usefulness of his essay for our purposes: "Unsatisfied wishes are the driving power behind phantasies; every separate phantasy contains the fulfillment of a wish, and improves upon unsatisfactory reality" (p. 47). What then is the nature of these wishes and, more to our point, does the sex of the dreamer affect the shaping of the daydream's text? Here, as might be expected, Freud does not disappoint:

> The impelling wishes vary according to the sex, character and circumstances of the creator; they may easily be divided, however, into two principal groups. Either they are ambitious wishes, serving to exalt the person creating them, or they are erotic. In young women erotic wishes dominate the phantasies *almost exclusively*, for their ambition is *generally comprised* in their erotic longings; in young men egoistic and ambitious wishes assert themselves plainly enough alongside their erotic desires.
>
> (pp. 47–48; emphasis added)

Here we see that the either/or antinomy, ambitious/erotic, is immediately collapsed to make coexistence possible in masculine fantasies: "in the greater number of ambitious daydreams . . . we can discover a woman in some corner, for whom the dreamer performs all his heroic deeds and at whose feet all his triumphs are to be laid" (p. 48).

But is this observation reversible? If, to make the logical extrapolation, romance dominates the female daydream and constitutes its primary heroine-ism, is there a *place* in which the ambitious wish of a young woman asserts itself? Has she an egoistic desire to be discovered "in some corner"? Freud elides the issue—while leaving the door open (for us) by his modifiers, "almost exclusively" and "generally comprised"—presumably because he is on his way to establishing the relationship between daydreaming and literary creation. The pertinence of difference there is moot, of course, because he conjures up only a male creator: not the great poet, however, but "the less pretentious writers of romances, novels and stories, who are read all the same by the widest circles of men and women" (p. 50). Freud then proceeds to identify the key "marked characteristic" of these fictions: "They all have a hero who is the centre of interest, for whom the author tries to win our sympathy by every possible means, and whom he places under the protection of a special providence" (p. 50). The hero in this literature is continually exposed to danger, but we follow his perilous adventures with a sense of security, because we know that at each turn he will triumph. According to Freud, the basis for this armchair security, for our tranquil contemplation, is the hero's own conviction of invincibility, best rendered by the expression "Nothing can happen to me!" And Freud comments, "It seems to me . . . that this significant mark of invulnerability very clearly betrays—His Majesty the Ego, the hero of *all daydreams* and *all novels*" (p. 51; emphasis added). Now, if the plots of male fiction chart the daydreams of an ego that would be invulnerable, what do the plots of female fiction reveal? Among French women writers, it would seem at first blush to be the obverse negative of "nothing can happen to me." The phrase that characterizes the heroine's posture might well be a variant of Murphy's law: If anything can go wrong, it will. And the reader's sense of security, itself dependent on the heroine's, comes from feeling not that the heroine will triumph in some *conventionally* positive way but that she will transcend the perils of plot with a self-exalting dignity. Here national constraints on the imagination, or what in this essay Freud calls "racial psychology," do seem to matter: the second-chance rerouting of disaster typical of Jane Austen's fiction, for example, is exceedingly rare in France. To the extent that we can speak of a triumph of Her Majesty the Ego in France, it lies in being beyond vulnerability, indeed beyond it all. On the whole, French women writers prefer what Peter Brooks has described as "the melodramatic imagination," a dreamlike and metaphorical drama of the "moral occult."[23] There are recurrent melodramatic plots about women unhappy in love because men are

men and women are women. As I said earlier, however, the suffering seems to have its own rewards in the economy of the female unconscious. The heroine proves to be better than her victimizers; and perhaps this ultimate superiority, which is to be read in the choice to go beyond love, beyond "erotic longings," is the figure that the "ambitious wishes" of women writers (dreamers) takes.

In the economy of Freud's plot, as we all know, fantasy scenarios are generated by consciously repressed content; and so he naturally assumes a motive for the "concealment" of "ambitious wishes": "the overweening self-regard" that a young man "acquires in the indulgent atmosphere surrounding his childhood" must be suppressed "so that he may find his proper place in a society that is full of other persons making similar claims" (p. 48)—hence the daydreams in which the hero conquers all to occupy victoriously center stage. The content that a young woman represses comes out in erotic daydreams because "a well-brought-up woman is, indeed, credited with only a minimum of erotic desire" (p. 48). Indeed. Now, there is a class of novels by women that "maximizes" that minimum, a type of fiction that George Eliot attacks as "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists": "The heroine is usually an heiress . . . with perhaps a vicious baronet, an amiable duke, and an irresistible younger son of a marquis as lovers in the foreground, a clergyman and a poet sighing for her in the middle distance, and a crowd of undefined adorers dimly indicated beyond."[24] After sketching out the variations of plot that punctuate the heroine's " 'starring' expedition through life" (p. 302), Eliot comments on the security with which we await the inevitably happy end:

> Before matters arrive at this desirable issue our feelings are tried by seeing the noble, lovely and gifted heroine pass through many *mauvais moments*, but we have the satisfaction of knowing that her sorrows are wept into embroidered pocket-handkerchiefs . . . and that whatever vicissitudes she may undergo . . . she comes out of them all with a complexion more blooming and locks more redundant than ever. (p. 303)

The plots of these "silly novels" bring grist to Freud's mill—that is, the grist I bring to his mill—in an almost uncanny way; and they would seem to undermine the argument I am on the verge of elaborating. But as Eliot says:

> Happily, we are not dependent on argument to prove that Fiction is a department of literature in which women can, after their kind, fully equal men. A cluster of great names, both living and dead, rush to our memories in evidence that women can produce novels not only fine, but among the very finest; —novels too, that have a precious speciality, lying quite apart from masculine aptitudes and experience. (p. 324)

(Let me work through her essay to my own.) What Eliot is attacking here is not only the relationship of certain women writers to literature but the critical reception given women's fiction. We might also say that she is attacking, the better to separate herself from, those women writers whose language is structured exactly like the unconscious that Freud has assigned to them, those writers (and their heroines) whose ambitious wishes are contained *entirely* in their erotic longings. And she is attacking these novelists, the better to defend, *not* those women who write *like* men (for she posits a "precious speciality" to women's production), but those women who write in their own way, "after their kind," and implicitly about something else. Silly novels are that popular artifact which has always been and still is known as "women's literature"—a term, I should add, applied to such fiction by those who do not read it.[25]

Women writers then, in contrast to lady novelists, are writers whose texts would be "among the finest" (to stay with Eliot's terminology) and for whom the "ambitious wish" (to stay with Freud's) manifests itself as fantasy within another economy. In this economy, egoistic desires would assert themselves paratactically alongside erotic ones. The repressed content, I think, would be, not erotic impulses, but an impulse to power: a fantasy of power that would revise the social grammar in which women are never defined as subjects; a fantasy of power that disdains a sexual exchange in which women can participate only as objects of circulation. The daydreams or fictions of women writers would then, like those of men, say, "Nothing can happen to me!" But the modalities of that invulnerability would be marked in an essentially

different way. I am talking, of course, about the power of the weak. The inscription of this power is not always easy to decipher, because, as has been noted, "the most essential form of accommodation for the weak is to conceal what power they do have."[26] Moreover, to pick up a lost thread, when these modalities of difference are perceived, they are generally called implausibilities. They are not perceived, or are misperceived, because the scripting of this fantasy does not bring the aesthetic "forepleasure" Freud says fantasy scenarios inevitably bring: pleasure bound to recognition and *identification* (p. 54), the "agrément" Genette assigns to plausible narrative. (Perhaps we shall not have a poetics of women's literature until we have more weak readers.)

In *Les Voleuses de langue*, Claudine Hermann takes up what I call the politics of dreams, or the ideology of daydreaming, in *La Princesse de Clèves*:

> A daydream is perpetuated when it loses all chance of coming true, when the woman dreaming [*la rêveuse*] cannot make it pass into reality. If women did not generally experience the love they desire as a repeated impossibility, they would dream about it less. They would dream of other, perhaps more interesting things. Nevertheless, written in a language of dream, dreamt by Mme de Lafayette, the Princesse de Clèves never dreams . . . for she knows that *love as she imagines it* is not realizable. What is realizable is a counterfeit she does not want. Her education permits her to glimpse this fact: men and women exchange feelings that are not equivalent. . . . Woman's "daydreaming" is a function of a world in which nothing comes true on her terms.
>
> (pp. 77–79)

"Men and women exchange feelings that are not equivalent." Mme de Clèves's brief experience of the court confirms the principle of difference at the heart of her mother's maxims. Mme de Clèves's rejection of Nemours on his terms, however, derives its necessity not only from the logic of maternal discourse (Nemours' love, like his name, is negative and plural: *ne/amours*) but also from the demands of Mme de Lafayette's dream. In this dream nothing can happen to the heroine, because she understands that the power and pleasure of the weak derive from circumventing the laws of contingency and circulation. She withdraws then and confesses, not merely to resist possession, as her mother would have wished, but to improve on it: to *rescript* possession.

The plausibility of this novel lies in the structuration of its fantasy. For if, to continue spinning out Hermann's metaphor, the heroine does not dream, she does daydream. And perhaps the most significant confession in the novel is neither the first (to her husband, that she is vulnerable to desire) nor the third (to Nemours, that she desires him) but the second, which is silent and entirely telling: I refer, of course, to her nocturnal *rêverie* at Coulommiers. Although all three confessions prefigure by their extravagance the heroine's retreat from the eyes of the world, it is this dreamlike event that is least ambiguous in underlining the erotic valence of the ambitious scenario.

At Coulommiers, her country retreat, Mme de Clèves sits one warm evening, secretly observed by Nemours, winding ribbons of his colors around an India cane. (I take her surreptitious acquisition of his cane to be the counterpart of his theft of her miniature, in this crisscrossing of desires by metonymy.) As Michel Butor observes in his seductive reading of this scene, "the mind of the princess is operating at this moment in a zone obscure to herself; it is as if she is knotting the ribbons around the cane in a dream, and her dream becomes clear little by little; the one she is thinking of begins to take on a face, and she goes to look for it."[27] Thus, having finished her handiwork, she places herself in front of a painting, a historical tableau of members of the court that she has had transported to her retreat, a painting including a likeness of Nemours: "She sat down and began to look at this portrait with an intensity and dreaminess [*rêverie*] that only passion can inspire" (p. 155). And Butor comments, "One hardly needs a diploma in psychoanalysis to detect and appreciate the symbolism of this whole scene" (p. 76). Indeed, it is quite clear that the princess is seen here in a moment of solitary pleasure, in a daydream of "fetichistic sublimation." This autoeroticism would seem to be the only sexual performance she can afford in an economy regulated by dispossession.[28]

Her retreat to Coulommiers, though, must be thought of not as a flight from sexuality but as a movement *into* it. As Sylvère Lotringer has observed, Mme de Clèves leaves the court not to flee passion but to preserve it.[29] To preserve it, however, on her own terms. Unlike Nemours—who is not content to possess the object of his desire in representation (the purloined portrait) and who pleads silently after this scene, "Only look at me the way I saw you look at my portrait tonight; how could you look so gently at my portrait and then so cruelly fly from my presence?" (p. 157)—the princess chooses "the duke of the portrait, not the man who seeks to step out of the frame" (Lotringer, "Structuration," p. 519). Here she differs from Austen's heroine Elizabeth Bennet, who stands gazing before her lover's portrait and feels "a more gentle sensation towards the original than she had ever felt in the height of their acquaintance."[30] Elizabeth can accept the hand of the man who steps out of the frame; the princess cannot. For if, in the world of *Pride and Prejudice*, "between the picture's eyes and Elizabeth's hangs what will be given shape when the marriage of the lovers is formalized" (Brownstein), in the world of the court the princess' response to Nemours must remain specular. Her desire cannot be framed by marriage—*à l'anglaise*. If, however, as I believe, the withdrawal to Coulommiers is homologous to the *final* withdrawal, then there is no reason to imagine that at a remove from the world—or, rather, in the company of the world contained by representation in painting—the princess does not continue to experience her "erotic longings." But the fulfillment of the wish is to be realized in the daydream itself.

The daydream, then, is both the stuff of fairy tales ("Someday my prince will come") and their rewriting ("Someday my prince will come, but we will not live happily ever after"). The princess refuses to marry the duke, however, not because she does not want to live happily ever after, but because she does. And by choosing not to act on that desire but to preserve it in and as fantasy, she both performs maternal discourse and italicizes it as repossession. Her choice is therefore not the simple reinscription of the seventeenth-century convention of female renunciation, dependent on the logic of either/or, but the sign of both-and, concretized by her final dual residence: in the convent *and* at home. "Perverted convention," as Peggy Kamuf names it, writing of another literary fetichist (Saint-Preux in Julie's closet): "The scene of optimal pleasure is within the prohibition which forms the walls of the house. Just on this side of the transgressive act, the fetichist's pleasure . . . is still in the closet."[31] This form of possession by metonymy both acknowledges the law and short-circuits it. Nobody, least of all the Duc de Nemours, believes in her renunciation (just as her husband never fully believed her confession):

> Do you think that your resolutions can hold against a man who adores you and who is fortunate enough to attract you? It is more difficult than you think, Madame, to resist the attractions of love. You have done it *by an austere virtue which has almost no example*; but that virtue is no longer opposed to your feelings and I hope that you will follow them despite yourself. (pp. 174–75; emphasis added)

Mme de Clèves will not be deterred by sheer difficulty, by mere plausibility, by Nemours' *maxims*. She knows herself to be without a text. "No woman but you in the world," she has been told earlier in the novel, "would confide everything she knows in her husband" (p. 116). "The singularity of such a confession," the narrator comments after the fait accompli, "for which she could find no example, made her see all the danger of it" (p. 125). The danger of singularity precisely is sociolinguistic: the attempt to *communicate* in a language, an idiolect, that would nonetheless break with the coded rules of communication. An impossibility, as Jakobson has seen: "Private property, in the domain of language, does not exist: everything is socialized. The verbal exchange, like every form of human relation, requires at least two interlocutors; an idiolect, in the final analysis, therefore can only be a *slightly perverse fiction*."[32] Thus in the end Mme de Clèves herself becomes both the impossibility of an example for others "in life" and its possibility in fiction. "Her life," the last line of the novel tells us, which "was rather short, left inimitable examples of virtue" (p. 180). The last word in French is the challenge to reiteration—*inimitables*, the mark of the writer's ambitious wish.

I hope it is understood that I am not suggest-

ing we read a heroine as the clone of her author —a reductionist strategy that has passed for literary criticism on women's writing from the beginning. Rather, I am arguing that the peculiar shape of a heroine's destiny in novels by women, the implausible twists of plot so common in these novels, is a form of insistence about the relation of women to writing: a comment on the stakes of difference within the theoretical indifference of literature itself.

Woolf begins her essay on Eliot in the *Common Reader* by saying, "To read George Eliot attentively is to become aware how little one knows about her." But then, a few pages later, she comments:

> For long she preferred not to think of herself at all. Then, when the first flush of creative energy was exhausted and self-confidence had come to her, she wrote more and more from the personal standpoint, but she did so without the unhesitating abandonment of the young. *Her self-consciousness is always marked when her heroines say what she herself would have said.* . . . The disconcerting and stimulating fact remained that she was compelled by the very power of her genius to step forth in person upon the quiet bucolic scene.[33]

What interests me here is the "marking" Woolf identifies, an underlining of what she later describes as Eliot's heroines' "demand for something—they scarcely know what—for something that is perhaps incompatible with the facts of human existence" (p. 175). This demand of the heroine for something else is in part what I mean by "italicization": the extravagant wish for a *story* that would turn out differently.

In the fourth chapter of Book v of *The Mill on the Floss* Maggie Tulliver, talking with Philip Wakem in the "Red Deeps," returns a novel he has lent her:

> "Take back your *Corinne*," said Maggie. . . . "You were right in telling me she would do me no good, but you were wrong in thinking I should wish to be like her."
>
> "Wouldn't you really like to be a tenth muse, then, Maggie?" . . .
>
> "Not at all," said Maggie laughing. "The muses were uncomfortable goddesses, I think—obliged always to carry rolls and musical instruments about with them. . . ."
>
> "You agree with me in not liking Corinne, then?"
>
> "I didn't finish the book," said Maggie. "As soon as I came to the blond-haired young lady reading in the park, I shut it up and determined to read no further. I foresaw that that light-complexioned girl would win away all the love from Corinne and make her miserable. I'm determined to read no more books where the blond-haired women carry away all the happiness. I should begin to have a prejudice against them. If you could give me some story, now, where the dark woman triumphs, it would restore the balance. I want to avenge Rebecca, and Flora MacIvor, and Minna, and all the rest of the dark unhappy ones. . . ."
>
> "Well, perhaps you will avenge the dark women in your own person and carry away all the love from your cousin Lucy. She is sure to have some handsome young man of St. Ogg's at her feet now, and you have only to shine upon him—your fair little cousin will be quite quenched in your beams."
>
> "Philip, that is not pretty of you, to apply my nonsense to anything real," said Maggie looking hurt.[34]

Maggie's literary instincts are correct. True to the laws of genre, Corinne—despite, that is, because of, her genius and exceptionality—is made miserable and the blond Lucile, her half sister, carries the day, although she is deprived of a perfectly happy end. But whatever Eliot's, or Maggie's, "prejudices" against the destinies of Scott's heroines, Maggie no more than Corinne avenges the dark woman in her own person. Even though, as Philip predicts, Maggie's inner radiance momentarily quenches her fair-haired cousin, Lucy, "reality"—that is to say, Eliot's novel—proves to be as hard on dark-haired women as literature is. What is important in this deliberate intertextuality, which has not gone unnoted (see, e.g., Moers, p. 174), is that both heroines revolt against the text of a certain "happily ever after." As Madelyn Gutwirth observes in her book on Mme de Staël, Corinne prefers "her genius to the . . . bonds of marriage, but that is not to say she thereby renounces happiness. On the contrary, it is her wish to be happy, that is to be herself *and* to love, that kills her."[35] Maggie Tulliver, too, would be herself and love, but the price for *that* unscriptable wish proves again to be the deferral of conventional erotic longings, what Maggie calls "earthly happiness." Almost two hundred years after the challenge to the maxim wrought by the blond (as it turns out)

Princesse de Clèves, George Eliot, through the scenario of definitive postponement, "imitates" Mme de Lafayette.

The last two books of *The Mill on the Floss* are called, respectively, "The Great Temptation" and "The Final Rescue." As the plot moves toward closure, the chapter headings of these books—"First Impressions," "Illustrating the Laws of Attraction," "Borne Along by the Tide," "Waking," "St. Ogg's Passes Judgment," "The Last Conflict"—further emphasize the sexual struggle at the heart of the novel. For, as Philip had anticipated, Maggie dazzles blond Lucy's fiancé, Stephen Guest, in "First Impressions," but then, surely what Philip had not dreamt of, the pair is swept away. Maggie, previously unawakened by *her* fiancé, Wakem, awakens both to her desire and to what she calls her duty, only to fulfill both by drowning, attaining at last that "wondrous happiness that is one with pain" (p. 545). Though I do great violence to the scope of Eliot's narrative by carving a novel out of a novel, the last two books taken together as they chart the culmination of a heroine's erotic destiny have a plot of their own—a plot, moreover, with elective affinities to the conclusion of *La Princesse de Clèves*, and to the conclusion of my argument.

Like Mme de Clèves after her husband's death, Maggie knows herself to be technically free to marry her lover but feels bound, though not for the same reasons, to another script. And Stephen Guest, who like Nemours does not believe in "mere resolution" (p. 499), finds Maggie's refusal to follow her passions "unnatural" and "horrible": "If you loved me as I love you, we should throw everything else to the winds for the sake of belonging to each other" (p. 470). Maggie does love him, just as the princess loves the duke, passionately; and she is tempted: part of her longs to be transported by the exquisite currents of desire. But her awakening, like that of the princess, though again not for the same reasons, is double. She falls asleep on the boat ride down the river. When she awakens and disentangles her mind "from the confused web of dreams" (p. 494), like Mme de Clèves after her own brush with death, Maggie pulls away from the man who has briefly but deeply tempted her. She will not build her happiness on the unhappiness of others:

> It is not the force that ought to rule us—this that we feel for each other; it would rend me away from all that my past life has made dear and holy to me. I can't set out on a fresh life and forget that; I must go back to it, and cling to it, else I shall feel as if there were nothing firm beneath my feet. (p. 502)

What is the content of this sacred past? Earlier, before the waking on the river, when Maggie was tempted only by the "fantasy" of a "life filled with all luxuries, with daily incense of adoration near and distant, and with all possibilities of culture at her command," the narrator had commented on the pull of that erotic scenario:

> But there were things in her stronger than vanity—passion, and affection, and long deep memories of early discipline and effort, of early claims on her love and pity; and the stream of vanity was soon swept along and mingled imperceptibly with that wider current which was at its highest force today. . . . (p. 457)

Maggie's renunciation of Stephen Guest, then, is not so simple as I have made it out to be, for the text of these "early claims," this archaic wish, has a power both erotic and ambitious in its own right. That "wider current" is, of course, the broken bond with her brother. And the epigraph to the novel, "In their death they were not divided," is the telos toward which the novel tends; for it is also the last line of the novel, the epitaph on the tombstone of the brother and sister who drown in each other's arms.

Maggie, obeying what Stephen called her "perverted notion of right," her passion for a "mere idea" (p. 538), drowns finally in an implausible flood. Maggie, no more than Mme de Clèves, could be *persuaded* (to invoke Jane Austen's last novel); for neither regarded a second chance as an alternative to be embraced. Maggie's return home sans husband is not understood by the community. And the narrator explains that "public opinion in these cases is always of the feminine gender—not the world, but the world's wife" (pp. 512–13). Despite the phrase, Eliot does not locate the inadequacy of received social ideas in gender per se; her attack on the notion of a "master-key that will fit all cases" is in fact directed at the "men of max-

ims": "The mysterious complexity of our life is not to be embraced by maxims . . ." (p. 521). This commentary seeks to justify Maggie's choice, her turning away from the maxim, and thus inscribes an internal "artificial plausibility": the text within the text, as we saw that function in *La Princesse de Clèves*. The commentary constitutes another *reading*, a reading by "reference," as Eliot puts it, to the "special circumstances that mark the individual lot" (p. 521). Like Mme de Clèves, Maggie has been given extraordinary feelings, and those feelings en*gender* another and extravagant narrative logic.

There is a feminist criticism today that laments Eliot's ultimate refusal to satisfy her heroine's longing for that "something . . . incompatible with the facts of human existence":

> Sadly, and it is a radical criticism of George Eliot, she does not commit herself fully to the energies and aspirations she lets loose in these women. Does she not cheat them, and cheat us, ultimately, in allowing them so little? Does she not excite our interest through the breadth and the challenge of the implications of her fiction, and then deftly dam up and fence round the momentum she has so powerfully created? She diagnoses so brilliantly "the common yearning of womanhood," and then cures it, sometimes drastically, as if it were indeed a disease.[36]

It is as though these critics, somewhat like Stendhal disbelieving the conviction of Mme de Clèves, would have Maggie live George Eliot's life. The point is, it seems to me, that the plots of women's literature are not about "life" and solutions in any therapeutic sense, nor should they be. They are about the plots of literature itself, about the constraints the maxim places on rendering a female life in fiction. Mme de Lafayette quietly, George Eliot less silently, both italicize by the demaximization of their heroines' texts the difficulty of curing plot of life, and life of certain plots.[37]

Lynn Sukenick, in her essay "On Women and Fiction," describes the uncomfortable posture of all women writers in our culture, within and without the text: what I would call a posture of imposture. And she says of the role of gender in relation to the literary project: "Like the minority writer, the female writer exists within an inescapable condition of identity which distances her from the mainstream of the culture and forces her either to stress her separation from the masculine literary tradition or to pursue her resemblance to it." Were she to forget her double bind, the "phallic critics" (as Mary Ellman describes them) would remind her that she is dreaming: "Lady novelists," Hugh Kenner wrote not so long ago, "have always claimed the privilege of transcending *mere plausibilities*. It's up to men to arrange such things. . . . Your bag is sensitivity, which means knowing what to put into this year's novels" (emphasis added).[38] And a recent reviewer of a woman's novel in a popular magazine complains:

> Like most feminist novels [this one] represents a triumph of sensibility over plot. Why a strong, credible narrative line that leads to a satisfactory resolution of conflicts should visit these stories so infrequently, I do not know. Because the ability to tell a good story is unrelated to gender, I sometimes suspect that the authors of these novels are simply indifferent to the rigors of narrative.[39]

The second gentleman is slightly more generous than the first. He at least thinks women capable of telling a good—that is, credible—story. The fault lies in their *in*difference. I would not have descended to the evidence of the middlebrow mainstream if it did not, with curious persistence, echo the objections of Bussy-Rabutin.

The attack on female plots and plausibilities assumes that women writers cannot or will not obey the rules of fiction. It also assumes that the truth devolving from *veri*similitude is male. For sensibility, sensitivity, "extravagance"—so many code words for feminine in our culture that the attack is in fact tautological—are taken to be not merely inferior modalities of production but deviations from some obvious truth. The blind spot here is both political (or philosophical) and literary. It does not see, nor does it want to, that the fictions of desire behind the desiderata of fiction are masculine and not universal constructs. It does not see that the maxims that pass for the truth of human experience, and the encoding of that experience in literature, are organizations, when they are not fantasies, of the dominant culture. To read women's literature is to see and hear repeatedly a chafing against the "unsatisfactory reality" contained in

the maxim. Everywhere in *The Mill on the Floss* one can read a protest against the division of labor that grants men the world and women love. Saying no to Philip *Wakem* and then to Stephen *Guest*, Maggie refuses the hospitality of the happy end: "But I begin to think there can never come much happiness to me from loving; I have always had so much pain mingled with it. I wish I could make myself a world outside it, as men do" (p. 430). But as in so much women's fiction a world outside love proves to be out of the world altogether. The protest against that topographical imperative is more or less muted from novel to novel. Still, the emphasis is always there to be read, and it points to another text. To continue to deny the credibility of women's literature is to adopt the posture of the philosopher of phallogocentrism's "credulous man who, in support of his testimony, offers truth and his phallus as his own proper credentials."[40] Those credentials are more than suspect.

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Notes

[1] Although what is being pointed to ultimately is an "elsewhere" under the sign of an androgyny I resist, I respond here to the implicit invitation to look again. The quote should be replaced both in its original context and within Carolyn Heilbrun's concluding argument in *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny* (New York: Knopf, 1973), pp. 167–72, which is where I (re)found it.

[2] If one must have a less arbitrary origin—and why not?—the properly inaugural fiction would be Hélisenne de Crenne's *Les Angoysses douloureuses qui procèdent d'amours*, 1538. But *La Princesse de Clèves* has this critical advantage: it also marks the beginning of the modern French novel.

[3] Bussy-Rabutin's oft cited remarks on the novel are most easily found in Maurice Laugaa's excellent volume of critical responses, *Lectures de Mme de Lafayette* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1971), pp. 18–19. The translation is mine, as are all other translations from the French in my essay, unless otherwise indicated.

[4] On the function and status of the confession in Mme de Villedieu's novel and on the problems of predecession, see Micheline Cuénin's introduction to her critical edition of *Les Désordres de l'amour* (Geneva: Droz, 1970). The best account of the attack on the novel remains Georges May's *Le Dilemme du roman au XVIII^e siècle* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1963), esp. his first chapter.

[5] I allude here (speciously) to the first definition of "extravagant" in *Le Petit Robert* (Paris: Société du Nouveau Littré, 1967), p. 668: "S'est dit de textes non incorporés dans les recueils canoniques" 'Used to refer to texts not included in the canon.'

[6] I refer here, as I indicate below, to Gérard Genette's "Vraisemblance et motivation," included in his *Figures II* (Paris: Seuil, 1969), p. 74. In my translation-adaptation of Genette's analysis I have chosen to render *vraisemblance* by "plausibility," a term with a richer semantic field of connotations than "verisimilitude." Page references to Genette's essay are hereafter given in the text.

[7] For an overview of the current discussion about women's writing in France, see Elaine Marks's fine piece "Women and Literature in France," *Signs*, 3 (1978), 832–42.

[8] Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs*, 1 (1976), 878.

[9] For a recent statement of her position on a possible specificity to women's writing, see "Questions à Julia Kristeva," *Revue des Sciences Humaines*, No. 168 (1977), pp. 495–501.

[10] The opposition between these positions is more rhetorical than actual, as Woolf's gloss on Coleridge in *A Room of One's Own* shows. See esp. Ch. vi.

[11] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1977), and Moers, *Literary Women* (New York: Doubleday, 1976). I understate the stakes of recognizing and responding to an apparently passive indifference. As Edward Said has written in another context: "Any philosophy or critical theory exists and is maintained in order not merely *to be there, passively around everyone and everything*, but in order to be taught and diffused, to be absorbed decisively into the institutions of society or to be instrumental in maintaining or changing or perhaps upsetting these institutions and that society" ("The Problem of Textuality," *Critical Inquiry*, 4 [1978], 682).

[12] As quoted by Elizabeth Janeway in her insightful essay on women's writing in postwar America, "Women's Literature," *Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing*, ed. Daniel Hoffman (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1979), p. 344.

[13] See in particular Showalter's first chapter, "The Female Tradition," pp. 3–36.

[14] See Showalter's chapter "The Double Critical Standard and the Feminine Novel," pp. 73–99.

[15] Irigaray, *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris: Minuit, 1977), p. 74.

[16] Sally McConnell-Ginet, "Intonation in a Man's World," *Signs*, 3 (1978), 542.

[17] My translations from *La Princesse de Clèves* are deliberately literal; page references to the French are

from the readily available Garnier-Flammarion edition (Paris, 1966) and are incorporated within the text. The published English translation (New York: Penguin, 1978) is, I think, rather poor.

[18] Stendhal, "Du Courage des femmes," *De L'Amour* (Paris: Editions de Cluny, 1938), Ch. xxix, p. 111.

[19] Serge Doubrovsky, "*La Princesse de Clèves*: Une Interprétation existentielle," *La Table Ronde*, No. 138 (1959), p. 48. Jean Rousset, *Forme et signification* (Paris: Corti, 1962), p. 25.

[20] A. Kibédi Varga, "Romans d'amour, romans de femme à l'époque classique," *Revue des Sciences Humaines*, No. 168 (1977), p. 524. Jules Brody, in "*La Princesse de Clèves* and the Myth of Courtly Love," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 38 (1969), 105–35, esp. 131–34, and Domna C. Stanton, in "The Ideal of *Repos* in Seventeenth-Century French Literature," *L'Esprit Créateur*, 15 (1975), 79–104, esp. 95–96, 99, 101–02, also interpret the princess' final refusal of Nemours (and her renunciation) as heroic and self-preserving actions within a certain seventeenth-century discourse.

[21] Hermann, *Les Voleuses de langue* (Paris: Editions des Femmes, 1976), p. 77.

[22] Freud, *On Creativity and the Unconscious*, trans. I. F. Grant Duff (New York: Harper, 1958), p. 44. Subsequent references to this edition are given in the text.

[23] Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1976), p. 20.

[24] *The Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), pp. 301–02. Hereafter page references to this edition are included in the text.

[25] On the content of popular women's literature and its relationship to high culture, see Lillian Robinson's "On Reading Trash," in *Sex, Class and Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1978), pp. 200–22.

[26] Barbara Bellow Watson, "On Power and the Literary Text," *Signs*, 1 (1975), 113. Watson suggests that we look instead for "expressive symbolic structures."

[27] Butor, "Sur *La Princesse de Clèves*," *Répertoire* (Paris: Minuit, 1960), pp. 76–77.

[28] David Grossvogel, *Limits of the Novel* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1971), p. 134. In Doubrovsky's terms, love in this universe means "being dispossessed of oneself and bound to the incoercible spontaneity of another" (p. 47).

[29] Lotringer, "La Structuration romanesque," *Critique*, 26 (1970), 517.

[30] The importance of this scene from Austen is underscored by Rachel Mayer Brownstein in *Becoming a Heroine* (forthcoming).

[31] Kamuf, "Inside *Julie*'s Closet," *Romanic Review*, 69 (1978), 303–04.

[32] Roman Jakobson, *Essais de linguistique générale* (Paris: Minuit, 1963), p. 33; quoted by S. Lotringer, "Vice de Forme," *Critique*, 27 (1971), 203; italics mine.

[33] Woolf, *The Common Reader* (New York: Harcourt, 1953), pp. 166, 173; emphasis added.

[34] Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (New York: NAL, 1965), pp. 348–49. Subsequent references to the novel are to this edition and are given in the text.

[35] Gutwirth, *Madame de Staël, Novelist: The Emergence of the Artist as Woman* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1978), p. 255.

[36] Jenni Calder, e.g., in *Women and Marriage in Victorian Fiction* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1976), p. 158.

[37] I echo here, with some distortion, the terms of Peter Brooks's analysis of the relations between "plot" and "life" in his illuminating essay "Freud's Masterplot," *Yale French Studies*, No. 55–56 (1977), pp. 280–300, esp. p. 298.

[38] Sukenick's essay is quoted from *The Authority of Experience: Essays in Feminist Criticism*, ed. Arlyn Diamond and Lee R. Edwards (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1977), p. 28; Kenner's observation is quoted in the same essay, p. 30. Mary Ellman's term is taken from *Thinking about Women* (New York: Harcourt, 1968), pp. 28–54.

[39] Peter Prescott, in *Newsweek*, 16 Oct. 1978, p. 112.

[40] Jacques Derrida, "Becoming Woman," trans. Barbara Harlow, *Semiotext(e)*, 3, No. 1 (1978), 133.