

Subversive strategies: fictional alternatives by women writers

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Summary

This article explores the ways in which certain recent texts by women writers construct oppositional strategies to the conventional depiction of gender in narrative. These texts are examined as acts of revision and, more radically, of subversion. The focus is on the way certain writers in the twentieth century revise prevailing paradigms, in particular, the paradigm of heterosexuality which has traditionally been the central relationship informing the conventional novel. In searching for new ways of presenting fiction that undermine the romantic closure of novels ending in marriage or death, women writers are following new directions in fiction.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel ondersoek die maniere waarop sekere resente tekste deur vroueskrywers opposisionele strategieë teenoor die konvensionele uitbeelding van geslag in verhalende tekste daarstel. Hierdie tekste word behandel as akte van hersiening en, radikaler, ondermyning. Die fokus is op die manier waarop sekere skrywers in die twintigste eeu oorheersende paradigmas hersien, en in besonder die paradigma van heteroseksualiteit wat tradisioneel die sentrale verhouding in die konvensionele roman vorm. In hulle soektog na nuwe weë om fiksie te skryf wat die romaneindes van huwelik of dood ondermyn, volg vroueskrywers nuwe rigtings in die prosa.

A feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic; as it is written it brings about an upheaval of the old property crust, carrier of masculine investments, there's no other way. There's no room for her if she's not a he. If she's a her/she, it's in order to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the "truth" with laughter. (Hélène Cixous, 1980: 258)

Men have always occupied a central position in fiction written by women, indeed the love of a man has been the primary focus of narrative attention in texts by men and women, and continues to be so in conventional romances (See Batsleer, 1985: 99, 100, 101, 104.). The shift in emphasis in women's writing from the romantic realist novel in which the female hero¹ either marries or dies, depending on her moral stance, thus producing the closure of the text, to alternative forms of fiction in which the romantic plot and traditional closure are undermined by the refusal of the female protagonist to enter into marriage or heterosexual relationships, is a significant moment in twentieth-century fiction.

Rachel Blau Du Plessis argues that all the basic formations of social practice, that is, the relation of men to women, of women to society, in short the family, sexuality, kinship, marriage and the division of labour by gender,

have their basis in the heterosexual couple. She goes on to make the connection between social and cultural conventions and fiction:

Romance plots of various kinds, the iconography of love, the postures of yearning, pleasing, choosing, slipping, falling and failing are, evidently, some of the deep, shared structures of our culture. These scripts of heterosexual romance, romantic thralldom, and a telos in marriage are also social forms expressed at once in individual desire and in a collective code of action including law... Romance as a mode may be historically activated: when middle-class women lose economic power in the transition from precapitalist economies and are dispossessed of certain functions, the romance script may be a compensatory social and narrative practice. (1985: 2)

Du Plessis' arguments move towards the numerous possible resolutions that can occur in a fictional work and the manner in which those fictional resolutions are also moments of "ideological negotiation" (1985: 3). Her thesis is that in the twentieth-century there occurred an ideological shift in women's thinking which resulted in the conflicting impulses in fiction being exposed rather than repressed in "subtexts and repressed discourses" (1985: 3).

The inscription of heterosexuality in socio-cultural formations and in fictional discourse has serious implications for the feminist critic. In foregrounding the male-female couple as the only possibility for fiction, writers are endorsing a binary vision which has been endemic to western discourse and metaphysics and which is one of patriarchy's most successful tools for supporting androcentrism. According to H el ene Cixous, all binary oppositions can be analysed hierarchically, and inevitably the "feminine" pole is classified as negative as in activity/passivity, sun/moon, culture/nature, man/woman (1980: 247). Sherry Ortner similarly sees a "universal devaluation of women" stemming from the logic of binary thinking (1974: 71). Cixous's alternative to the systematization of binary oppositions is to appropriate Derrida's notion of *diff erance*, to

split open the closure of the binary opposition and revel in the pleasures of open-ended textuality. (Moi, 1985: 108)

She advocates a way of writing that is bisexual, but which veers towards the womanly since it is women who are bisexual, "man - it's a secret to no one - being poised to keep glorious phallic monosexuality in view" (Cixous, 1975: 156/7). In "The Laugh of the Medusa", Cixous urges women to write, speak, give voice, for only in enunciation can women recover their lost bodies and move from repression to existence, from marginality to recognition. In this process of recovery "it is essential to recognize the need for another woman - to deny the hatred foisted on women by men" (1980: 248).

Virginia Woolf said much the same thing several years prior to Cixous in "Women and Fiction" in which she discusses women as writers as well as the different ideologies of women and men. She stresses the need for women writers to adhere to their own set of values and to reject the literary conventions which have been handed down to them by male writers:

...and the end is still to be reached only when a woman has the courage to surmount opposition and the determination to be true to herself. For a novel, after all, is a statement about a thousand different objects – human, natural, divine; it is an attempt to relate them to each other. In every novel of merit these different elements are held in place by the force of the writer's vision. But they have another order also, which is the order imposed upon them by convention. And as men are the arbiters of that convention, as they have established an order of values in life, so too, since fiction is largely based on life, these values prevail there also to a very great extent. (1979: 49)

Both Woolf and Du Plessis claim that women writers should revise the ideological basis of narrative plot and situation in accordance with their own woman-centred values. In recent years, women writers have used narrative to undermine the dominant hegemony of masculine ideologies. Literature then ceases to be an “incorrigible perpetrator” (Barbara Johnson, 1980) of heterosexuality and the conventions of marriage and romance (which is the dominant ideology passed down by literary history) and becomes instead a radical questioner of received texts:

It is probable, however, that both in life and in art the values of a woman are not the values of a man. Thus when a woman comes to write a novel, she will find that she is perpetually wishing to alter the established values – to make serious what appears insignificant to a man, and trivial what is to him important. (Woolf, 1979: 49)

Woolf goes on to talk more specifically about the subject matter of the “new” novel. Its difference lies in the way in which women write about other women:

...the subject matter of their novels begins to show certain changes. They are less interested, it would seem, in themselves; on the other hand, they are more interested in other women ... women are beginning to explore their own sex, to write of women as women have never been written of before; for of course, until very lately women in literature were the creation of men. (1979: 49)

It is not only in her non-fictional discourses that Woolf expresses her views on sexual difference in writing. In *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse* and particularly in *Orlando*, Woolf removes marriage, as it is conventionally perceived, and attachments between men and women, away from the centre of her narrative, replacing them with the shifting foci of personal and interpersonal impressions by a series of characters. The heterosexual couple in Woolf's novels is thus marginalized, and she is free to play with the kind of writing that is non-linear and heterogeneous. More recent writers, however, have found the transition from the conventional romance plot to alternative forms more difficult. Margaret Drabble, for example, continues to write about love between men and women even in her most recent work. If we remove the heterosexual couple from the pages of the novel what is there to write about? What are the possible plots and themes available for the writer of fiction? Some women writers in the twentieth-century have focused on specific

fictional alternatives which include female friendships, androgynous and bisexual relationships, and lesbian attachments. I shall be discussing each of these fictional alternatives in the rest of this paper.

1 Female friendships as alternative fictional subjects

Do not start. Do not blush. Let us admit in the privacy of our own society that these things sometimes happen. Sometimes women do like women. (Virginia Woolf, 1977: 78)

The idea that women enjoy each other's company and might even be friends has not been a popular literary theme. It is more common to find in literary texts the notion that women dislike and mistrust their own sex and that it is more "natural" for women to want to bond with men. Even in texts by such recent writers as Anita Brookner, there is an ambivalence in the attitude to other women which reveals itself through the female characters. In *Family and Friends* (1985) Sofka, the main character, is described musing over her flirtatious daughter, Betty:

Sofka hardly believes in the solidarity of her sex unless it is united by bonds of mutual standing: sisterhood, matrimonial status, mother love. She is well aware that Betty is one of those women, rather like herself, in fact, who is the instinctive ally of men. (1985: 41)

Later in the book, using her persuasive maternal power, Sofka releases her pent up anxiety over her older daughter's refusal to marry a family friend:

"Daughter!" cries Sofka, in a loud voice which startles them both, as does the archaic use of the word. "I do not want to die and leave you alone. I do not want you to remain my little child, without your mother to run to. Do you know what they say of such women? Do you know what it is like for a woman to grow old without a man? To be a godmother to other women's children, useful for presents and otherwise disregarded? Do you know what it is like never to see a family table? Never to celebrate? To sit alone, because it is inconvenient for your friends to invite you? . . . Do you know the names that other women apply to women like you?"

Mimi lifts her head and stares at her mother in horror.

"Do they talk about me, then?" she asks.

"Yes," says Sofka. "They talk about you. As if you had some fatal illness. . ." (1985: 134)

The communication is designed to show Mimi that she is isolated, an outcast from female society and judged by other women as a misfit, because she is unmarried and childless.

Friendship between women is curiously neglected in twentieth-century fiction by women, although, as Janet Todd (1980) points out, eighteenth-century fiction depicts female friendship as a relationship subsidiary to marriage, but one in which women establish intimacy, not conflict. In a recent article on women's friendships in contemporary novels, Elizabeth Abel

(1980) focuses on the psychological mechanisms of female relationships as they are portrayed by Doris Lessing, Christa Wolf, Ruth Praver Jhabvala and Toni Morrison, using object-relations theory to reveal that a close identification, rather than the idea of complementarity, is the cause which bonds women of different ages and psychological types. However, despite these tentative descriptions of female bonding, it is more common, as is evident in the work of Anita Brookner and Fay Weldon, to show, either with serious compassion (Brookner) or with bathetic irony (Weldon) that women have, of necessity, to ally themselves with men, as a matter of survival:

Marjorie, Grace and me. Fine citizens we make, fine sisters! Our loyalties are to men, not to each other . . . We women, we beggars, we scrubbers and dusters, we do the best we can for us and ours. We are divided amongst ourselves. We have to be, for survival's sake. (Weldon, 1975: 249)

Indeed, female betrayal plays just as important a role in the supposedly 'seminal' feminist novel *The Women's Room* as sisterly solidarity, and the message is the same: women betray women, not because it is in their nature to do so but because men cause them to do so. Hélène Cixous in "The Laugh of the Medusa" similarly describes the cause of women's betrayal of their sex:

Men have committed the greatest crime against women. Insidiously, violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense strength against themselves, to be the executants of their virile needs. They have made for women an antinarcissism! A narcissism which loves itself only to be loved for what women haven't got. They have constructed the infamous logic of antilove. (1980: 248)

Life is unthinkable without the loving support (always illusory) of men. The second part of *The Women's Room* sets out to contradict this view by showing women's friendships at work. They are, however, tentative at best, and dissolve immediately when the possibility of a heterosexual relationship presents itself.

There are several novels which describe friendship between women, but these usually take the form of relationships between mother and daughter, or friendship between a younger and older woman which is obviously a compensation for a missing mother and daughter relationship. Doris Lessing's *The Diaries of Jane Somers* is an example of this. Jan, the protagonist, befriends an old woman as a compensation for the guilt she feels at her mismanagement of both her mother's and her husband's protracted illnesses and eventual deaths. The relationship is one of mutual dependence and cannot strictly be called a friendship.

One of the few novels to have as its central subject the relationship between two women which is based on friendship and not on sexual attachment, and which omits almost entirely relationships with men, is *Solstice* by Joyce Carol Oates. Written in 1985, the novel aims to treat exclusively the topic of female friendship without the mitigating sub-plot of socio-political interests which informs a book like *The Golden Notebook*. Oates has to sustain the reader's

interest in a relationship between two women who are admittedly very different in outlook, age, personality and experience, but who do not overtly attract each other sexually. The impact of the novel lies in the tension which builds up between the two women as a consequence of their different attitudes to work, and to themselves. In fact, the suffering each woman causes the other is not unlike the kind of anguish which can result from a love relationship. Sheila is the older of the women and is self-sufficient. As a successful artist, she is experienced in the ways of the world and acts as the catalyst for Monica's crisis of self-recognition. The latter is young and inexperienced and develops a dependency on Sheila. It seems inevitable in female relationships that one woman acts as the mentor/mother allowing the daughter to grow into independence via a route of nurturing and dependence. Yet, Sheila is not the conventional mother-figure. Using the Ariadne myth, Oates depicts Sheila as Ariadne in both her forms, as the unraveller of the thread leading Monica to the labyrinth, and as the spider who traps the unwary soul in her sticky web. She also has a streak of ruthless selfishness which nearly destroys the younger woman who passionately reveals the secrets of her private life to Sheila but is mystified when Sheila fails to do the same. Sheila remains mysterious to Monica. She is clearly a troubled woman who drinks too much, probably takes amphetamines and frequently loses control. Sheila, it is clear, is also in need of help and needs Monica's support. Monica, however, seems unequal to the task, although she devotes herself to Sheila with passionate intensity. Indeed, Monica's dependency on and total dedication to Sheila results in a kind of closed-marriage syndrome, with Monica giving up her outside interests, her friends, and, ultimately, her work, to look after Sheila.

Solstice is a departure from the conventional novel in its subject-matter but the stresses experienced by the two female protagonists are not very different from those of a heterosexual couple. Clearly, the novel of female friendship as it exists at present does not present a strong challenge to the hegemony of heterosexuality.

2 Lesbianism as an alternative fictional form

Women alone stir my imagination. (Virginia Woolf)

It is generally accepted by feminist critics that the concept "lesbian" does not imply a purely sexual reference or orientation. Adrienne Rich, for example, chooses to use "lesbian existence" and "lesbian continuum" to suggest both the historical presence of lesbians and also to indicate

a range – through each woman's life and throughout history – of woman-identified experience; not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman. If we expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support . . . we begin to grasp breadths of

female history and psychology which have lain out of reach as a consequence of limited, mostly clinical, definitions of "lesbianism". (1980: 21)

Rich's definition of lesbian existence, derived from Simone de Beauvoir, includes all forms of female bonding and expands the idea of the erotic as it is experienced by women. By erotic enjoyment she includes suckling (mother and child), women sharing the pleasures of work, friendship between children, women tended by nurses, nuns and sisterhoods, in fact, all communities of women. Similarly, Lilian Fadermann, in her comprehensive book *Surpassing the Love of Men*, is careful to show that romantic attachments between women were common in the eighteenth century when they were called "romantic friendships", a description which denoted "a relationship that was considered noble and virtuous in everyway" (1981: 16). Fadermann also discusses such attachments being documented in the nineteenth century as "the love of kindred spirits", "Boston marriage" and "sentimental friends", signifying love relationships between women without being genital, and condoned by society. Fadermann concludes from this that "lesbian"

describes a relationship in which two women's strongest emotions and affections are directed toward each other. Sexual contact may be a part of the relationship to a greater or lesser degree, or it may be entirely absent. By preference the two women spend most of their time together and share most aspects of their lives with each other. (1981: 18)

Fadermann, however, shows that after World War I, openly expressed love between women ceases to be possible, perhaps because of women's changed status in society and new medical knowledge. Thus twentieth-century lesbian literature "usually shows love between women as a disease" and lesbian women generally "internalized these views" (1981: 20). Moreover, the association between lesbianism and unorthodox sex has become firmly imprinted on the popular imagination in the twentieth century so that it seems to have limited the scope and ability of women writers to express a lesbian relationship without either being defensive or overly explicit.

As a necessary counterbalance to Rich's all-inclusive definition of "lesbian" and Fadermann's inclusion of non-genital female friendship as lesbian relationship, Bonnie Zimmerman distinguishes between lesbian relationships and non-lesbian female friendship, and between a lesbian identity and a female-centred identity. She calls the blurring of these distinctions reductive:

By so reducing the meaning of lesbian, we have in effect eliminated lesbianism as a meaningful category. (1981: 457)

Zimmerman identifies two problems facing the critic: the first is defining the term "lesbian", the second is identifying a lesbian text. For example, in wishing to make a separate category for lesbian texts in this paper, as opposed to female friendships, I have been forced to adopt a narrower definition of lesbianism which includes genital sexuality and I have had to choose texts which are "overtly" lesbian, according to that prescribed definition. This

narrows the field considerably and excludes such books as *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker and *Other Women* by Lisa Alther. The former text has as its protagonist a woman who, because of a traumatized childhood of rape by her stepfather, inclines towards another woman for gentleness, eroticism and emotional support. Is this a lesbian text? *Other Women* has two main concerns and two protagonists: a psychoanalyst who is heterosexual and married and who counsels and befriends a lesbian who cannot come to terms with her sexual preference. The book raises questions about both forms of sexual engagement, but does not focus exclusively on lesbian attachments. Zimmerman compounds the problem by asking whether a lesbian text is one that is written by a lesbian (and how is that determined?), written about lesbians, or one which expresses a lesbian vision (how is this to be defined?).

In a narrowly exclusive field, two texts might satisfy these demands: *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall and *Rubyfruit Jungle* by Rita Mae Brown. These texts have at their centre an overt lesbianism instead of the covert, asexual association hinted at in Woolf's novels and possibly in *Solstice*. They are written by women who openly declared their lesbianism, and both aim to express a lesbian vision in startlingly different ways. The two books are not only separated by forty-five years but also by radically polarized attitudes expressed by their authors. For Radclyffe Hall, the lesbian nature of her protagonist Stephen is a tragedy, a disease which she is born with and which she has to endure until her death. For Rita Mae Brown, lesbianism is a delightful picaresque experience in which her protagonist, Molly Bolt, asserts her sexuality with confidence and humour, affirming the more modern view that lesbianism is a healthy lifestyle freely chosen by women in all societies. Both books convey a quasi-didactic message. *The Well of Loneliness* was written with the avowed purpose to show the world that although lesbians might be "inverts" suffering from an hereditary disorder, they nevertheless had a rightful place in society taking their place as "God's creatures":

"God," she gasped, "we believe; we have told You we believe . . . we have not denied You, then rise up and defend us. Acknowledge us, oh God, before the whole world. Give us also the right to our existence!" (Hall, 1976: 447)

Rita Mae Brown is more subtle in her intentions but her book certainly serves as a sounding-board for healthy, happy lesbians. In a scene where Molly is confronted by the Dean over her alleged relationship with Faye Raider, the conventional sentiments of the older woman appear ridiculously out of alignment with Molly's outspoken acceptance of her sexuality:

"Now tell me about this difficulty you have in relating to girls and your roommate."

"Dean Marne, I don't have any problem relating to girls and I'm in love with my roommate. She makes me happy."

Her scraggly red eyebrows with the brown pencil glaring through shot up. "Is this relationship with Faye Raider of an, uh - intimate nature?"

"We fuck, if that's what you're after." (1971: 127)

Suleiman cites *Rubyfruit Jungle* as an American example of a subversive text which, in its uninhibited use of four-letter words and “its ironic awareness of its own unconventionality” (1985: 45) represents a rebellious gesture in the first wave of the American women’s movement. She defines the “message” of *Rubyfruit Jungle* as follows:

... women have a right to speak of, and to recount in detail their enactments of their sexual desire for other women. (1985: 46)

Suleiman defines the precise nature of the significance of a text like *Rubyfruit Jungle* with its “celebration of lesbian desire and lesbian pleasure” (1985: 47) within the context of masculine pornographic literature but because these have been written by men and (largely) for men, they are always subordinated to a male gaze and male desire. These pornographic portrayals of women making love deny the reality of women’s desire for other women. *Rubyfruit Jungle* is a conscious attempt to reappropriate women as subjects, not merely as objects of male desire. However, despite its very different tone, the novel is similar in content to *The Well of Loneliness*. Molly is not allowed to express her sexual preference by a society that condemns homosexuals as queers and prevents them from having a normal life. The wistful plea in the last paragraph that the world should recognize difference echoes Radclyffe Hall in content but is strongly positive:

What the hell . . . I wished I could walk down the streets and not hear those constant, abrasive sounds from the mouths of the opposite sex. Damn, I wished the world would let me be myself. But I knew better on all counts. I wish I could make my films. That wish I can work for. One way or another I’ll make those movies and I don’t feel like having to fight until I’m fifty. But if it does take that long then watch out world because I’m going to be the hottest fifty-year-old this side of the Mississippi. (1973: 246)

Furthermore, Suleiman does question the extent to which *Rubyfruit Jungle* is truly subversive. In fact, she suggests its popularity is an indication that the reading public has assimilated the potentially subversive gesture into the mainstream thus “neutralizing its potential subversive energy” (1985: 47). This negation of difference is due in part to the narrative technique of the novel which is conventional and which does not disrupt the usual patterns of reading.

A more satisfactory approach to the concept “lesbian” which broadens its parameters and brings it within the focus of literary subversion is that which defines lesbianism as an act of resistance to the hegemony of heterosexuality. Jacqueline Zita, for example, defines the term as follows:

We define the lesbian option as a form of resistance to patriarchy qualitatively different from other forms because, however obscurely, lesbian resistance does include the sexual component. That is, the lesbian option, as an erotic, emotional, social, and political commitment to other women represents an option that cannot, like the alternatives of androgyny or dual parenting, be contained within the institution of heterosexuality. Likewise, the lesbian option cannot be

contained as a simple negation or “reaction to” dehumanized heterosexuality – it is radically other and expansive. (1981: 180)

Similarly, Bonnie Zimmerman, in a more recent article, sees important implications for feminism in the reclamation of lesbian identity in such texts as *Rubyfruit Jungle*, *The Wanderground* and *Les guérillères*. “Lesbian”, says Zimmerman, is a

politically charged word connoting subversion, marginality, and rebellion. To the extent that feminism and feminist literary criticism wishes to preserve its radical and aggressive edge, it needs to draw into itself rather than isolate subversive elements such as lesbianism. (1983: 172)

Jill Johnston also uses the word “lesbian” in its radically subversive sense implying political resistance:

The word lesbian has expanded so much through political definition that it should no longer refer exclusively to a woman simply in sexual relation to another woman. The word has in fact had pornographic implications, as though a lesbian was a woman who did nothing but enjoy sex, an implication employed as a tool of discrimination. The word is now a generic term signifying activism and resistance and the envisioned goal of a woman committed state. (1973: 278)

Using this paradigm the subversive strain of the lesbian moment need not be confined to those texts which are overtly lesbian, but may be found in a variety of texts and in the gaps in their discourse. The relationship therefore need not be sexual, in the conventional use of that term, but it may be erotic, nurturing, motherly or supportive. The celebrated kiss in *Mrs Dalloway*, Lily Briscoe’s yearning for Mrs Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*, Beth and Helen swimming together in Michèle Roberts’s *The Visitation*, Edna and Adele lying on the beach in *The Awakening* and the ambivalent relationship between Celie and Shug in *The Color Purple* may all be cited as instances of the subversive lesbian moment.

However, the more extreme forms of subversion emerge in the writings of the French writers, Monique Wittig, Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous. Monique Wittig aims to eliminate entirely the concept “woman” by erasing the dualism man/woman and inserting into symbolic discourse the idea of “political writing”. By this, Wittig means a discourse not founded upon sexual differences, but positioning instead the concept “lesbian” to replace the sexually identifiable and hierarchically fixed label “woman”:

Lesbian is the only concept I know of which is beyond the categories of sex (woman and man), because the designated subject (lesbian) is not a woman, either economically, or politically, or ideologically. For what makes a woman is a specific social relation to a man, a relation that we have previously called servitude, . . . a relation which lesbians escape by refusing to become or to stay heterosexual. (1981: 53)

A lesbian consciousness is therefore radically subversive because it strikes at

the basis of androcentrism and at the structures of sexual difference. Wittig also aims to change language by eliminating the use of metaphor to describe women in her writing. In *Les guérillères*, for example, Wittig tries to free women's bodies from the fetishes imposed on them by a patriarchal metaphorizing process and in *The Lesbian Body* she deconstructs the female body in order to "write the body". She achieves this by describing the body in non-metaphorical terms in order to show how every part of a woman's body is worthy of celebration:

THE LESBIAN BODY THE JUICE THE SPITTLE THE SALIVA THE
SNOT THE SWEAT THE TEARS THE WAX THE URINE THE FAECES.
(1975: 26)

By listing those items of physicality not normally thought of as worthy of description, Wittig undermines our received notions, handed down by masculine thinking, of what is desirable or undesirable in the female body. By her refusal to use metaphor to describe the body, Wittig also deconstructs a literary tradition, particularly the poetic one, in which one of the basic conventions is to transform, through metaphor, parts of the body into objects of aesthetic beauty or value. Elaine Marks comments:

Le corps lesbien is a textual and cultural gamble. It is a courageous aspiration toward the creation of a linguistic behaviour that would, by its very existence, prepare the way for the undomestication of women. (1979: 377)

Luce Irigaray, while not espousing the cause of lesbianism as such, celebrates the subversive nature of female sexuality in "Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un?" (This sex which is not one). This text both theorizes female sexuality and attempts to communicate in a language which is specifically feminine. Claiming that "female sexuality has always been theorized within masculine parameters" (1980: 99), Irigaray sets out to deconstruct Freudian ideas of women's libido by showing that masculine theory has misconstrued the idea of female pleasure. She begins by discussing the differences between auto-eroticism as practised by men and women: men need an instrument in order to feel pleasure, a hand, a vagina, language. Women, according to Irigaray, need no mediating instrument:

(she) touches herself by and within herself directly, without mediation and before any distinction between activity and passivity is possible. A woman "touches herself" constantly without anyone being able to forbid her to do so, for her sex is composed of two lips which embrace continually. Thus, within herself she is already two – but not divisible into ones – who stimulate each other. (1980: 100)

This is the key idea of Irigaray's text and an explanation of the pun in the title. Women have a sex which is not a sex (not one) according to Freud and Lacan who claim that the penis/phallus is the privileged signifier, but according to Irigaray, they have a sex which is not one but two. By modelling a new kind of discourse on this notion of multiplicity within oneness, women can learn to "write the body" and to write themselves.

However, as Suleiman has suggested, Irigaray's stance as projected in "Ce sexe..." might be seen as limited in that if raised to "the status of an ideology" (1985: 51) it will create the same kind of bastion of female superiority and separatism as masculine discourse has done for the phallic universe. But, it appears, Irigaray is too astute a theorist to be caught in this trap. Her emphasis on female sexuality which excludes the male and her desire for an exclusively women's world should be seen as prelude to a new order in male/female relationships. While autoeroticism and homosexuality are prime factors in women's liberation from phallogocentric domination, Irigaray is disinclined to suggest that women overthrow heterosexuality altogether in order to reform as a phallogocentric enclave or a new species:

But if women are to preserve their auto-eroticism, their homo-sexuality, and let it flourish, would not the renunciation of heterosexual pleasure simply be another form of this amputation of power that is traditionally associated with women? Would this renunciation not be a new incarceration, a new cloister that women would willingly build? Let women tacitly go on strike, avoid men long enough to learn to defend their desire notably by their speech, let them discover the love of other women protected from that imperious choice of men which puts them in a position of rival goods, let them forge a social status which demands recognition ... But if their goal is to reverse the existing order – even if that were possible – history would simply repeat itself and return to phallogocritism, where neither women's sex, their imaginary, nor their language can exist. (1980: 106)

3 Androgyny and bisexuality

As the final form of subversion which I shall discuss, androgyny and bisexuality, as they are depicted in certain fictional texts, offer an interesting compromise in recent fiction between conventional heterosexuality and the radical separatism and exclusivity encouraged by lesbianism and female autoeroticism. Androgyny, as it is defined by June Singer, represents a psychosexual impulse towards wholeness in the individual, and a recognition that to remain fixed in the feminine or masculine stereotype is a limitation, while acknowledging that the conscious absorption of opposite characteristics is an attempt at completion. Singer has researched the mythologies that have fostered the androgynous ideal in the human psyche and finds that, for example, the Artemis Amazon type of woman (one who will mutilate herself in order to be self-sufficient and avoid the company of men)

is a phenomenon that often comes to the fore in a period of transition between two cultural epochs. Rejecting the totally feminine as her ruling element, she also sets herself against the invading masculine power by attempting to be even more powerful. She is the prototype of the radical feminist who has little interest in relating to men. (1977: 72)

In Singer's view, this determined and aggressive type of woman paves the way for the emergence of the androgynous being. The former is necessary to break the stereotype of "femininity":

It is, as it always was, the extremists of the world who initiate changes that the moderates only later make palatable to the broader ranges of society. (1977: 73)

Caroline Heilbrun, in her book *Towards Androgyny* (1973), finds a lack of androgynous material in twentieth-century fiction. In her view, there has been a polarisation of masculine and feminine material, recent American male authors retreating into a purely masculine universe (James Dickey's *Deliverance*, for example), and women writers in an understandable reaction to their past "chivalry" towards the other sex, preferring to write feminist fictions in an exclusively female world.

I should like to conclude this paper by discussing two fictional texts which use androgyny and bisexuality as playful subversions of the fixed stereotyping of masculinity and femininity. The texts are Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*.

In *Orlando*, Woolf plays with several ideas at once: the notion of literary "truth"; which is voiced by her male biographer and which is ridiculed in the text; the idea of fictional closure which (again) is the professed aim of the biographer, but which Woolf undermines by having her protagonist unable to "perform a peroration" and by her own "ending" to the text with its ambiguous uncertainty signifying a lack of closure:

"It is the goose!" Orlando cried. "The wild goose . . ." (1942: 232)

and, most significantly, with the idea of fixed gender identities in general and marriage in particular.

In depicting Orlando's vacillation from male role to female role, Woolf creates a remarkable androgynous being and, at the same time, opens up her fictional space to the playful subversion of the traditional plot and the fixed-gender character. In Chapter Five Woolf expounds her ideas on marriage by describing Orlando's bewilderment at finding herself in the nineteenth century, in a society where, it seems, "the whole world was ringed with gold . . . wedding rings abounded . . . wedding rings were everywhere" (1942: 70). Orlando is mystified and somewhat disturbed by this inexplicable bonding of couples which seemed against Nature, but is moved by the times (as she often is) to make the conventional gesture. She, too, slips a gold band on her left hand but finds that when she takes up her pen the next morning her page is merely blotted with ink. Conventional marriage, even its most superficial outward sign, prevents a woman from thinking creatively. Orlando seems beaten by the dull confining solidity of the Victorian temperament:

Everyone is mated except myself . . . whereas I . . . am single, am mateless, am alone. (1942: 174)

Orlando's chosen mate, Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine, is not a conventional husband. He is, like Orlando, androgynous:

"You're a woman, Shel!" she cried.

"You're a man, Orlando!" he cried. (1942: 177)

and these two androgynous beings have a profound understanding of each other which makes ordinary speech superfluous, enabling them to develop a code language. They allow each other complete solitude when desired, in fact, the marriage is so unconventional that Orlando, in a fit of self-doubt, finds herself back in a conventional Victorian mode of thinking, and questions the foundations of her marriage:

She was married, true; but if one's husband was always sailing round Cape Horn, was it marriage? If one liked him, was it marriage? If one liked other people, was it marriage? And finally, if one still wished, more than anything in the whole world, to write poetry, was it marriage? She had her doubts. (1942: 187)

Orlando, however, manages to be at one and the same time both of her age and yet remain herself. She finds that she can be married and continue to write, because love does not take sole occupancy of the mind. Woolf, in the guise of her biographer, comments astringently on the disparity between her subject, Orlando, and the conventional heroine:

. . .when we are writing the life of a woman, we may, it is agreed, waive our demand for action, and substitute love instead. Love, the poet has said, is woman's whole existence . . . surely, since she is a woman, and a beautiful woman, and a woman in the prime of her life, she will soon give over this pretence of writing and thinking and begin at least to think of a gamekeeper. . . ? (1942: 190)

But Orlando disappoints the biographer by refusing to confine herself to love and gamekeepers (the only possible subject for fiction) and finishes her manuscript, completing her lifelong literary task. With this brilliant stroke of literary game-playing, Woolf allows her protagonist to complete a work of art while her narrator/biographer is left stumbling behind not knowing how to proceed with his biography since he cannot close his narration with a marriage ending. *Orlando* undermines the techniques of masculine narration: as a literary joke, the book is a telling commentary on the traditional plot of the romantic novel.

Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* (1982) is a contemporary equivalent of and elaboration on *Orlando*. It is a futuristic fantasy set in an apocalyptic America in which the forces of anarchy, destruction and entropy form a background for the psychic quest of Evelyn/Eve, a young man turned woman in search of his/her self, origins, sexual identity and, finally, the meaning of existence. The book is revolutionary in its free play of ideas about gender, taking its cue from *Orlando* but also depending on Eliot's concept of time and history ("in our end is our beginning").

Evelyn, the young man at the beginning of the book, flies to America imbued with a sense of uncertainty about his identity but compelled by the image of the elusively beautiful film star, Tristessa. His search for Tristessa, although by no means conscious, is a search for himself, and the text leads the reader, by means of a fictional maze, to the end of the quest, where Eve, now a beautiful woman, pregnant by Tristessa, in fact, a man, is about to leave the

shores of America. The novel is thus a double *Orlando*. Evelyn is transformed into a man by the Great Mother who performs her surgery in an underground world beneath the desert. She meets her childhood idol Tristessa, who is a man disguised as a female film star and falls in love with him/her. But this is neither the beginning nor the end of Eve's quest as the novel does not follow the conventional romance plot. Before she encounters Tristessa in the flesh, Evelyn has to undergo his learning experience as a man. When he arrives in New York (a post-apocalyptic city infested with rats as large as dogs, hoodlums, and viciously angry women with radical feminist insignia) he is lured by a black dancer through the streets to her apartment where he is helplessly seduced and, in turn, seduces. Their liason is characterized by a sado-masochism which appears to suit both of them until Leilah (the name associates her with the seductress and betrayer of men) discovers that she is pregnant. Evelyn behaves in a conventionally masculine way experiencing an immediate coldness and withdraws from Leilah after she has an unsuccessful abortion. He runs away to the desert where he is captured by a group of women led by Mother who operates on Evelyn after a symbolic copulation and turns him into Eve, an archetypally beautiful woman. The conversion is not only physical since Eve is subjected to psycho-verbal mental change as well. She is subjected to video-taped productions of all the Virgin and Child pictures that have ever been painted and must listen to the sounds of gurgling babies to inculcate in her a maternal instinct. Sophia, the wise, lectures her on the evils perpetrated on women by men, until the day of unveiling takes place. Eve views herself in the mirror, still a man by inclination and watching herself as a womanly object of desire:

Let the punishment fit the crime, whatever it had been. They had turned me into the *Playboy* center fold. I was the object of all the unfocused desires that had ever existed in my own head. I had become my own masturbatory fantasy. And – how can I put it – the cock in my head, still, twitched at the sight of myself. (1982: 75)

Eve escapes from the colony of women to be caught in a worse situation wherein she is subjected to violent rape as the eighth wife of Zero who is obsessed with the idea of hunting down Tristessa because he has heard she is a "dyke". He eventually locates her in her desert home where she is disrobed and her masculine nakedness exposed. Tristessa and Eve are then "married" in a grotesque wedding ceremony in which each is, in a sense, both man and wife. The ceremony is thus a suitable emblem of the question of gender identity: is one's gender and the way one thinks of oneself one and the same, or is gender a psychosocial acquisition? What Eve experiences when forced to kiss Tristessa is terror at her own negation. Since she has always thought of herself as male, she is still a man and has not accepted or acknowledged her female body:

You and I, who inhabited false shapes, who appeared to one another doubly masked, like an ultimate mystification, were unknown even to ourselves. Circumstances had forced us both out of the selves into which we had been born and

now we were no longer human – the false universals of myth transformed us, now we cast longer shadows than a man does, we were beings composed of echoes. (1982: 136)

The Passion of New Eve was conceived as a “feminist tract about the social creation of femininity . . .” (Angela Carter, 1983: 71) but developed into a diverting romp which overtly mocks the idea of fixed gender identity. It represents a direct frontal attack on any pre-conceived notions of stereotyped heterosexual relations, and exposes the often unconscious violence at the heart of masculine sexuality.

4 Conclusion

The undermining of received ideas about heterosexuality is a vital function for feminist critics to perform. The issue is, however, a complex one, for the task of undermining must not be seen as one of simple rejection. Subversion involves at the outset rethinking and revision. The project for feminism is not, as some feminists suggest, to substitute one form of sexuality for another, in this case lesbianism for heterosexuality. That is to return to an essentialist view of sexuality which ignores its social, historical and political construction. This kind of radical zeal imbues women’s sexuality with false ideas about its non-violent, gentle nature and maintains that all male sexuality is violent and aggressive. Such thinking endorses a sexual polarization which is not the goal of feminist practice as I see it. If we are to re-examine male and female sexuality in order to change the way men and women relate to each other, then we need to subvert and undermine the narrowly conceived, socially and politically endorsed *version* of heterosexuality given to us by the media, television, popular fiction and the conventional romance novel, while at the same time liberating imprisoned ideas about marginalized and so-called deviant sexual minorities. Our notions of sexuality need to be expanded from the basic paradigm of the heterosexual couple in which the woman is by nature submissive, docile and yielding, and the man is thrusting, dominant and aggressive. Women can be sexually active and men can be compliant and gentle in their sexual practices. It follows then, that we need new versions of heterosexual relationships and a revised sense of human sexuality in general, one which can include as “normal” homosexuality, lesbianism and bisexuality.

It must be added that heterosexuality in its narrowly defined sense is endorsed socially, legally and politically because it can then be used to promote masculine power. As long as women are defined sexually as submissive and helpless, and as long as men regard it as their right to colonize women’s bodies, the power structures of society will not change:

The maintenance of heterosexual regimes by these institutions (legal, familial, religious and medical) creates a narrowness and rigidity in all our notions of sexuality. But it does not prevent either women or men from engaging in the struggle to transform the context, meaning and power relations typically manifest

in heterosexual practice. And it does not prevent the struggle of gay and lesbian people, as well as heterosexuals, to affirm the positive nature of diverse sexualities. (Lynn Segal, 1987: 114/5)

The texts I have been discussing might also fruitfully be seen in two ways: not only as radical questioners of old ideas of conventional sexuality but, more positively, as proponents of a new paradigm of sexual relationships.

Notes

1. I am using the term "female hero" in the sense in which it is used by Rachel Blau du Plessis (1985) and Pearson and Pope (1981). Du Plessis uses "hero" to denote a central character:

whose activities growth and insight are given much narrative attention and much authorial interest.

The term "heroine" is used when the protagonist becomes an object of "male attention or rescue" (1985: 200) usually when she gives up her quest for self-knowledge in favour of marriage.

Pearson and Pope use the term in a deliberate attempt to counteract the impression that the heroic figure is always male and that women are incapable of heroism. "Heroine" is thus seen by these authors as a diminutive and as a reduction of potential.

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