

**PART TWO**  
**THE POWER TO SPEAK**  
**WHO IS SPEAKING, FROM WHERE?**

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## 5 Disarticulated Voices Feminism and Philomela

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*By juxtaposing readings of selected feminist critics with a reading of Ovid's account of Philomela's rape and silencing, this essay interrogates the rhetorical, political, and epistemological implications of the feminist "we." As a political intervention that comes into being as a response to women's oppression, feminism must posit a collective "we." But this feminist "we" is best understood as an impersonal, performative pronoun whose political force is not derived from a knowable referent.*

### I. Articulating Silence

If feminism comes into being discursively as a political response to "women's oppression," the rhetorical figure most commonly invoked to express that oppression is that of being silenced. But in what language can one speak the effect of being silenced? How does feminist discourse situate itself in relation to patriarchal law, institutions, and discourse? As a collective speech act that often begins by saying both "we are oppressed" and "our voices are suppressed by patriarchal discourses," feminist discourse can never not examine the parameters of its own possibility of speaking. How does a speech act that posits a politicized "we" determine both who is designated by that "we" and what that "we" can say? In what ways does the political necessity of speaking as a collective "we" determine and affect the ways in which that collectivity can be thought?

If, as Teresa de Lauretis has proposed, "the relation of experience to discourse, finally, is what is at issue in the definition of feminism" (de Lauretis 1986, 5), how does feminist discourse articulate this relation? If there is no experience "outside" of patriarchal structures and no discrete language "outside" of patriarchal discourse, in what terms can this experience be spoken? I propose to address these questions through two sets of readings, beginning with an examination of some punctual moments in feminist discourse in which the language of feminism is explicitly interrogated and ending with a feminist reading of a classical literary text, Ovid's Philomela story. This text stages a scene of a woman's "experience" of violation and the relationship between that violation and the language of its articulation. By juxtaposing these two different textual articulations of women's relationship to discourse, I hope to raise questions concerning the impact of rhetorical figures on political language as well as the place of politics within a feminist reading practice.

## II. The "Feminist" Label and the Dream of a Common Tongue

The term "feminist" is not a proper name. It denotes no precise group, race, class, or even gender. It is a peculiar label—one that is seemingly personally conferred (I declare myself a feminist) and collectively confirmed (I am acknowledged by others as participating in feminism). While the field of feminism has flourished in the space that is left undefined by the term, the word "feminist" has remained a site of perpetual conflict and controversy. Even those feminists who declare with absolute certainty their commitment to feminist politics cannot say with any precision *who* is named by the term or *what* such a naming implies. To state that "one cannot *know*" who or what is named by the name "feminist" is not at all to say that it has no meaning. On the contrary—each moment of feminist thinking has paradoxically defined itself *in response* to the resoundingly open-ended echo of these insistent questions: "who" or "what" is implied by my/our use of the term?

In *Gynesis*, Alice Jardine describes a moment of high tension in the audience when she presented an early version of a paper that engaged French theories of the "feminine":

During a discussion following the presentation of an early version of "Gynesis" at an MLA conference in New York City, a lot of energy was expended over the words "feminist" and "antifeminist." It was as if the problems of translation foregrounded here could be resolved if everyone in the room could just come to an *agreement* about what feminism is or is not. The problems with that (primarily Anglo-American) approach to interpretation are, of course, made abundantly clear by many of the French theorists we will be concerned with here. What is important, they might say, is not to decide who is or is not a feminist, but rather to examine how and why feminism may itself be problematic; is itself connected to larger theoretical issues; is not a natural given but a construction like all others. This kind of questioning does not have to be undertaken from a conservative position; it can in fact provide feminism's most radical moments. (Jardine 1985, 21)

One does not have to have been present in that audience to reconstruct from Jardine's brief description that the debate was no doubt extremely heated and to realize that even if the particular terms of the debate are now, in 1991, somewhat outdated in feminist writing, the *anxieties* that fuelled this debate are very much alive. Ultimately, it would seem, it boiled down to a question of name-calling. Some women, probably trained in the Anglo-American tradition, must have passionately proposed that French theories of the "feminine," written by women who were proud to say both that they were not feminists and that they were influenced largely by French male theorists, were consequently *not* feminist—they were antifeminist. To refer to this as name-calling is not, I believe, to trivialize the terms of the debate. Far from it: name-calling is never a neutral act—politically, ontologically, or epistemologically. Jardine's observation that "it was as if the problems of translation foregrounded here could be resolved if everyone in the room could just come to an *agreement* about what feminism is or is not" is perhaps feminism's central dream—its necessity (as a collective speech act) as well as its constituting impossibility. If, as I imagine, the women in Jardine's audience were, as we say, reduced to name-calling, this reduction was rendered necessary by the troubling difficulties of "translating" the epistemological interrogation of feminism by French

theories of the feminine into a discourse of American political intervention. What Jardine calls "energy"—the friction between the terms "feminist" and "anti-feminist" has as much to say about the peculiar epistemological challenge that the field of feminism poses as it does about the different political agendas that were undoubtedly represented in that audience. As Jardine points out, the French theorists *refuse* to enter into debates concerning who is or is not a "feminist" and choose, instead, to interrogate the philosophical ramifications and methodological difficulties implied by the term "feminist" itself. Read in this context, the issue of name-calling becomes the site of a political/epistemological chasm that, acknowledged or not, is spoken by every feminist intervention.

If I am insisting upon retelling a rather familiar scenario, it is because I think that the aporia at work here—the peculiar undecidability that the name "feminist" names—has a variety of very specific consequences and implications for feminist scholarship that remain to be thought through and explored carefully. Jardine's thematization of the problem of Franco/American "translation" (the fact that "feminists" do not all speak "feminism" in a common tongue) is not merely a function of national or linguistic differences but a problem within any feminist collectivity. Because feminism has no one discourse or language, translation is always an issue. Even though aporia names the site of an undecidability, feminist scholarship—as political intervention—has always decided to decide, provisionally and in specifically telling ways what it means to speak or for that matter to read "as a feminist."

One of the most powerful of these decisions is to dream feminism as a kind of utopic metalanguage. This desire to a universal language that could comprehend all the possible referents designated by the term "feminist" can be heard in the cadences of Elaine Showalter's mapping of feminist theory in "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness":

English feminist criticism, essentially Marxist, stresses oppression; French feminist criticism, essentially psychoanalytic, stresses repression; American feminist criticism, essentially textual, stresses expression. All, however, have become gynocentric. All are struggling to find terminology that can rescue the feminine from its stereotypical associations with inferiority. (Showalter 1982, 16)

This text dates from the same general period as Jardine's text; the difference lies in its rhetoric. Where Jardine's text is largely concerned with the difficulty of importing French texts to an American context, Showalter's text marks the moment when traditional American academic feminism attempts to incorporate the French infiltration into a larger, general, universal Feminist project. It is no accident if, at this moment in her essay, Showalter's map of theoretical advances looks very much like a map of the First World, a world where all feminist critics speak rhyming dialects of one basic, feminist Esperanto—"oppression," "repression," "expression." Paradoxically, in her attempt to find a common tongue for all forms of feminist expression that would speak in harmony and unison, Showalter has effectively silenced the force of the specific contributions of those voices she mentions while excluding other voices from her map.<sup>1</sup> Despite her obvious intention to invoke the diversity of this collectivity, she has muted the productive discord of specific speech acts. The collective "we" implied by Showalter's chorus is one that monotonizes feminist language by minimizing, among other things, the incompatibility of different sorts of discourses.

### III. Saying "We" Epistemologically and Politically

If feminism cannot speak without positing a "we," the question "to whom does this *we* refer?" has generated enormous discussion. Most feminist theorists have long been concerned with the implications and consequences of invoking a collective "we." For the purposes of this essay, I have chosen to focus on two discrete examples of how this "we" has been thoughtfully invoked. In her 1982 article "Replacing Feminist Criticism," Peggy Kamuf calls attention to the dangers of conflating the invocation of a "we" with a critical approach that would presume to know who that "we" is. Reading a passage from an anthology of essays on feminist literary theory, Kamuf claims that the appeal to a "we" usually engages an attempt to uncover something specific to "women" that patriarchy has veiled:

What is striking about this passage, I think, is first the combined appeal to a specific "we" and to a certain method of defining who that "we" is. The "we," in other words, is constituted by a shared faith in its consolidation at the end of an

empirical process which has codified its patterns of consciousness. Secondly, there is an implicit assumption in such programs that this knowledge about women can be produced in and of itself without seeking any support within those very structures of power which—or so it is implied—have prevented knowledge of the feminine in the past. Yet what is it about those structures which could have succeeded until now in excluding such knowledge if it is not a similar appeal to a "we" that has had a similar faith in its own eventual constitution as a delimited and totalizable object? (Kamuf 1982, 45)

For Kamuf, following both Foucault and Derrida, this sort of appeal to a "we" recalls the traditional (invisibly masculine) humanist's blindness in assuming that a human "we" speaks for all humanity. But if feminism begins by understanding that women have always been erased by the traditional humanist's claim that his "we" speaks for everyone, then why, Kamuf asks, do feminists believe that their use of the same "we" will not result in similar sorts of blindness? She argues that in order for this feminist "we" to believe in the truth of its own consolidation, it employs the very strategies of exclusion to which women have always been subjected. In the act of establishing an aim, an end, or a telos to the question "who are we?" that end has already been subverted. Feminism subverts its own power to subvert when it refuses to acknowledge its negative debt to the inheritance of patriarchy. The language of feminism is not outside the language of patriarchy. For Kamuf, feminist politics would seemingly follow from, and not precede, an attention to problems of epistemology. Ultimately, Kamuf proposes that the one thing that feminism cannot afford *not* to do is to leave "its own undecidable margins of indeterminacy visible" (Kamuf 1982, 47). While I agree with Kamuf's general concern, her insistence on the necessity of constantly dislocating the grounds of feminist discourse does not account for the possibility that punctual, political interventions can function *formatively* and that they must be provisionally "grounded." I most emphatically share, however, her conviction that feminism must leave its own undecidable margins visible. Feminism's performative power retains its force only by acknowledging its ultimate difficulty in speaking. And the specific effects of patriarchal structures are often rendered visible where "feminism" has difficulty articulating its own terms.

More recently, Teresa de Lauretis has suggested that the feminist "we" is a political construction that emerges as both product and function of women's historical and material conditions. For de Lauretis, feminism defines itself as it turns around to look at the material history of its own production. "Feminists" are therefore constructed out of what "women" have produced:

Women have written books, to say nothing of diaries and letters and drawersful of words, about how much it takes to be able to write, at best, and how many other women do not even have that much. We have written books about our writing and the suppression of our writing; we have written about silence and madness, marginality and invisibility, negativity and difference. But we have also written of femininity and feminine writing, of identities, differences, and commonalities. (de Lauretis 1986, 5)

De Lauretis implies that the "we" of the second sentence is produced by the history recounted in the first sentence. Only after having posited a historical and institutional relationship between women and "writing" does de Lauretis finally invoke the "we." Although she is careful not to conflate the feminist "we" with the term "women" it is clear that for her the two are linked. "Feminism" is a possible aftereffect that can only come into being in the wake of a certain critical mass of writings by women. The category of "women," however, is invoked through the *institution* of writing. The power in this description lies in the fact that the "we" is constructed through a kind of dialectic between affirmation and negation. It posits itself and negates itself simultaneously, incorporating moments of failure to produce within the history of its own production. Furthermore, this "we" is a function of that history and not a representation of it; it does not coincide with the term women that engenders it. This "we" neither names a coherent identity nor does it speak with one voice. De Lauretis's invocation of this kind of feminist "we" suggests that feminists can say "we" without positing identically constructed subjects that speak in harmony or unison. I would argue that the feminist "we" can and paradoxically must continue to speak as a "we" as long as that "we" does not believe its own concrete identity. Our collective "we" only has force as long as we collectively refuse to accord that "we" status as a knowable, identifiable category.

#### IV. Reading (and) the "Experience of Real Women"

But are there limits to what this political, collective "we" can meaningfully say? What, for example, is at stake when the politicized voice speaks to and through a literary text? What is involved in reading "as a feminist?"<sup>2</sup> Can politically motivated terms such as "experience" or "power" be deployed in order to ground feminist readings?

Speaking in the name of a collective "we" in "Feminism and the Power of Interpretation: Some Critical Readings," Tania Modleski (1986, 121–38) argues that the categories of "experience" and "power" are essential to a feminist reading practice. Modleski begins her essay by positing a narrative of literary history that is essentially one of monolithic male oppression accompanied by monolithic female enslavement: "Recognizing that women have long been prisoners of male texts, genres, canons, many feminist critics have argued for the necessity of constructing a theory of the female reader and have offered a variety of strategies by which she may elude her captors" (Modleski 1986, 121). The three most slippery terms that circulate in her essay are "power," "real women," and "experience." The word "power" is invoked as a universal, monolithic thing that one either does or does not possess. Toward the end of her essay she writes:

Interpretation is, as I have insisted throughout this essay, crucially bound up with power. For feminism, power is the stake of the critical enterprise, and each and every interpretative act involves an exercise of power over a text, whether we like to admit it or not . . . In any case the ultimate goal of feminist criticism and theory is female empowerment. My particular concern here has been to empower female readers of texts, in part by rescuing them from the oblivion to which some critics would consign them. . . . By working on a variety of fronts for the survival and empowerment of women, feminist criticism performs an escape act dedicated to freeing women from *all* male captivity narratives, whether these be found in literature, criticism, or theory. (Modleski 1986, 136)

In her overarching deployment of the notion of power (which is articulated variously as "truth," "domination," and "mastery,") Modleski fails to make distinctions between limited and largely

privileged academic institutional power relations and the act of reading a literary text. Under the umbrella of the word "power," Modleski conflates two different and incommensurable sorts of relations: a reader with her text and the positions that particular male and female professors hold within the American (largely white and middle-class) academic institution.

In this text, Modleski's strategy for "empowering" female readers turns out to be a critique of the work of two feminist readers who, she believes, betray the feminist cause by selling out to the enemy. Their crime is their refusal to understand the task of reading as one of mastery and power:

To my mind there is something profoundly depressing in the spectacle of female critics' avowing their eagerness to relinquish a mastery that they have never possessed. Since when have women been granted the power of interpretation or our readings accorded the status of interpretative truth by the male critical establishment? For a woman to proclaim an end to critical mastery, then, is quite different from a male critic's repudiation of the textual dominance he in fact possesses. (Modleski 1986, 127)

To read is not to dominate: male critics do not "dominate" texts. They do occupy certain pivotal positions within academic institutions where certain reading practices are ideologically valorized and others are not. A relationship to a literary text that proclaims the "power" of its own interpretive truth by asserting textual domination is, quite simply, not a reading at all, whether performed by a male or by a female critic.

The feminist reading that "depresses" Modleski is a reading of Ovid's Echo and Narcissus myth. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is a classical Latin text about gods, nymphs, men, and women, all of whom are magically transformed into animals or inanimate beings. There are no "real women" in Ovid's text—only allegories of representations of gendered subject positions. A reading of Ovid can have no direct, mimetic applicability to the plight of particular oppressed "real women." Ironically, it is Modleski, and not the readers she criticizes, who transforms the woman named Peggy Kamuf into a mythological figure: "In depicting a situation in which real women and their experience are superfluous to the process she describes

(since beginnings are arbitrary and all notions of identity negated) Kamuf plays the role of Juno condemning Echo to a repetition that ultimately leads to her physical annihilation" (Modleski 1986, 134). While this is clearly meant as some sort of parody of Kamuf's position, one is struck by Modleski's use of these mythological figures in order to make her point about the suppressed "experience" of "real women." Invoked throughout the essay, the "experience" of "real women" finds a dubious voice through this sort of unexamined reliance upon mythological models of representation. A feminist reading practice that reads mythological figures as if they are "real women" is also a reading practice that, conversely, mythologizes the notion of "real women." To condemn a reading because it betrays a political agenda is to betray politics as well as reading.<sup>3</sup>

Modleski's ideal feminist reader would be engaged in a narcissistic endeavor: the reader constructs the text as a mirror in which she reads an emancipated or enslaved image of herself as an analogy of "real women" in "real-world" situations. This gesture insists upon reading images of a *hypothetical* "real world" in mythological allegories while simultaneously constructing a mythologized image of a "real world." As interpretive practice it does not allow the literary text to speak in its own literary language. It reduces that text to a transparent field of resemblances where literary figures confirm political positions that need to be grounded. But to use literature as the stable anchor for political intervention is to misrecognize the specific function and power of literary figures. Succumbing to the seduction of analogy, this sort of reading conflates text and world; it deflates literary texts by using them to construct a myth of a real world. If the primary concern of a reading is its applicability to political interventions "in the world," that reading is grounded on the notion that the relationship between text and world is reducible to analogic resemblance. Such a reading can only confirm what is already known before the text is read. Feminists cannot explore the possibilities of speaking differently from texts they dictate and manhandle. If to read "as a feminist" is to look for traces of real women in allegorical texts, then that reading practice ultimately fails to the extent that it succeeds in mastering its text. A literary text is not an object to be mastered or beaten into submission. A reading occurs only to the degree that the text is allowed to speak in terms that are foreign to its reader. Where a reading's primary function is its applicability as exemplum of a particular

political agenda, it ceases to be a reading. It might function as discursive example—but then the text is ultimately silenced and rendered superfluous to the ends to which it is put.

The task of reading "as a feminist" is a demanding challenge. For a feminist reading to fulfill this challenge, it must go beyond reading for the plot of male oppression and female victimization, even and especially when that plot seemingly dominates the text. A feminist reading cannot dictate specific political action. But by opening up the fabric of a literary text, feminist readings can examine the discursive structure of patriarchy in order to help formulate an effective language of response. Some feminist readings might provide women with new means of expression; others might provide an articulation of why, how, and where feminist discourse stutters. In any case, the discourse of patriarchy is neither seamless nor univocal—feminist readings can puncture and punctuate the dominant discourse only by forcing its texts to unfold.

## V. Reading "Philomela" as a Feminist

While one could dispute the value of reading Ovid's Echo and Narcissus story as a paradigm of patriarchy and the oppression of "real" women, Ovid's account of the Philomela story seems to beg for such a reading.<sup>4</sup> Unlike the Echo and Narcissus story, where gender positions, bodies, and identities are destabilized and interrogated by the narrative, and where the main characters are not human and are condemned to their respective fates because of divine intervention, divine presence is strikingly absent from the story of Philomela. While most of the preceding Ovidian tales depict conflicts between human and divine figures, present confusions of animal and inanimate worlds, and involve magical or supernatural operations, the story of Philomela is presented as a human drama among characters who are endowed solely with human powers, proper names, and social positions. In this story it would seem that figures of men and women correspond mimetically to stable gender positions and that they can be read accordingly. Furthermore, the story recounted in this "human" textual hiatus is a horrific and violent tale of a woman's rape, mutilation, and silencing. In the context of both this discussion of feminist discourse and Ovid's general project in the *Metamorphoses*, the story of