The straight mind continues to affirm that incest, and not homosexuality, represents its major interdiction. Thus, when thought by the straight mind, homosexuality is nothing but heterosexuality.

—Monique Wittig, “The Straight Mind”

On occasion feminist theory has been drawn to the thought of an origin, a time before what some would call “patriarchy” that would provide an imaginary perspective from which to establish the contingency of the history of women’s oppression. Debates have emerged over whether prepatriarchal cultures have existed, whether they were matriarchal or matrilineal in structure, whether patriarchy could be shown to have a beginning and, hence, be subject to an end. The critical impetus behind
these kinds of inquiry sought understandably to show that the antifeminist argument in favor of the inevitability of patriarchy constituted a reification and naturalization of a historical and contingent phenomenon.

Although the turn to a prepatriarchal state of culture was intended to expose the self-reification of patriarchy, that prepatriarchal scheme has proven to be a different sort of reification. More recently, some feminists have offered a reflexive critique of some reified constructs within feminism itself. The very notion of “patriarchy” has threatened to become a universalizing concept that overrides or reduces distinct articulations of gender asymmetry in different cultural contexts. As feminism has sought to become integrally related to struggles against racial and colonialisr oppression, it has become increasingly important to resist the colonizing epistemological strategy that would subordinate different configurations of domination under the rubric of a transcultural notion of patriarchy. The articulation of the law of patriarchy as a repressive and regulatory structure also requires reconsideration from this critical perspective. The feminist recourse to an imaginary past needs to be cautious not to promote a politically problematic reification of women’s experience in the course of debunking the self-reifying claims of masculinist power.

The self-justification of a repressive or subordinating law almost always grounds itself in a story about what it was like before the advent of the law, and how it came about that the law emerged in its present and necessary form.1 The fabrication of those origins tends to describe a state of affairs before the law that follows a necessary and unilinear narrative that culminates in, and thereby justifies, the constitution of the law. The story of origins is thus a strategic tactic within a narrative that, by telling a single, authoritative account about an irrecoverable past, makes the constitution of the law appear as a historical inevitability.
Some feminists have found in the prejuridical past traces of a utopian future, a potential resource for subversion or insurrection that promises to lead to the destruction of the law and the instatement of a new order. But if the imaginary “before” is inevitably figured within the terms of a prehistorical narrative that serves to legitimate the present state of the law or, alternatively, the imaginary future beyond the law, then this “before” is always already imbued with the self-justificatory fabrications of present and future interests, whether feminist or antifeminist. The postulation of the “before” within feminist theory becomes politically problematic when it constrains the future to materialize an idealized notion of the past or when it supports, even inadvertently, the reification of a precultural sphere of the authentic feminine. This recourse to an original or genuine femininity is a nostalgic and parochial ideal that refuses the contemporary demand to formulate an account of gender as a complex cultural construction. This ideal tends not only to serve culturally conservative aims, but to constitute an exclusionary practice within feminism, precipitating precisely the kind of fragmentation that the ideal purports to overcome.

Throughout the speculation of Engels, socialist feminism, those feminist positions rooted in structuralist anthropology, there emerge various efforts to locate moments or structures within history or culture that establish gender hierarchy. The isolation of such structures or key periods is pursued in order to repudiate those reactionary theories which would naturalize or universalize the subordination of women. As significant efforts to provide a critical displacement of the universalizing gestures of oppression, these theories constitute part of the contemporary theoretical field in which a further contestation of oppression is taking place. The question needs to be pursued, however, whether these powerful critiques of gender hierarchy make use of presuppositional fictions that entail problematic normative ideals.
Lévi-Strauss’s structuralist anthropology, including the problematic nature/culture distinction, has been appropriated by some feminist theorists to support and elucidate the sex/gender distinction: the position that there is a natural or biological female who is subsequently transformed into a socially subordinate “woman,” with the consequence that “sex” is to nature or “the raw” as gender is to culture or “the cooked.” If Lévi-Strauss’s framework were true, it would be possible to trace the transformation of sex into gender by locating that stable mechanism of cultures, the exchange rules of kinship, which effect that transformation in fairly regular ways. Within such a view, “sex” is before the law in the sense that it is culturally and political undetermined, providing the “raw material” of culture, as it were, that begins to signify only through and after its subjection to the rules of kinship.

This very concept of sex-as-matter, sex-as-instrument-of-cultural-signification, however, is a discursive formation that acts as a naturalized foundation for the nature/culture distinction and the strategies of domination that that distinction supports. The binary relation between culture and nature promotes a relationship of hierarchy in which culture freely “imposes” meaning on nature, and, hence, renders it into an “Other” to be appropriated to its own limitless uses, safeguarding the ideality of the signifier and the structure of signification on the model of domination.

Anthropologists Marilyn Strathern and Carol MacCormack have argued that nature/culture discourse regularly figures nature as female, in need of subordination by a culture that is invariably figured as male, active, and abstract.2 As in the existential dialectic of misogyny, this is yet another instance in which reason and mind are associated with masculinity and agency, while the body and nature are considered to be the mute facticity of the feminine, awaiting signification from an opposing masculine subject. As in that misogynist dialectic, materiality and meaning
are mutually exclusive terms. The sexual politics that construct and maintain this distinction are effectively concealed by the discursive production of a nature and, indeed, a natural sex that postures as the unquestioned foundation of culture. Critics of structuralism such as Clifford Geertz have argued that its universalizing framework discounts the multiplicity of cultural configurations of “nature.” The analysis that assumes nature to be singular and prediscursive cannot ask, what qualifies as “nature” within a given cultural context, and for what purposes? Is the dualism necessary at all? How are the sex/gender and nature/culture dualisms constructed and naturalized in and through one another? What gender hierarchies do they serve, and what relations of subordination do they reify? If the very designation of sex is political, then “sex,” that designation supposed to be most in the raw, proves to be always already “cooked,” and the central distinctions of structuralist anthropology appear to collapse.  

The effort to locate a sexed nature before the law seems to be rooted understandably in the more fundamental project to be able to think that the patriarchal law is not universally true and all-determining. Indeed, if constructed gender is all there is, then there appears to be no “outside,” no epistemic anchor in a precultural “before” that might serve as an alternative epistemic point of departure for a critical assessment of existing gender relations. Locating the mechanism whereby sex is transformed into gender is meant to establish not only the constructedness of gender, its unnatural and nonnecessary status, but the cultural universality of oppression in nonbiologistic terms. How is this mechanism formulated? Can it be found or merely imagined? Is the designation of its ostensible universality any less of a reification than the position that grounds universal oppression in biology?

Only when the mechanism of gender construction implies the contingency of that construction does “constructedness” per se prove useful to the political project to enlarge the scope of possible gender configurations. If, however, it is a life of the body
beyond the law or a recovery of the body before the law which then emerges as the normative goal of feminist theory, such a norm effectively takes the focus of feminist theory away from the concrete terms of contemporary cultural struggle. Indeed, the following sections on psychoanalysis, structuralism, and the status and power of their gender-instituting prohibitions center precisely on this notion of the law: What is its ontological status—is it juridical, oppressive, and reductive in its workings, or does it inadvertently create the possibility of its own cultural displacement? To what extent does the articulation of a body prior to articulation performatively contradict itself and spawn alternatives in its place?

I. STRUCTURALISM’S CRITICAL EXCHANGE

Structuralist discourse tends to refer to the Law in the singular, in accord with Lévi-Strauss’s contention that there is a universal structure of regulating exchange that characterizes all systems of kinship. According to The Elementary Structures of Kinship, the object of exchange that both consolidates and differentiates kinship relations is women, given as gifts from one patrilineal clan to another through the institution of marriage. The bride, the gift, the object of exchange constitutes “a sign and a value” that opens a channel of exchange that not only serves the functional purpose of facilitating trade but performs the symbolic or ritualistic purpose of consolidating the internal bonds, the collective identity, of each clan differentiated through the act. In other words, the bride functions as a relational term between groups of men; she does not have an identity, and neither does she exchange one identity for another. She reflects masculine identity precisely through being the site of its absence. Clan members, invariably male, invoke the prerogative of identity through marriage, a repeated act of symbolic differentiation. Exogamy distinguishes and binds patronymically specific kinds of men. Patrilineality is
secured through the ritualistic expulsion of women and, reciprocally, the ritualistic importation of women. As wives, women not only secure the reproduction of the name (the functional purpose), but effect a symbolic intercourse between clans of men. As the site of a patronymic exchange, women are and are not the patronymic sign, excluded from the signifier, the very patronym they bear. The woman in marriage qualifies not as an identity, but only as a relational term that both distinguishes and binds the various clans to a common but internally differentiated patrilineal identity.

The structural systematicity of Lévi-Strauss’s explanation of kinship relations appeals to a universal logic that appears to structure human relations. Although Lévi-Strauss reports in *Tristes tropiques* that he left philosophy because anthropology provided a more concrete cultural texture to the analysis of human life, he nevertheless assimilates that cultural texture to a totalizing logical structure that effectively returns his analyses to the decontextualized philosophical structures he purported to leave. Although a number of questions can be raised about the presumptions of universality in Lévi-Strauss’s work (as they are in anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s *Local Knowledge*), the questions here concern the place of identitarian assumptions in this universal logic and the relationship of that identitarian logic to the subordinate status of women within the cultural reality that this logic describes. If the symbolic nature of exchange is its universally human character as well, and if that universal structure distributes “identity” to male persons and a subordinate and relational “negation” or “lack” to women, then this logic might well be contested by a position or set of positions excluded from its very terms. What might an alternative logic of kinship be like? To what extent do identitarian logical systems always require the construction of socially impossible identities to occupy an unnamed, excluded, but presuppositional relation subsequently concealed by the logic itself? Here the impetus
for Irigaray’s marking off of the phallogocentric economy becomes clear, as does a major poststructuralist impulse within feminism that questions whether an effective critique of phallogocentrism requires a displacement of the Symbolic as defined by Lévi-Strauss.

The totality and closure of language is both presumed and contested within structuralism. Although Saussure understands the relationship of signifier and signified to be arbitrary, he places this arbitrary relation within a necessarily complete linguistic system. All linguistic terms presuppose a linguistic totality of structures, the entirety of which is presupposed and implicitly recalled for any one term to bear meaning. This quasi-Leibnizian view, in which language figures as a systematic totality, effectively suppresses the moment of difference between signifier and signified, relating and unifying that moment of arbitrariness within a totalizing field. The poststructuralist break with Saussure and with the identitarian structures of exchange found in Lévi-Strauss refutes the claims of totality and universality and the presumption of binary structural oppositions that implicitly operate to quell the insistent ambiguity and openness of linguistic and cultural signification. As a result, the discrepancy between signifier and signified becomes the operative and limitless difference of language, rendering all referentiality into a potentially limitless displacement.

For Lévi-Strauss, the masculine cultural identity is established through an overt act of differentiation between patrilineal clans, where the “difference” in this relation is Hegelian—that is, one which simultaneously distinguishes and binds. But the “difference” established between men and the women who effect the differentiation between men eludes the dialectic altogether. In other words, the differentiating moment of social exchange appears to be a social bond between men, a Hegelian unity between masculine terms that are simultaneously specified and individualized. On an abstract level, this is an identity-in-
difference, since both clans retain a similar identity: male, patriarchal, and patrilineal. Bearing different names, they particularize themselves within this all-encompassing masculine cultural identity. But what relation instates women as the object of exchange, clothed first in one patronym and then another? What kind of differentiating mechanism distributes gender functions in this way? What kind of differentiating difference is presupposed and excluded by the explicit, male-mediating negation of Lévi-Strauss’s Hegelian economy? As Irigaray argues, this phallogocentric economy depends essentially on an economy of difference that is never manifest, but always both presupposed and disavowed. In effect, the relations among patrilineal clans are based in homosocial desire (what Irigary punningly calls “hommo-sexuality”), a repressed and, hence, disparaged sexuality, a relationship between men which is, finally, about the bonds of men, but which takes place through the heterosexual exchange and distribution of women.

In a passage that reveals the homoerotic unconscious of the phallogocentric economy, Lévi-Strauss offers the link between the incest taboo and the consolidation of homoerotic bonds:

Exchange—and consequently the rule of exogamy—is not simply that of goods exchanged. Exchange—and consequently the rule of exogamy that expresses it—has in itself a social value. It provides the means of binding men together.

The taboo generates exogamic heterosexuality which Lévi-Strauss understands as the artificial accomplishment of a non-incestuous heterosexuality extracted through prohibition from a more natural and unconstrained sexuality (an assumption shared by Freud in Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality).

The relation of reciprocity established between men, however, is the condition of a relation of radical nonreciprocity between men and women and a relation, as it were, of nonrelation
between women. Lévi-Strauss’s notorious claim that “the emergence of symbolic thought must have required that women, like words, should be things that were exchanged,” suggests a necessity that Lévi-Strauss himself induces from the presumed universal structures of culture from the retrospective position of a transparent observer. But the “must have” appears as an inference only to function as a performative; since the moment in which the symbolic emerged could not be one that Lévi-Strauss witnessed, he conjectures a necessary history: The report thereby becomes an injunction. His analysis prompted Irigaray to reflect on what would happen if “the goods got together” and revealed the unanticipated agency of an alternative sexual economy. Her recent work, Sexes et parentés, offers a critical exegesis of how this construction of reciprocal exchange between men presupposes a nonreciprocity between the sexes inarticulable within that economy, as well as the unnameability of the female, the feminine, and lesbian sexuality.

If there is a sexual domain that is excluded from the Symbolic and can potentially expose the Symbolic as hegemonic rather than totalizing in its reach, it must then be possible to locate this excluded domain either within or outside that economy and to strategize its intervention in terms of that placement. The following rereading of the structuralist law and the narrative that accounts for the production of sexual difference within its terms centers on the presumed fixity and universality of that law and, through a genealogical critique, seeks to expose that law’s powers of inadvertent and self-defeating generativity. Does “the Law” produce these positions unilaterally or invariably? Can it produce configurations of sexuality that effectively contest the law itself, or are those contests inevitably phantasmatic? Can the generativity of that law be specified as variable or even subversive?

The law forbidding incest is the locus of this economy of kinship that forbids endogamy. Lévi-Strauss maintains that the
centrality of the incest taboo establishes the significant nexus between structuralist anthropology and psychoanalysis. Although Lévi-Strauss acknowledges that Freud’s Totem and Taboo has been discredited on empirical grounds, he considers that repudiating gesture as paradoxical evidence in support of Freud’s thesis. Incest, for Lévi-Strauss, is not a social fact, but a pervasive cultural fantasy. Presuming the heterosexual masculinity of the subject of desire, Lévi-Strauss maintains that “the desire for the mother or the sister, the murder of the father and the sons’ repentance undoubtedly do not correspond to any fact or group of facts occupying a given place in history. But perhaps they symbolically express an ancient and lasting dream.”

In an effort to affirm the psychoanalytic insight into unconscious incestuous fantasy, Lévi-Strauss refers to the “magic of this dream, its power to mould men’s thoughts unbeknown to them . . . the acts it evokes have never been committed, because culture opposes them at all times and all places.” This rather astonishing statement provides insight not only into Lévi-Strauss’s apparent powers of denial (acts of incest “have never been committed”!), but the central difficulty with assuming the efficacy of that prohibition. That the prohibition exists in no way suggests that it works. Rather, its existence appears to suggest that desires, actions, indeed, pervasive social practices of incest are generated precisely in virtue of the eroticization of that taboo. That incestuous desires are phantasmatic in no way implies that they are not also “social facts.” The question is, rather, how do such phantasms become generated and, indeed, instituted as a consequence of their prohibition? Further, how does the social conviction, here symptomatically articulated through Lévi-Strauss, that the prohibition is efficacious disavow and, hence, clear a social space in which incestuous practices are free to reproduce themselves without proscription?

For Lévi-Strauss, the taboo against the act of heterosexual
incest between son and mother as well as that incestuous fantasy are instated as universal truths of culture. How is incestuous heterosexuality constituted as the ostensibly natural and pre-artificial matrix for desire, and how is desire established as a heterosexual male prerogative? The naturalization of both heterosexuality and masculine sexual agency are discursive constructions nowhere accounted for but everywhere assumed within this founding structuralist frame.

The Lacanian appropriation of Lévi-Strauss focuses on the prohibition against incest and the rule of exogamy in the reproduction of culture, where culture is understood primarily as a set of linguistic structures and significations. For Lacan, the Law which forbids the incestuous union between boy and mother initiates the structures of kinship, a series of highly regulated libidinal displacements that take place through language. Although the structures of language, collectively understood as the Symbolic, maintain an ontological integrity apart from the various speaking agents through whom they work, the Law reasserts and individuates itself within the terms of every infantile entrance into culture. Speech emerges only upon the condition of dissatisfaction, where dissatisfaction is instituted through incestuous prohibition; the original jouissance is lost through the primary repression that founds the subject. In its place emerges the sign which is similarly barred from the signifier and which seeks in what it signifies a recovery of that irretrievable pleasure. Founded through that prohibition, the subject speaks only to displace desire onto the metonymic substitutions for that irretrievable pleasure. Language is the residue and alternative accomplishment of dissatisfied desire, the variegated cultural production of a sublimation that never really satisfies. That language inevitably fails to signify is the necessary consequence of the prohibition which grounds the possibility of language and marks the vanity of its referential gestures.
II. LACAN, RIVIERE, AND THE STRATEGIES OF MASQUERADE

To ask after the “being” of gender and/or sex in Lacanian terms is to confound the very purpose of Lacan’s theory of language. Lacan disputes the primacy given to ontology within the terms of Western metaphysics and insists upon the subordination of the question “What is/has being?” to the prior question “How is ‘being’ instituted and allocated through the signifying practices of the paternal economy?” The ontological specification of being, negation, and their relations is understood to be determined by a language structured by the paternal law and its mechanisms of differentiation. A thing takes on the characterization of “being” and becomes mobilized by that ontological gesture only within a structure of signification that, as the Symbolic, is itself pre-ontological.

There is no inquiry, then, into ontology per se, no access to being, without a prior inquiry into the “being” of the Phallus, the authorizing signification of the Law that takes sexual difference as a presupposition of its own intelligibility. “Being” the Phallus and “having” the Phallus denote divergent sexual positions, or nonpositions (impossible positions, really), within language. To “be” the Phallus is to be the “signifier” of the desire of the Other and to appear as this signifier. In other words, it is to be the object, the Other of a (heterosexualized) masculine desire, but also to represent or reflect that desire. This is an Other that constitutes, not the limit of masculinity in a feminine alterity, but the site of a masculine self-elaboration. For women to “be” the Phallus means, then, to reflect the power of the Phallus, to signify that power, to “embody” the Phallus, to supply the site to which it penetrates, and to signify the Phallus through “being” its Other, its absence, its lack, the dialectical confirmation of its identity. By claiming that the Other that lacks the Phallus is the one who is the Phallus Lacan clearly suggests that
power is wielded by this feminine position of not-having, that the masculine subject who “has” the Phallus requires this Other to confirm and, hence, be the Phallus in its “extended” sense.  

This ontological characterization presupposes that the appearance or effect of being is always produced through the structures of signification. The Symbolic order creates cultural intelligibility through the mutually exclusive positions of “having” the Phallus (the position of men) and “being” the Phallus (the paradoxical position of women). The interdependency of these positions recalls the Hegelian structure of failed reciprocity between master and slave, in particular, the unexpected dependency of the master on the slave in order to establish his own identity through reflection. Lacan casts that drama, however, in a phantasmatic domain. Every effort to establish identity within the terms of this binary disjunction of “being” and “having” returns to the inevitable “lack” and “loss” that ground their phantasmatic construction and mark the incommensurability of the Symbolic and the real.

If the Symbolic is understood as a culturally universal structure of signification that is nowhere fully instantiated in the real, it makes sense to ask: What or who is it that signifies what or whom in this ostensibly crosscultural affair? This question, however, is posed within a frame that presupposes a subject as signifier and an object as signified, the traditional epistemological dichotomy within philosophy prior to the structuralist displacement of the subject. Lacan calls into question this scheme of signification. He poses the relation between the sexes in terms that reveal the speaking “I” as a masculinized effect of repression, one which postures as an autonomous and self-grounding subject, but whose very coherence is called into question by the sexual positions that it excludes in the process of identity formation. For Lacan, the subject comes into being—that is, begins to posture as a self-grounding signifier within language—only on the condition of a primary repression of the
pre-individuated incestuous pleasures associated with the (now repressed) maternal body.

The masculine subject only appears to originate meanings and thereby to signify. His seemingly self-grounded autonomy attempts to conceal the repression which is both its ground and the perpetual possibility of its own ungrounding. But that process of meaning-constitution requires that women reflect that masculine power and everywhere reassure that power of the reality of its illusory autonomy. This task is confounded, to say the least, when the demand that women reflect the autonomous power of masculine subject/signifier becomes essential to the construction of that autonomy and, thus, becomes the basis of a radical dependency that effectively undercuts the function it serves. But further, this dependency, although denied, is also pursued by the masculine subject, for the woman as reassuring sign is the displaced maternal body, the vain but persistent promise of the recovery of preindividuated jouissance. The conflict of masculinity appears, then, to be precisely the demand for a full recognition of autonomy that will also and nevertheless promise a return to those full pleasures prior to repression and individuation.

Women are said to “be” the Phallus in the sense that they maintain the power to reflect or represent the “reality” of the self-grounding postures of the masculine subject, a power which, if withdrawn, would break up the foundational illusions of the masculine subject position. In order to “be” the Phallus, the reflector and guarantor of an apparent masculine subject position, women must become, must “be” (in the sense of “posture as if they were”) precisely what men are not and, in their very lack, establish the essential function of men. Hence, “being” the Phallus is always a “being for” a masculine subject who seeks to reconfirm and augment his identity through the recognition of that “being for.” In a strong sense, Lacan disputes the notion that men signify the meaning of women or that women
signify the meaning of men. The division and exchange between this “being” and “having” the Phallus is established by the Symbolic, the paternal law. Part of the comedic dimension of this failed model of reciprocity, of course, is that both masculine and feminine positions are signified, the signifier belonging to the Symbolic that can never be assumed in more than token form by either position.

To be the Phallus is to be signified by the paternal law, to be both its object and its instrument and, in structuralist terms, the “sign” and promise of its power. Hence, as the constituted or signified object of exchange through which the paternal law extends its power and the mode in which it appears, women are said to be the Phallus, that is, the emblem of its continuing circulation. But this “being” the Phallus is necessarily dissatisfying to the extent that women can never fully reflect that law; some feminists argue that it requires a renunciation of women’s own desire (a double renunciation, in fact, corresponding to the “double wave” of repression that Freud claimed founds femininity),\(^{15}\) which is the expropriation of that desire as the desire to be nothing other than a reflection, a guarantor of the pervasive necessity of the Phallus.

On the other hand, men are said to “have” the Phallus, yet never to “be” it, in the sense that the penis is not equivalent to that Law and can never fully symbolize that Law. Hence, there is a necessary or presuppositional impossibility to any effort to occupy the position of “having” the Phallus, with the consequence that both positions of “having” and “being” are, in Lacan’s terms, finally to be understood as comedic failures that are nevertheless compelled to articulate and enact these repeated impossibilities.

But how does a woman “appear” to be the Phallus, the lack that embodies and affirms the Phallus? According to Lacan, this is done through masquerade, the effect of a melancholy that is essential to the feminine position as such. In his early essay,
“The Meaning of the Phallus,” he writes of “the relations between the sexes”:

Let us say that these relations will revolve around a being and a having which, because they refer to a signifier, the phallus, have the contradictory effect of on the one hand lending reality to the subject in that signifier, and on the other making unreal the relations to be signified.\(^{16}\)

In the lines that directly follow this sentence, Lacan appears to refer to the appearance of the “reality” of the masculine subject as well as to the “unreality” of heterosexuality. He also appears to refer to the position of women (my interruption is within brackets): “This follows from the intervention of an ‘appearing’ which gets substituted for the ‘having’ [a substitution is required, no doubt, because women are said not “to have”] so as to protect it on one side and to mask its lack on the other.” Although there is no grammatical gender here, it seems that Lacan is describing the position of women for whom “lack” is characteristic and, hence, in need of masking and who are in some unspecified sense in need of protection. Lacan then states that this situation produces “the effect that the ideal or typical manifestations of behaviour in both sexes, up to and including the act of sexual copulation, are entirely propelled into comedy” (84).

Lacan continues this exposition of heterosexual comedy by explaining that this “appearing as being” the Phallus that women are compelled to do is inevitably masquerade. The term is significant because it suggests contradictory meanings: On the one hand, if the “being,” the ontological specification of the Phallus, is masquerade, then it would appear to reduce all being to a form of appearing, the appearance of being, with the consequence that all gender ontology is reducible to the play of appearances. On the other hand, masquerade suggests that there is a “being” or ontological specification of femininity prior to the
masquerade, a feminine desire or demand that is masked and capable of disclosure, that, indeed, might promise an eventual disruption and displacement of the phallogocentric signifying economy.

At least two very different tasks can be discerned from the ambiguous structure of Lacan’s analysis. On the one hand, masquerade may be understood as the performative production of a sexual ontology, an appearing that makes itself convincing as a “being”; on the other hand, masquerade can be read as a denial of a feminine desire that presupposes some prior ontological femininity regularly unrepresented by the phallic economy. Irigaray remarks in such a vein that “the masquerade . . . is what women do . . . in order to participate in man’s desire, but at the cost of giving up their own.”

The former task would engage a critical reflection on gender ontology as parodic (de)construction and, perhaps, pursue the mobile possibilities of the slippery distinction between “appearing” and “being,” a radicalization of the “comedic” dimension of sexual ontology only partially pursued by Lacan. The latter would initiate feminist strategies of unmasking in order to recover or release whatever feminine desire has remained suppressed within the terms of the phallic economy.

Perhaps these alternative directions are not as mutually exclusive as they appear, since appearances become more suspect all the time. Reflections on the meaning of masquerade in Lacan as well as in Joan Riviere’s “Womanliness as a Masquerade” have differed greatly in their interpretations of what precisely is masked by masquerade. Is masquerade the consequence of a feminine desire that must be negated and, thus, made into a lack that, nevertheless, must appear in some way? Is masquerade the consequence of a denial of this lack for the purpose of appearing to be the Phallus? Does masquerade construct femininity as the reflection of the Phallus in order to disguise bisexual possibilities that otherwise might disrupt the seamless construction of a
heterosexualized femininity? Does masquerade, as Riviere suggests, transform aggression and the fear of reprisal into seduction and flirtation? Does it serve primarily to conceal or repress a pregiven femininity, a feminine desire which would establish an insubordinate alterity to the masculine subject and expose the necessary failure of masculinity? Or is masquerade the means by which femininity itself is first established, the exclusionary practice of identity formation in which the masculine is effectively excluded and instated as outside the boundaries of a feminine gendered position?

Lacan continues the quotation cited above:

Paradoxical as this formulation might seem, it is in order to be the phallus, that is, the signifier of the desire of the Other, that the woman will reject an essential part of her femininity, notably all its attributes through masquerade. It is for what she is not that she expects to be desired as well as loved. But she finds the signifier of her own desire in the body of the one to whom she addresses her demand for love. Certainly we should not forget that the organ invested with this signifying function takes on the value of a fetish. (84)

If this unnamed “organ,” presumably the penis (treated like the Hebraic Yahweh, never to be spoken), is a fetish, why should it be that we might so easily forget it, as Lacan himself assumes? And what is the “essential part of her femininity” that must be rejected? Is it the, again, unnamed part which, once rejected, appears as a lack? Or is it the lack itself that must be rejected, so that she might appear as the Phallus itself? Is the unnameability of this “essential part” the same unnameability that attends the male “organ” that we are always in danger of forgetting? Is this precisely that forgetfulness that constitutes the repression at the core of feminine masquerade? Is it a presumed masculinity that must be forfeited in order to appear as the lack that confirms
and, therefore, is the Phallus, or is it a phallic possibility, that must be negated in order to be that lack that confirms?

Lacan clarifies his own position as he remarks that “the function of the mask . . . dominates the identifications through which refusals of love are resolved” (85). In other words, the mask is part of the incorporative strategy of melancholy, the taking on of attributes of the object/Other that is lost, where loss is the consequence of a refusal of love.19 That the mask “dominates” as well as “resolves” these refusals suggests that appropriation is the strategy through which those refusals are themselves refused, a double negation that redoubles the structure of identity through the melancholic absorption of the one who is, in effect, twice lost.

Significantly, Lacan locates the discussion of the mask in conjunction with an account of female homosexuality. He claims that “the orientation of feminine homosexuality, as observation shows, follows from a disappointment which reenforces the side of the demand for love” (85). Who is observing and what is being observed are conveniently elided here, but Lacan takes his commentary to be obvious to anyone who cares to look. What one sees through “observation” is the founding disappointment of the female homosexual, where this disappointment recalls the refusals that are dominated/resolved through masquerade. One also “observes” somehow that the female homosexual is subject to a strengthened idealization, a demand for love that is pursued at the expense of desire.

Lacan continues this paragraph on “feminine homosexuality” with the statement partially quoted above: “These remarks should be qualified by going back to the function of the mask [which is] to dominate the identifications through which refusals of love are resolved,” and if female homosexuality is understood as a consequence of a disappointment “as observation shows,” then this disappointment must appear, and appear clearly, in order to be observed. If Lacan presumes that female homosexuality issues
from a disappointed heterosexuality, as observation is said to show, could it not be equally clear to the observer that heterosexuality issues from a disappointed homosexuality? Is it the mask of the female homosexual that is “observed,” and if so, what clearly readable expression gives evidence of that “disappointment” and that “orientation” as well as the displacement of desire by the (idealized) demand for love? Lacan is perhaps suggesting that what is clear to observation is the desexualized status of the lesbian, the incorporation of a refusal that appears as the absence of desire. But we can understand this conclusion to be the necessary result of a heterosexualized and masculine observational point of view that takes lesbian sexuality to be a refusal of sexuality per se only because sexuality is presumed to be heterosexual, and the observer, here constructed as the heterosexual male, is clearly being refused. Indeed, is this account not the consequence of a refusal that disappoints the observer, and whose disappointment, disavowed and projected, is made into the essential character of the women who effectively refuse him?

In a characteristic gliding over pronomial locations, Lacan fails to make clear who refuses whom. As readers, we are meant, however, to understand that this free-floating “refusal” is linked in a significant way to the mask. If every refusal is, finally, a loyalty to some other bond in the present or the past, refusal is simultaneously preservation as well. The mask thus conceals this loss, but preserves (and negates) this loss through its concealment. The mask has a double function which is the double function of melancholy. The mask is taken on through the process of incorporation which is a way of inscribing and then wearing a melancholic identification in and on the body; in effect, it is the signification of the body in the mold of the Other who has been refused. Dominated through appropriation, every refusal fails, and the refuser becomes part of the very identity of the refused, indeed, becomes the psychic refuse of the refused. The loss of the object is never absolute because it is
redistributed within a psychic/corporeal boundary that expands to incorporate that loss. This locates the process of gender incorporation within the wider orbit of melancholy.

Published in 1929, Joan Riviere’s essay, “Womanliness as a Masquerade,” introduces the notion of femininity as masquerade in terms of a theory of aggression and conflict resolution. This theory appears at first to be far afield from Lacan’s analysis of masquerade in terms of the comedy of sexual positions. She begins with a respectful review of Ernest Jones’s typology of the development of female sexuality into heterosexual and homosexual forms. She focuses, however, on the “intermediate types” that blur the boundaries between the heterosexual and the homosexual and, implicitly, contest the descriptive capacity of Jones’s classificatory system. In a remark that resonates with Lacan’s facile reference to “observation,” Riviere seeks recourse to mundane perception or experience to validate her focus on these “intermediate types”: “In daily life types of men and women are constantly met with who, while mainly heterosexual in their development, plainly display strong features of the other sex” (35). What is here most plain is the classifications that condition and structure the perception of this mix of attributes. Clearly, Riviere begins with set notions about what it is to display characteristics of one’s sex, and how it is that those plain characteristics are understood to express or reflect an ostensible sexual orientation. This perception or observation not only assumes a correlation among characteristics, desires, and “orientations,” but creates that unity through the perceptual act itself. Riviere’s postulated unity between gender attributes and a naturalized “orientation” appears as an instance of what Wittig refers to as the “imaginary formation” of sex.

And yet, Riviere calls into question these naturalized typologies through an appeal to a psychoanalytic account that locates the meaning of mixed gender attributes in the “interplay of conflicts” (35). Significantly, she contrasts this kind of psychoanalytic
theory with one that would reduce the presence of ostensibly “masculine” attributes in a woman to a “radical or fundamental tendency.” In other words, the acquisition of such attributes and the accomplishment of a heterosexual or homosexual orientation are produced through the resolution of conflicts that have as their aim the suppression of anxiety. Citing Ferenczi in order to establish an analogy with her own account, Riviere writes:

Ferenczi pointed out . . . that homosexual men exaggerate their heterosexuality as a “defence” against their homosexuality. I shall attempt to show that women who wish for masculinity may put on a mask of womanliness to avert anxiety and the retribution feared from men. (35)

It is unclear what is the “exaggerated” form of heterosexuality the homosexual man is alleged to display, but the phenomenon under notice here might simply be that gay men simply may not look much different from their heterosexual counterparts. This lack of an overt differentiating style or appearance may be diagnosed as a symptomatic “defense” only because the gay man in question does not conform to the idea of the homosexual that the analyst has drawn and sustained from cultural stereotypes. A Lacanian analysis might argue that the supposed “exaggeration” in the homosexual man of whatever attributes count as apparent heterosexuality is the attempt to “have” the Phallus, the subject position that entails an active and heterosexualized desire. Similarly, the “mask” of the “women who wish for masculinity” can be interpreted as an effort to renounce the “having” of the Phallus in order to avert retribution by those from whom it must have been procured through castration. Riviere explains the fear of retribution as the consequence of a woman’s fantasy to take the place of men, more precisely, of the father. In the case that she herself examines, which some consider to be autobiographical, the rivalry with the father is not over the desire of the
mother, as one might expect, but over the place of the father in public discourse as speaker, lecturer, writer—that is, as a user of signs rather than a sign-object, an item of exchange. This castrating desire might be understood as the desire to relinquish the status of woman-as-sign in order to appear as a subject within language.

Indeed, the analogy that Riviere draws between the homosexual man and the masked woman is not, in her view, an analogy between male and female homosexuality. Femininity is taken on by a woman who “wishes for masculinity,” but fears the retributive consequences of taking on the public appearance of masculinity. Masculinity is taken on by the male homosexual who, presumably, seeks to hide—not from others, but from himself—an ostensible femininity. The woman takes on a masquerade knowingly in order to conceal her masculinity from the masculine audience she wants to castrate. But the homosexual man is said to exaggerate his “heterosexuality” (meaning a masculinity that allows him to pass as heterosexual?) as a “defense,” unknowingly, because he cannot acknowledge his own homosexuality (or is it that the analyst would not acknowledge it, if it were his?). In other words, the homosexual man takes unconscious retribution on himself, both desiring and fearing the consequences of castration. The male homosexual does not “know” his homosexuality, although Ferenczi and Riviere apparently do.

But does Riviere know the homosexuality of the woman in masquerade that she describes? When it comes to the counterpart of the analogy that she herself sets up, the woman who “wishes for masculinity” is homosexual only in terms of sustaining a masculine identification, but not in terms of a sexual orientation or desire. Invoking Jones’s typology once again, as if it were a phallic shield, she formulates a “defense” that designates as asexual a class of female homosexuals understood as the masquerading type: “his first group of homosexual