



Feminist Constructions of the 'Witch' as a Fantasmatic Other

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Desire as a Place of Hysterical Inconsistencies

What a magnificent idea it was to invent the benevolent character of the witch therapist, to describe the indomitable tenacity of 'paganism' under the mantle of Christianity! The more time I spend with healers on every continent, the more I verify Michelet's intuition. Magic uses the implements of a now-proscribed past, and it is always women who hold its secrets. (Clément and Kristeva, 2001: 130)

While rereading the radical feminist versions of the 'witch' figure in 1970s work, it is possible to come to a conclusion that no matter who she is, or whom she supposedly represents, the 'witch' remains a benevolent 'wise-woman', a victim of phallogocentric hegemonies. This particular identity construction derives above all from mythic stories of the 'Burning Times' and beliefs in the 'Craft of the Wise', both drawing on the historically documented medieval and postmedieval European witch-craze. Following Diane Purkiss (1996: 15), most of these 'mythic' sources were invented (and invention is one of the key words here) at the point when the second wave feminist movement 'began to turn away from rights-centred public-sphere issues towards crime-centred, private-sphere issues':

Sexuality was to be identified as the site of women's oppression in the sense that property was for Marx the site of class oppression. Rape, sexual violence, pornography, wife battering and (eventually) child sexual abuse became the central signifiers of patriarchy, replacing signifiers such as legal asymmetries and pay differentials. (Purkiss, 1996: 15)

The feminist narratives from this period, such as Mary Daly's *Gyn/ecology* (1978) or Andrea Dworkin's *Woman-Hating* (1974), shift their critical interest to the witch figure as a signifier for physically abused and culturally neglected 'woman', the one Cixous, in the French feminist context, refers to in 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1975): the woman 'in her inevitable struggle against conventional man', the 'universal woman subject who must bring women to their senses and to their meaning in history' (Cixous, 1997: 347). To begin with, this 'universal subject' performs 'a sort of tetralogy, tackling the problem of the four elements: water, air, fire, earth, applied to philosophers nearer our time' and, simultaneously, it interrogates the philosophical tradition (Irigaray, 2000a: 35), particularly from the side of desire. The very concept of 'desire', dense with intertextual connotations, is understood here – as used by Lacan in correlation with the exteriority of linguistic experience – as 'a gap between expressing a wish and receiving its answer' (Warhol and Herndl, 1997: 485) and a 'hole' in the 'self' that the subject attempts to 'close' through an endless metonymic chain of supplements. For Lacan, as Herndl argues,

our desire is always for jouissance, a term that refers both to orgasm and to a state of blissful, ecstatic union that would complete us, would heal the 'split' that occurred when we entered language. This desire is unrealizable. Its impossibility does not, however, keep us from continually seeking its fulfillment. (Warhol and Herndl, 1997: 485)

'Desire' becomes an issue for French and Anglophone second-wave feminists because of the phallogocentric model of 'woman', who is said 'to be desirable to man' owing to a belief that 'she will be able to complete him, that she is his Other (all that he is not)' (Warhol and Herndl, 1997: 485). Within feminist psychoanalytical discourse, this concept of 'desire' clearly limits the possibilities open to women in the world of lived experience, that is, an experience ruled by 'the symbolic' discourse which relegates female types of desire to the dyadic 'imaginary'. The 'symbolic', imposed by Lacanian psychoanalysis 'as a universal, innocent of any empirical or historical contingency', is in fact, as Irigaray argues, a 'monosexual' (or 'hom(m)osexual') imaginary, 'transformed into an order, into the social' (Whitford, 2000: 72). In this phantasmatic system of topological order of phallus as a signifier of fullness of being, woman (and as a result, women) has been made into the material support of male narcissism; she does not exist nor belong. Projected as 'being the phallus', she is 'in exile' (2000: 72), in cultural diaspora.

The exilic narratives, especially the Anglo-American radical feminist texts, thus revalorize the roles of midwives, healers, herbalists and crones, reflecting Cixous' 'women' who return from the Dark Continent of 'desire', 'from always: from "without", from the heath where the witches are kept alive; from below, from beyond "culture"; from their childhood which men have been trying desperately to make them forget' (1997: 348). These texts need to be viewed as attempts to remove witches' history (identified with women's history) from the entrapment of their 'physiological' bodies stigmatized by 'symbolical castration': the 'little girls and their "ill-mannered" bodies immured, well-preserved, intact unto themselves, in the mirror. Frigidified' (Cixous, 1997: 248). They are mostly so-called *herstorical* (in contrast to historical) narratives, and their objective is to escape the stereotypical link between fascination and revulsion as inscribed onto the 'castrated' and melancholic female body.

More recently, this and similar radical objectives have come under challenge from within feminist or postfeminist discourse (Butler, 1990). The subject of a feminist identity, assumed to be shared, obvious, and crucial to the understanding of the radical feminist texts, has since been recognized as far from monolithic. Indeed, the arguments developed by Diane Purkiss, Luise Pusch or Judith Butler that will frame this discussion emphasize the fragmentation of feminist identity and 'the paradoxical opposition to feminism from "women" whom feminism claims to represent' (Butler, 1990: 4). This opposition, a type of adversative reaction, suggests in itself 'the necessary limits of identity politics' (1990: 4). In that sense, the radical narratives of the witch-craze are particularly troublesome, and here I follow Purkiss' argument, because the myth of the 'Burning Times' has become 'such a key part of many feminists' identities that to point to its limitations is bound to be painful and divisive' (1996: 26). As a radical feminist identity, the 'witch' strategically represents both the historical abject figure subjected to torture and death, and a radical fantasy of renewal in the form of a female figure who desires (and articulates) a cultural transformation 'that has not happened yet' and also the one who already marks that transformation. Thus, the feminist witch succeeds in subverting her own (abject) identity by converting it into a political fantasy; nevertheless the 'category of women for merely "strategic" purposes' (Butler, 1990: 4), as represented by the 'witch', remains problematic. As Purkiss suggests,

the herbalist-witch represents a fantasy ... in which domestic skills are valued in the community as if they were professional skills. There is more than a passing resemblance between the witch-herbalist and the fantasy superwoman heroine of the 1980s and 90s, professional women who have beautiful country gardens, bake their own bread, make their own quilts, and demonstrate sexuality at every turn. (1996: 21)

To continue with Purkiss, feminist witches 'can only represent all oppressed women if we know very little about them. The more witch-history the myth of the Burning Times attempts, the more damage it does to its own mythic status' (1996: 13). This *herstorical* blindness to the witch's (woman's) actual difference is characteristic of radical feminist texts. Their witch remains entrapped within the dilemma of a/the cultural transgressor (and negotiator) that in history became a convenient scapegoat (the stereotypical frightening witch-woman to be eliminated) and in *herstory* becomes a utopian projection of female power.

In contextualizing thus Cixous', Daly's or Irigaray's 'universal' woman, it seems necessary to refer to a mobile discursive locus of the/a woman: a dialogical impossibility, or incongruence between history and *herstory*, ending up, strategically, in women's imaginary which 'is inexhaustible, like music, painting, writing: their stream of phantasms is incredible' (Cixous, 1997: 347). My discussion of the radical feminist formulations of the 'witch' focuses on this 'incredible stream of phantasms' that, retrospectively, needs to be seen as a therapeutic attempt both to break through the silence and invisibility of female history and to elevate the notion of female alterity over the complementarity (symmetricity) of the phallogocentric system. These radical phantasms represent, according to Moi, the 'undeconstructed' form of feminism that, still 'unaware of the metaphysical nature of gender identities', 'runs the risk of becoming an inverted form of sexism' (1985: 129). One of the risks to be negotiated by these feminist projects is that of merging, intentionally or not, with the patriarchal definitions of women that de Beauvoir struggled to contest, confining women to the mysterious and not quite human other, as a muse incapable of taking responsible actions in the 'symbolic'. Thus, although significant as radically positive and empowering rewritings of the historical 'witch' into a therapeutic narrative figure, the narratives analysed here demonstrate how difficult and sometimes risky it is to work against the phallogocentric structure, especially once we start to diversify feminist *herstories* across race, class and political systems.

Precisely because it operates on a basis of assumed identity politics, *herstory* emerges as a form of feminist mythology¹ and constitutes a challenging alternative to the established (Western) male-centered master-story. This phase of 'intellectual rebellion, gynocentrism, and critical separatism' belongs to 'a crucial period in the experience of women who had always played subordinate roles as dutiful academic daughters, research assistants, second readers, and faculty wives' (Showalter, 1997: 224). As an alternative discourse, *herstory* (or rather herstories, taking into account their conceptual plurality) initiates important processes in the cultural interrogation of existing historical and mythical representations of gender. In the 1970s, as Clément reminds us, '[w]e heard slogans about the return

of witches, the moon, the tides, matriarchy, the primal. There was blood in the air and slaughter on the horizon' (Clément and Kristeva, 2001: 71). In these rebellious circumstances, the alterity accomplished in the feminine amounts to a radical claim, and must alter the traditional association of the feminine with negative otherness. The feminist witch (or the alterity of the woman) consequently becomes a central strategic signifier, a crucial metaphor or metonymy for *herstorically* transmitted female values. As Irmtraud Morgner, an East German author from that period observed, the witch 'is not only possible, but actually she is needed, desired' (1983: 635). The perspective offered is that of an *other woman*, defined by Irigaray as one that is exterior to phallogocentric metaphorizations, 'a woman who does not yet exist, but whose advent could shake the foundations of patriarchy' (Whitford, 2000: 29).

Indeed, in *The Newly Born Woman* (1986), Cixous' and Clément's witch figures replicate the traces of subversive symbols (the evil eye, menstrual pollution, the castrating mother) as well as feminine/female symbols of transcendence (the virginal mother goddess). Evoking both medical and sexual implications, the sorceress and the hysteric are posited as tropes for the female condition, that is, for cultural incompatibility and deviance which, if excessive, will be vomited 'into protected spaces – hospitals, asylums, prisons' (1986: 6). There the witch-woman is 'veiled', hidden and kept under restraint. This female condition, according to Cixous, has to be re-written against the heterosexual ideology of two physiologically different but supposedly complementary 'halves'; an ideology still valid today, which Butler would reformulate as 'literalizing fantasy':

The conflation of desire with the real – that is the belief that it is parts of the body, the 'literal' penis, the 'literal' vagina, which cause pleasure and desire – is precisely the kind of literalizing fantasy characteristic of the syndrome of melancholic heterosexuality. (Butler, 1990: 71)

Also, the 'dark' origin of the female condition, to continue with Cixous, has to be re-written, since the '*Dark continent*' a/the woman has been relegated to is in fact '*neither dark nor unexplorable*' (1997: 354; emphasis in original):

It is still unexplored only because we've been made to believe that it was too dark to be explorable. And because they [the phallogocentric culture] want to make us believe that what interests us is the white continent, with its monuments to Lack. And we believed. They riveted us between two horrifying myths: between the Medusa and the abyss. That would be enough to set half the world laughing, except that it's still going on. (1997: 354)

In analysing the/a woman as a hysteric figure in *The Newly Born Woman*, Cixous analyses the parts of her body and leads back to the Greek *hyster* (womb), to the witch-woman as a creature with a 'wandering, even wondering womb' which manifests a 'distinctively female bonding' of mind and body,

the inescapable female connection between creation and procreation, the destiny that is inexorably determined by anatomy. And the sorceress – the witch, the wisewoman, destroyer and preserver of culture – is she not the midwife, the intermediary between life and death, the go-between whose occult yet necessary labors deliver souls and bodies across frightening boundaries? (Cixous and Clément, 1986: xiii)

Similarly, in a striking reliance on the ‘original craft’ of words, Mary Daly and Barbara Walker draw on the hag’s metamorphosis from the wise-woman into the witch that transforms her medieval cauldron ‘from a sacred symbol of regeneration into a vessel of poisons’ (Walker, 1985: 122). According to Daly, the hag is a female *eccentric*, in reference to the Greek *ek* (out of) and *kentrum* (center of a circle) (1978: 186), who deviates from established patterns and defines gynocentric cultural boundaries. This malevolent stereotypical hag ‘still haunts elder women today. If a man is old, ugly, and wise, he is a sage. If a woman is old, ugly, and wise, she is a *saga* – that is, a witch’ (Walker, 1985: 122).²

The tension between past and present, as argued by Purkiss, ‘is experienced in all feminist histories, but only radical feminism resolves it by denying the difference’, by presenting its narrative ‘not as a reconstruction of the past, but an account of the way things *always* are’ (1996: 11; emphasis in original). This *herstorical* tendency to invoke the mythical past, and its insistence on erasing the traces of its own historicity, is undoubtedly intertwined with the desire to manifest one’s own sovereign presence, even if that presence appears to be hysterical. As Bovenschen notes, the ‘assimilation of the witch into feminist visual and linguistic parlance happened spontaneously, not as the result of a plan’ (2001: 231). The revival of the word, the image and the motif of the witch allowed for highly emotional ‘digging’ through several layers of history, and led to the re-discovery of the witch pogroms of the late Middle Ages as an incontestable archaeological proof of female oppression (2001: 230–1). Alice Walker’s references to witches, in the ethnic context of her African heritage, also seem to fall into this category of emotional ‘digging’. As explained by Lissie, one of the protagonists in *The Temple of My Familiar*,

[t]he first witches to die at the stake were the daughters of the Moors. . . . It was they (or, rather, we) who thought the Christian religion that flourished in Spain would let the Goddess of Africa ‘pass’ into the modern world as ‘the Black Madonna’. After all, this was how the gods and goddesses moved from era to era before, though Islam, our official religion for quite a long time by now, would have nothing to do with this notion; instead, whole families in Africa who worshipped the goddess were routinely killed, sold into slavery, or converted to Islam at the point of the sword. Yes . . . I was one of those ‘pagan’ heretics they burned at the stake. (Walker, 1990: 222)

Such emotional ‘proofs’ explain, perhaps, why ‘the radical feminist history of witches often appears to offer a static, finished vision of the witch’ (Purkiss, 1996:

10), one that reflects the feminist *desire* for an irrefutable reference that could be considered ultimate and eternal. This form of historicizing, dogmatic and often historically inadequate, can be understood as a resistance to what Felman calls the persistent attribution of incompleteness, deficiency and envy (1997: 9) to 'woman'. I therefore propose to consider radical feminist texts as theoretical and narrative forms of hysteria, that is, as examples of a revolutionary discourse that carries in itself an inherent division between the methodical, logical and reasonable on one hand, and the hysterical, that is *eccentric* and out of control, on the other.³ I illustrate this division while focusing specifically on Daly's and Dworkin's work.

Constructing the Body as a Locus of Fear

Daly's and Dworkin's texts could certainly be categorized as hysterical and fanatical means to resist an equally hysterical and fanatical misogyny. Their strategies consistently draw on the historical victimization of women accused of witchcraft⁴ and particularly on the exhibition and torture of the female body. In the process of constructing a 'universal' feminist story, personal fears, hatred and solidarity are evoked on purpose and their complexities, such as the conflation of fiction with academic research, are often difficult to analyse. In suggesting that Daly's word puns can be seen as linguistic weaknesses, tangible especially if read in a translation, Luise Pusch writes: 'Mary, please don't pun-ish us any more' (1996: 106). Her troublesome, deliberately ambiguous wording would still be digestible if used within reasonable limits but, with Daly, the opposite is the case (Pusch, 1996). In fact, her linguistic intricacies increase from one work to the next, and thus questions arise as to why she penalizes her readers: what are the reasons, and what are the results? Undeniably, Daly seems 'to have so much fun with re-inventing words' that

she does it, so to speak, above all, out of pure pleasure. To engage in word games can truly become a pleasurable pursuit, especially if resulting in such flourishing creations as stag-nation, the-rapist, bore-ocracy, Hexicon or Mister-ek-tomy, which have since become part of the classical feminist vocabulary. (Pusch, 1996: 107)

Questioning Daly's self-absorption with verbal discoveries that leave no space for an analytical perspective, it is more than easy to disapprove of her incongruent postulates of the 'new, true, deep structures', apparently referring to the etymological origin of words, the 'original word craft'. Indeed, although Daly, 'an impossibly sharp-witted critic', has drawn our attention to many pathologies of patriarchal language, her etymological dictionaries have recently ended up 'in storage, section: patriarchal curiosities' (Pusch, 1996: 110–11). I would propose,

however, to open the storage once more and dust off some of the reasons for the *herstorical* rage and its dogmatic practices.

Both Daly's and Dworkin's radical theses posit the 'witch' simultaneously as a female source of authority and as a patriarchal scapegoat, equating patriarchy with the relentless persecution of women by (physical) torture. In *Woman-Hating*, Dworkin informs her readers that 'the magic of witches was an imposing catalogue of medical skills concerning reproductive and psychological processes, a sophisticated knowledge of telepathy, auto- and hetero-suggestion' (1974: 148). Accused, in history, of stealing male fertility (or even dismembering the male body), the all-devouring, death-dealing hag returns in Daly's *Gyn/ecology* to represent the protective (maternal) instincts of an archaic character. The witch-crone, Daly's most prominent 'archetype' of female powers, becomes a guardian of birth-giving as well as of virginity and homosexuality unstained by patriarchal semen. Daly's rewriting of *hagiography* as *Hagography* modulates the *hag*, making her the very embodiment of feminist sisterhood:

our foresisters were the Great Hags whom the institutionally powerful but privately impotent patriarchs found too threatening for coexistence. . . . For women who are on the journey of radical being, the lives of the witches, of the Great Hags of hidden history are deeply intertwined with our own process. As we write/live in our own story, we are uncovering their history. (Daly, 1978: 14)

Their story is hence *our* story, while *we* become crones (the survivors of the witchcraze) 'as a result of having discovered depths of courage, strength and wisdom' (1978: 16) in *ourselves*. Daly's mode of speaking in the name of all of *us* is disturbingly dogmatic, raising acute questions about 'who has the right to speak about what on behalf of whom' or else 'who can possibly be fit to listen' (Purkiss, 1996: 17). This 'we', as Kathy Davis has recently argued, brings 'different women living under highly disparate circumstances into the same feminist family':

At the same time, however, it denies the historical specificity of women as sometimes subordinate or marginal, but sometimes powerful or central, depending upon their social location and local power networks. Women are not a unified powerless group, nor are they powerless in the same way. (2002: 227)

Nevertheless, Daly's strategy serves its purpose, since '[at] this point, it becomes clear that [her] narrative account of the Burning Times is less a presentation of external events than the story of an internal voyage, a metaphorical journey into the heart of patriarchal darkness' (Purkiss, 1996: 13).

In a particular mode of resistance to women's 'cultural castration' both Daly and Dworkin identify themselves with and as witches. If Daly's *herstory* of witchcraft is a religious experience, a form of self-actualizing suffering,

Dworkin's is an experience of bodily victimization, a type of masochism, through which she replies to the 'gynocide', 'a term which at once covers over and gestures at what it replaces' (Purkiss, 1996: 17). Dworkin 'uses both the image of the demonised witch-stepmother of fairy tales and the figure of the persecuted witch-victim of the Burning Times as figures for the suffering woman-victim of pornography and rape' (1996: 15). Her narratives are manifestos of female powerlessness and simultaneously, somehow disruptively, they celebrate the survivor-figure who lives to tell the tale. Particularly valid, in this double context, is Purkiss' observation that radical feminists equate themselves with witches in order to ensure 'that anyone who disagrees with [them] can be cast as an inquisitor' (1996: 16). Daly's 'notorious intolerance of women not classed as Hags – often stigmatised by her as "fembots" (female robots) – ironically reduplicates a rigid structure of "acceptable" behaviour for women' (1996: 16). Moreover, Daly's firm conviction that *what happened to Hags once is happening to them again*, perpetuates the vicious circle of gynophobia and is no longer effectual in the light of more recent feminist readings. Similarly, Dworkin's conscious preoccupation with the very linguistic structure she uses (she writes 'with a broken tool, a language which is sexist and discriminatory to its core'; Dworkin, 1974: 26) reflects, above all, her own failure to invent vocabulary and articulate her pain. Instead, she appropriates a sometimes coarse and angry style, as if trying to break through 'the symbolic', through the theory, into something that constitutes the 'actual' subversive discourse, into 'life', as she says.⁵

In thus refusing emotional detachment as a necessity of critical evaluation, these radical feminist voices maintain a highly personal character. To follow Daly, defending a witch equals declaring oneself a witch, a symbolic 'Holocaust'-survivor from the past and the cult figure of the present. As Purkiss suggests,

Pogroms, lynchings and above all the Holocaust do make it more difficult (though *not* impossible) to deny the very existence of racism and ethnocentrism. The Burning Times myth offers to play the same role in women's history, to authorise the need for struggle and authenticate the forms that struggle takes. (1996: 15)⁶

Despite a detailed analysis of the torture inflicted on witches, Daly and Dworkin are reluctant to mention (historical) names of witches or to describe particular cases of witch trials. According to Purkiss, 'male historians never tire of observing that radical feminist histories of witchcraft use almost no early modern texts as a source for views about witchcraft except the *Malleus Maleficarum*' (1996: 11). Both Daly's and Dworkin's major historical reference is indeed the infamous *Malleus Maleficarum*, published in 1486, in the early period of the witch-craze, and known in English as *The Witch's Hammer*.⁷ This 'comprehensive witch-hunter's handbook, by far the most important treatise on persecuting witches to

come out of the witch hysteria of the Middle Ages and Renaissance was compiled by two Dominican inquisitors, Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger' (Guiley, 1989: 221–2).⁸

The Latin genitive *Maleficarum* translates literally as 'of female evil-doers', and, as cited by Dworkin, the questions analysed in it are such quandaries as: 'Whether Witches may work some Prestidigitatory Illusion so that the Male Organ appears to be entirely removed and separate from the Body (Answer: Yes)', [or] 'That Witches who are Midwives in Various Ways Kill the Child Conceived in the Womb, and Procure Abortion; or if they do not do this, offer New-born Children to the Devils (Answer: Yes)' (Dworkin, 1974: 128). Elaborating on the interrogational procedures described, both Daly and Dworkin portray the witch-hunters as obsessed (religious) maniacs who see themselves as *purifying* the female *mystical body* of *indigestible* (to paraphrase Daly's text) elements. It is precisely these elements, in the radical feminist interpretation, that constitute female independence, a spiritual, physical and economic sovereignty that threatens the phallogocentric monopoly of power. According to Daly, references to torture and the death sentence, performed *ad infinitum* on witches in a medieval form of spectacle, do not concern the women actually accused, but their bodies or body fragments that are rendered seductive, both fascinating and repulsive at once. As Purkiss claims, passages

are quoted from [the *Malleus*] not for their centrality to witch-beliefs, but for their striking qualities, hence the more or less constant reiteration of the passage about the stolen *phalloi*, a belief rarely recorded elsewhere but striking as an illustration of rabid misogyny. Radical feminist historians are not deluded into thinking that the *Malleus* is central (although they do write as if it is); their criteria are those of the storyteller, in search of the most striking illustration or anecdote. (1996: 11)

Furthermore, radical feminists seem to agree with the Foucauldian understanding of torture as forming part of a ritual. The radical symbolism of the inadvertently sexualized female body is extended and designed to illustrate the spectacular martyrdom of the raped pagan goddess.

The same symbolism turns the persecutor into a hysteric who applies repetitive procedures of detecting warts and moles on the stripped female body, or verifies its ability to float when tied up and thrown into the water. As Foucault writes in *Discipline and Punish* (1995), 'from the point of view of the law that imposes it, public torture and execution must be spectacular, it must be seen by all almost as its triumph' (1995: 34). Particularly valid, in the radical feminist context, is the observation that 'torture does not reconcile (even if its function is to "purge" the crime)'; it rather 'traces around ... the very body of the condemned' woman, leaving on the reader/spectator visible and recognizable

scars of fear, which 'must not be effaced' (1995: 34). Ironic as it seems, Daly's and Dworkin's narratives express a similar (desire for) ongoing torture, even after death, in elaborate descriptions of the burnt corpses, or bodies dragged on hurdles and exhibited at the roadside. If (medieval) justice 'pursues the body beyond all possible pain' (Foucault, 1995: 34), some radical feminist narratives seem to be absorbed with the same abject and ceremonial element: with a sanctification of the victimized body that torture invokes. This element, called by Foucault 'the liturgy of punishment', marks the victim 'either by the scar it leaves on the body, or by the spectacle that accompanies it, to brand the victim with infamy' (1995: 34). Because of their focus on torture and execution, Daly's and Dworkin's narratives are both problematic and rhetorically significant:

Since we all have a body, and since we all fear pain and death, torture and execution create an illusion of common identity with a witch suspect which might be shattered if Daly were to enlarge upon her life or quote her words. (Purkiss, 1996: 14)

Certainly, in the light of such commentaries as those of Pusch and Purkiss, the myth of the 'Burning Times' has lost its political usefulness, but it is important to remember that it was logically unavoidable at one stage in the feminist past. This is particularly true in the context of the eventually rejected victimization of the female body as a site of torture, evoked quite famously by Monique Wittig's *Les Guérillères* (1985) or Sally Gearhart's *Wanderground* (1985). Their radical eco-feminist and lesbian manifestos about witch- Amazons, the rebel-warriors riding bare-breasted under a brilliant helm of crescent horns, appear at the point in history when

there was one rape too many . . . the earth finally said 'no'. There was no storm, no earthquake, no tidal wave or volcanic eruption, no specific moment to mark its happening. It only became apparent that it happened, and that it happened everywhere. (Gearhart, 1985: 171)

Although, as Showalter observed, the identifications with the Amazon as a figure of female autonomy and creativity 'was both too radical and too narrow for a broadly based critical movement' (1997: 225), in fact, these types of acute and legitimate refusal to cooperate with the phallogocentric culture enabled a turning point in feminist theory and cannot be ignored. Today, not unlike the *Malleus* itself, these narratives can be read as abandoned, archetypal monuments, significant because of the re-enacted silence of the victimized female bodies. Certainly, as Annis Pratt suggests, these archetypes must be constantly validated; they should be 'fluid and dynamic, empowering women's personalities to grow and develop' (1981: 135): 'Some feminist theoreticians, [Mary Daly, among others] take stereotype and archetype as synonymous', ignoring the 'projective' and 'futuristic' capacities of the archetype (1981: 135). However, Pratt herself offers

vivid examples of *herstorical* tendencies to elaborate on ‘insanity and woman-hating for which there can be no reparation’ and on the female martyrdom in death which ‘took the forms of burning at the stake, strangulation, crushing with stones, whipping, hanging, drowning, and unspeakable and vile tortures’ (1981: 175).

This indomitable persistence in articulating fear of rape and women’s victimization ‘helps to explain the very dangerous preoccupation with torture and execution in radical feminist narratives of witchcraft’ which have turned the historical figure of the witch ‘into a spectacle of violation and dismemberment’ (Purkiss, 1996: 15). Often difficult to control, fears evoked by radical feminist texts have universalizing tendencies that, not unlike the fear of death itself, are irreversible and impossible to cure. In the fear of rape, as Angela Carter observed in *The Sadeian Woman*, there is ‘more than merely physical terror of hurt and humiliation – a fear of psychic disintegration, of an essential dismemberment, a fear of a loss or disruption of the self which is not confined to the victim alone’ (2000[1979]: 6). The *herstorical* fantasies, strategically called feminist, are therefore both escapist and political, taking a withdrawal into the *fantasmatic* as a tool for cultural transformation. In positing the ‘witch’ as a powerful ‘other’ of the victimized woman, they impose ‘otherness’ as a political strategy, based on the identity principle that is crucial to early radical feminist work. I proceed by describing the quality of this *fantasmatic* while drawing on the poststructural French feminist stances, such as those of Irigaray, Cixous and Clément.

The ‘Orgasmic Freedom’ of the ‘Newly Born’ Woman

In French *herstorical* deconstructions of ‘masculine’ sameness, ‘femininity’ becomes a state of permanent conceptual reconfiguration (a permanent lack of authority), since, as Felman has put it, the ‘possibility of a thought which would neither spring from nor return to this masculine Sameness is simply unthinkable’ (1997: 8–9). At the same time, paradoxically, *herstory* attempts to challenge the unthinkable, and this is perhaps the most hysterical part of it, since the challenge comes very close to trying to normalize the unthinkable. ‘More present than ever’, the feminist witch becomes (or transgresses into) *the newly born woman*, ‘the ancient/innocent/fluent/powerful/impossible woman’, as Cixous and Clément have described her. And everything about her is ‘intense, indeed hyperbolic’ (Gilbert, 1986: x).

To dance: at the heart of *The Newly Born Woman* is the story of a southern Italian ritual, the tarantella. Early in the book, as she discusses the rebellious celebrations with which repressed (female) subjects have responded to their subjugation by patriarchal hierarchies, Clément tells

a tale of women in the Mezzogiorno who can be cured of imaginary spider bites only by doing a ceremonial dance, which sometimes lasts for twenty-four hours. A village orchestra plays; a woman/patient dances – dances in a ferocious 'festival of metamorphosis' . . . which subversively . . . expresses her passionate rage . . . At the end of the episode, she transcends the divine bite and 'leave[s] risk behind . . . to settle down again under a roof, in a house, in the family circle of kinship and marriage . . . the men's world' . . . But she has had her interlude of orgasmic freedom. (1986: xii)

It is in her 'orgasmic freedom' that Cixous' witch personifies the assimilated abjection of the witch's body, her ambiguity of form, and her re-enactment of the absence of patriarchal culture that cannot be conceptualized in the historical language of 'the symbolic'. As a linguistically abstracted, imaginary position assigned to the witch, Cixous' and Clément's cultural absence defies symbolic 'cultural castration' by a strategic re-enacting of inconsistency, transgression, trance. Similarly, Irigaray's feminine 'sex which is not one' has its point of departure in a linguistic absence,⁹ which, as Butler would later argue,

is not marked as such within the masculine signifying economy – a contention that reverses Beauvoir's argument (and Wittig's) that the female sex is marked, while the male sex is not. . . . On the contrary, the female sex [for Irigaray] eludes the very requirements of representation, for she is neither 'Other' nor the 'lack'. (1990: 10)

Similarly to Daly and Dworkin, Cixous and Clément focus precisely on this eluded representation of the female, on symbolically suppressed female transgressions: desires, fears and rage. These transgressions integrate the new radically re-invented qualities of the witch as a metonymic extension of the female limits in the symbolic, an extension that in fact eradicates these limits. Consequently, the narratives both associate with and disassociate themselves from the conflictual and self-perpetuating desire to celebrate an exclusively female (*herstorical*) type of suffering. The momentary 'dis/integrity' of the dancing, carnivalesque body, as posited by Cixous, revives the experience of inquisitorial interrogation, and links this experience with the "possession" of a/the woman who by her opening up is open to being "possessed", which is to say, disposed of herself' (1994: 42).

Hence, the witches' sabbath is evoked as a recurring spectacle of *trans-*, a *trance*, and a *trace* associated with monstrous, dislocated female elements. Moreover, to follow Cixous, 'those' who did not experience the 'festival of metamorphosis' can neither articulate nor negotiate it. But 'she' (the female pronoun, the one designated She, the 'orgasmic' witch-woman) who has participated in this experience has to return in order to speak of it, and so she no longer speaks from, but only about, the/a position of otherness. The 'she', once placed in the symbolic structure, cannot, or can no longer, speak from the place of the Other

since this place resists symbolic articulation.¹⁰ Her otherness, deriving precisely from her negotiating status between speaking and speechless (the one that cannot be articulated) positions, refuses to complement the Law of the Father. The feminist ‘witch’ in fact embodies the otherness of ‘woman’, the otherness transmitted in *herstory* as an ambiguous (transgressing) value that cannot be culturally mapped but is already symbolically ‘castrated’.

At this stage, I propose to link this ambiguity of the ‘witch’ with the problematic position of the other that is a ‘floating signifier’,¹¹ a ‘senseless flow that produces its own significance’ and speaks ‘(in) the name of no one’ (Kristeva, 1980: 190). In ‘speaking’ thus, she ‘laughs at the solemnities of sacrifice that constitute culture’ (Cixous and Clément, 1986: xiii) and refuses the historical construction of the abject hag as a zone of exclusion from the ‘symbolic’. The phallogocentric construct of the hag represents, therefore, a salient challenge to *herstory* which sets another equally imaginary zone against it, the zone of fantasy, that of the positive other, Irigaray’s ‘fantasmatic’ woman who ‘will not yet have taken (a) place’:

And ‘not yet’ which no doubt corresponds to a *hysterical fantasmatic* but/and which acknowledges a historical condition. Woman is still the place, the whole of the place where she cannot appropriate herself as such. Experienced as all-powerful where ‘she’ is most radically powerless in her indifferenciation. (2000c: 53)

In deriving the *herstorical fantasmatic* from Irigaray’s *hysterical fantasmatic* in *Speculum* (1974), I emphasize the radical feminist appropriation of sexual difference, ‘whether written in opposition to the phallogocentrism of Lacan (Irigaray) or as a critical re-elaboration of Lacan’, as a necessary attempt to view the feminine ‘as the unrepresentable absence effected by (masculine) denial that grounds the signifying economy through exclusion’ (Butler, 1990: 28). Although Irigaray’s philosophical texts, like Cixous’, ‘are dazzling, allusive, deliberately polysemic, difficult to unravel, and for the most part still untranslated’ (Whitford, 2000: 9), they are significant for reminding us that it was Freud, and not Lacan,

who brought to light something that had been operative all along though it remained implicit, hidden, unknown: *the sexual indifferenciation that underlies the truth of any science, the logic of every discourse*. This is readily apparent in the way Freud defines female sexuality. In fact, this sexuality is never defined with respect to any sex but the masculine. . . . The feminine is always described in terms of deficiency or atrophy, as the other side of the sex that alone holds a monopoly on value: the male sex. (Irigaray, 2000b: 118; emphasis in original)

Hence sexual difference, which has not been recognized in phallogocentric discourse, is necessary to overcome the split between the incompatible sensibilities of the maternal and the paternal versions of intelligibility.

Above all, the *herstorical fantasmatic* draws our attention to the inconsistency of the *herstorical* locations attributed to witches, who, according to Dworkin, 'of course, could also fly on broomsticks, and often did. Before going to the sabbat, they anointed their bodies with a mixture of belladonna and aconite, which caused delirium, hallucination, and gave the sensation of flying' (1974: 148). The trans-formed broomstick, 'an almost archetypal symbol of womanhood, as the pitchfork was of manhood' (1974: 148), serves here as an excellent example of Cixous' 'orgasmic freedom', the *herstorical* trance beyond 'the symbolic', in which the flying broomstick also denotes escape from housework, domestic ties and oppression. In flying on her broomstick, the radical witch of the 1970s personifies an alarming 'indifference to the boundaries between memory and invention, fact and fancy, truth and fiction' (Purkiss, 1996: 53). Her fantasies do not address the phenomenon of flying itself, but rather its metaphorical potential. As Cixous explains,

Flying is woman's gesture – flying in language and making it fly. We have all learned the art of flying and its numerous techniques; for centuries we've been able to possess anything only by flying; we've lived in flight, stealing away, finding when desired, narrow passageways, hidden crossovers. It's no accident that *voler* has a double meaning, that it plays on each of them and thus throws off the agents of sense. It's no accident: women take after birds and robbers just as robbers take after women and birds. (1997: 356–7)

For Irigaray, this emancipation of the female body is inseparable from a female self-knowledge (self-touching and opening up physical and metaphysical borders), and related to her plural and 'perverse' images of anatomy:

Whereas in the self-touching of the/a woman, a whole [*tout*] touches itself because it is infinite/unfinished, unable or unwilling to close up or to swell definitively to the extension of an infinite. This (self-)touching giving woman a form which is in(de)initely transformed without closing up on her appropriation. Metamorphoses where no whole [ensemble] ever consists, where the systematicity of the One never insists. Transformations, always unpredictable. (2000c: 59)

The self-touching 'witch' 'lives with her body in the past', the past referred to by Cixous as a spectacle of 'forgotten roles: the *ambiguous*, the *subversive* and the *conservative*' (1986: 12). She is *subversive* 'because the symptoms – the attacks – revolt and shake up the public' (the phallic gaze of the others to whom they are exhibited). She is *conservative* 'because every sorceress ends up being destroyed, and nothing is registered of her but mythical traces'. Her *ambiguity* is 'expressed in an escape that marks the histories of sorceress and hysteric with the suspense of ellipses' (1986: 5). The *herstorical* sabbath is thus a rite of the past, an apotheosis of the emancipated body. It is also a repressed desire for the imaginary space prior to gender, the forbidden *maternal zone*, and a fantasy of fragmentation as

well as of union: 'Perhaps it is a question of a particular phase which, later, one could call "transitivism", some sort of phase of excessive identification' with the other being (always on both sides, double). In the end the sabbath, like a hysterical attack, 'provides a return to regular rhythm' (Cixous and Clément, 1986: 19), reiterating as well as subverting a pattern. During her performance, the witch-woman 'is open to being "possessed," which is to say, dispossessed of herself' (1986: 42). Like the carnivalesque structure discussed by Bakhtin, she is 'composed of distances . . . analogies and non-exclusive oppositions . . . essentially dialogical' (Kristeva, 1986b: 48). Out of the dialogue established between her possession and her dispossession the 'dyads of carnival' appear: 'high and low, birth and agony, food and excrement, praise and curses, laughter and tears' (1986a: 48).

Bovenschen, in a German feminist context, also refers to these 'fantastic qualities of imagination' that 'go far beyond what theoretical discourse, hostile towards images as it is, can transmit' (2001: 232). In agreement with Purkiss' line of argument, Bovenschen points out, however, that 'to elevate the historical witch *post festum* to an archetypal image of female freedom and vigor would be cynical, considering the magnitude of her unimaginable suffering' (2001: 232). It is rather the witch's hysterical placement on the border between suffering and freedom that evokes the desire to perform, to take part in the enactment of deliverance, the emancipation of body, form and structure. This borderline location is still central to the contemporary feminist politics of resistance. It does not simply add to the answers of existing research but fills the (historical) gaps and omissions in the answers with *herstory*, which in itself might no longer be relevant, but needs to be acknowledged as a necessary and extremely empowering stage of development in feminist research. The *herstorical* witch as a 'fantasmatic other' is thus far from representing

a previously missing addendum to current subjects of research in the form of the un-cultivated female subject. It runs counter to these subjects. It is cross-thinking, counter-questioning, counter-seeing, contradiction, protest. It is thus also indifferent to the reproach of one-sidedness. As long as it does not reduce itself or allow itself to be reduced to what is 'female-specific,' it is not one-sided or half-true. It seeks to uncover the standardized systems, understandings, and lies of the androcentric worldview. (Thürmer-Rohr, 2001: 164)

In the end, the *fantasmatic* witches represent a much cleaner break with standardized academic reasoning 'than anything feminist historians have produced or have wished to produce' (Purkiss 1996: 53). The phenomenon of *herstory* demonstrates perhaps 'what feminist history might be like if it *really* abandoned empiricism altogether instead of simply calling it into question from time to time' (1996: 53). Beyond doubt, the *herstorical* assumption that patriarchy operates in similar

ways across national borders neglects historical and material differences in women's situations which give rise to different concerns and require different political struggles. Beyond doubt, it allowed some US (and European) feminists to avoid confronting painful race/ethnic and class differences among women in their own cultures, while obscuring the dominance of middle-class women around the globe (Kaplan, 1996). However, enveloped in de Beauvoir's and Irigaray's metaphors of *the sex which is not one*, it is *herstorical* 'stream of phantasms' that enabled new conceptualizations of the protest and rebellion against the cultural imprisonment in gender. They have provided the necessary points of departure for criticism currently exercised by such feminist thinkers as Braidotti, Butler and Haraway: namely the criticism of the prevailing representation of 'the metaphysics of substance' (Butler, 1990) that today still constitutes the very notion of the subject.

Notes

1. I refer to the work of Joanne Russ, 'What Can a Heroine Do? Or Why Women Can't Write' (1973). The narrative fantasies of Elana Nachman in *Riverfinger Women*, Bertha Harris in *Lover*, or Sally Miller Gearhart in *The Wanderground* present communities of strong, witch-like women, drawing on myths of Amazons and prehistorical matriarchies.

2. According to Barbara Walker in *The Crone: Woman of Age, Wisdom and Ritual* (1985), the Scandinavian word *saga*

has been translated out of its original meaning, 'She-Who-Speaks,' that is, an oracular priestess, such as were formerly associated with sacred poetry. The literal meaning of *saga* was 'female sage.' . . . The written sagas of Scandinavia were originally sacred histories kept by female sagas or sayers, who knew how to write them in runic script. Among northern tribes, men were usually illiterate. Writing and reading the runes were female occupations. Consequently, runes were associated with witchcraft by medieval Christian authorities, who distrusted all women's lore. To them, *saga* became a synonym for Witch. (1985: 52)

3. As Irigaray argues, there is a revolutionary potential in this type of hysterical discourse:

Even in her paralysis, the hysteric exhibits a potential for gestures and desires . . . A movement of revolt and refusal, a desire for/of the living mother who would be more than a reproductive body in the pay of the polis, a living, loving woman. It is because they want neither to see her nor hear that movement that they so despise the hysteric. (2000d: 47–8)

4. According to Andrew Sanders, medieval and postmedieval accusations of witchcraft were aimed at particular categories of persons. These are usually persons who display certain patterns of behaviour, occupy particular positions in the social structure, or have certain kinds of personal relationship with the accuser or the alleged victim. They have access to suspect knowledge, or are believed to harbour feelings of malevolence, hostility, or envy towards the victims or their kinsmen and associates. (1995: 118)

In his examination of witchcraft in England, Sanders concludes that the majority of the victims of the Great Witch-Craze were elderly, and often poor widowed women of low status.

5. Dworkin writes:

Books are commercial ventures. . . . People write them to make money, to become famous, to build or augment other careers. Most Americans [Americans] do not read books – they prefer television. Academics lock books in a tangled web of mindfuck and abstraction. The notion is that somewhere here are ideas . . . then somewhere else, unrelated, life. (1974: 24)

6. Daly's model of genocide, unreflectively drawing on the paradigm of Holocaust, clearly serves the purpose of symbolic shock-value and has been critically addressed by Purkiss as a strategic attempt 'to inflate the number of women who died in witch-persecutions into the millions'. Worryingly, 'since there is little actual evidence for such figures', Daly's estimate

goes two million better than the Holocaust, as if a competition is afoot, and at times there does seem to be a race on to prove that women have suffered more than victims of racism or genocide (as though women have not been among the victims of racism and genocide). Finally, the very stress on burning itself seems to allude to the crematoria, although it may also point to Dresden and Hiroshima. (Purkiss, 1996: 17)

7. One of the most famous passages in the *Malleus Maleficarum* reads as follows:

As for the first question, why a greater number of witches is found in the fragile feminine sex than among men . . . the first reason is, that they are more credulous, and since the chief aim of the devil is to corrupt faith, therefore he rather attacks them . . . the second reason is, that women are naturally more impressionable, and . . . the third reason is that they have slippery tongues, and are unable to conceal from their fellow-women those things which by evil arts they know. . . . But the natural reason is that [a woman] is more carnal than a man, as is clear from her many carnal abominations. And it should be noted that there was a defect in the formation of the first woman, since she was formed from the bent rib, that is, a rib of the breast, which is bent as it were in a contrary direction to a man. And since through this defect she is an imperfect animal, she always deceives. . . . And this is indicated by the etymology of the word; for Femina comes from Fe and Minus, since she is ever weaker to hold and preserve the faith. . . . All witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in women insatiable. (Kramer and Sprenger, (1486[1972]))

8. In *Encyclopedia of Witches and Witchcraft*, Rosemary Ellen Guiley informs us further that the *Malleus Maleficarum*

had a profound impact on witch trials on the Continent for about 200 years. Montagu Summers (an English author who wrote extensively on witchcraft and demonology at the beginning of the 20th century) called it 'among the most important, wisest, and weightiest books in the world'. It was second only to the Bible in sales until John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* published in 1678. (1989: 221–2)

Whether Guiley's encyclopaedia represents an unbiased and reliable academic source is subject to debate. Published in 1989, her work certainly follows and belongs to the herstorical representations of the witches' history.

9. In reference to Irigaray's texts, Whitford explains that

it is not a question of biology determining speech, but of identity assumed in language within a particular symbolic system known as patriarchy, and described by Lacan, in which the only possible subject-position is masculine. Within this system, the only feminine identity available to women is that of 'defective' or 'castrated' men; women are not symbolically self-defined. (2000: 3)

10. In the Introduction to Kristeva's *Desire in Language*, Roudiez notes:

Place (lieu). The word 'place' has been preferred [in feminist psychoanalysis, especially with reference to Kristeva] over the more mathematical 'locus' (lieu géométrique), for it does not convey the latter's precise localization. Kristeva's lieu is a hypothetical place, even though constrained by actual forces or presences. (Kristeva, 1980: 17)

11. As referred to by Abel in her analysis of Morrison's short story 'Recitatif', 'the floating signifier' emphasizes the ambiguity and/or interchangeability of roles that 'discloses the operations of race in the feminine' (1997: 102). 'The floating signifier', however, could be understood in a Kristevan sense, as a 'senseless flow that produces its own significance . . . [t]hus impersonal, in short, speaking (in) the name of no one' (Kristeva, 1980: 190).

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