

***The Laugh of the Medusa* by Helene  
Cixous**

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In the year 1975 the French feminist author Helene Cixous published an essay called "The Laugh of the Medusa". In it, she develops an entirely new theoretical concept with the aim of giving rise to feminist voice. In the text, Cixous advocates heavily for the idea that women need to write. She claims that there is a very close relationship between women's bodies and their writing and that both have been repressed by men for centuries. For Cixous, women beginning to write would also be the beginning of them reclaiming their voices and their bodies.

Men, Cixous claims, have dominated religion, science, logic, reason, and writing, directly or indirectly, for hundreds of years. Everything from the "publishing houses [that] are the crafty, obsequious relayers of imperatives handed down by an economy that works against us and off our backs" to the "history of reason" and "the religion of the father" has been dominated by men and has been "one with the phallogocentric tradition."

Since men have dominated the written word for so long, and since Cixous believes that men repress and reduce women because they are afraid of them, Cixous claims that women have been taught to hate themselves and other women. She believes that women have allowed themselves to buy into these male ideologies and have internalized them to their own detriment.

Cixous claims that women must write because "there has not yet been any writing that inscribes femininity." She writes:

I wished that that woman would write and proclaim this unique empire so that other women, other unacknowledged sovereigns, might exclaim: I, too, overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard-of songs. Time and again I, too, have felt so full of luminous torrents that I could burst—burst with forms much more beautiful than those which are put up in frames and sold for a stinking fortune. And I, too, said nothing, showed nothing; I didn't open my mouth, I didn't repaint my half of the world. I was ashamed. I was afraid, and I swallowed my shame and my fear. I said to myself: You are mad! What's the meaning of these waves, these floods, these outbursts? Where is the ebullient, infinite woman who, immersed as she was in her naivete, kept in the dark about herself, led into self-disdain by the great arm of parental-conjugal phallocentrism, hasn't been ashamed of her strength? Who, surprised and horrified by the fantastic tumult of her drives (for she was made to believe that a well-adjusted normal woman has a . . . divine composure), hasn't accused herself of being a monster?

By writing, Cixous believes, women can reclaim themselves. Instead of being painted as weak and lacking, or as frightful monsters like Medusa, they can share the full wealth of their experience and redefine what it means to be feminine. Through writing, women can rewrite the "history of life somewhere else." According to Cixous, writing and creating a feminine empire of writing would allow women to redefine their relationships with men, with the world, and with themselves.

Helene Cixous was part of the French feminist movement which had significantly grown since 1968 when the frustration and anger at the exclusion of women from the political institutions became apparent. At that time, women have also been excluded from public discourse, in general. Feminists were convinced that language reflects this kind of exclusion and that their presence in literature would change existing power relations. Their aim was to be heard as women within a female discourse rather than women as subjects of male discourse. In the consequence, the idea of a feminine-defined writing practice emerged. This way of writing should become a starting point for a female consciousness as well as a means of subverting the system of patriarchy in society. Cixous puts this goal quite strongly saying that "[\_]women must bring to surface what masculine history has repressed in them." Cixous tried to change the field of literary production which is part of the cultural system. Since the cultural system is deeply political, her attempt to change it is clearly a political act.

In the 1970s Cixous was considered to be one of the most influential representatives of the poststructuralist theory. We speak about a theory that "analyzes the patriarchal structures of society and the positions that we occupy within them". Orientating towards this theory, Cixous wanted the public to understand, why women tolerate social relations which eventually subordinate their interests to those of men. Furthermore, she focused on the way in which texts construct meanings and its political implications, both by looking back on the past and by examining the present. In doing so, she deals with language and representation as well as philosophical issues. Speaking about the latter, Cixous directs her criticism at Sigmund Freud's theory of penis envy:

The woman who still allows herself to be threatened by a big dick, who's still impressed by the commotion of the phallic stance, who still leads a loyal master to the beat of the drum: that's the woman of yesterday

In her opinion, Freud lays the foundation for a precarious biological discrimination and prejudice against women. The reason for her criticism is Freud's statement that women are generally envious of men due to the fact that they were not born with a penis. Freud added that women's sexuality is, therefore, characterized by the longing for a penis, a process in which women are naturally doomed to be inferior to men. He goes even further by assuming that this inferiority may also be the reason for the small number of cultural achievements by women. This said, Freud, amongst other men, has created a system in which women are repressed due to a masculine style that is predominant in the realm of writing.

This notion is also known as phallogentrism, coined by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. Speaking of which, Cixous argues that:

Nearly the entire history of writing is confounded with the history of reason, of which it is at once the effect, the support, and one of the privileged alibis. It has been one with the phallogentric tradition. It is, indeed, the same self- admiring, self-stimulating, self-congratulatory phallogentrism.<sup>[14]</sup> The term phallogentrism seeks to combine the notion of the phallus with the concept of logocentrism. Logocentrism emphasizes the privileged role of logos, i.e. speech, and claims that speech has been accorded in the Western tradition. Furthermore, logocentrism refers to the prioritization of the logical language, meaning the way men use to express themselves. Hence, it deems every kind of other language, including women's language, to be marginal and insignificant.<sup>[15]</sup> Merging phallus with logocentrism to phallogentrism one gets an entirely new meaning. Phallogentrism is a form of logocentrism but strongly influenced by the male gender and the male concept of patriarchy. In response to this theory, Cixous urges women to become more dominant in the field of literature by using their sexuality:

When women, historically limited to being sexual objects for men have been prevented from expressing their sexuality in itself or for themselves. If they can do this and if they can speak about it in the new languages it calls for, they will establish a point of view from which phallogentric concepts and controls can be seen through and taken apart.

As just quoted, Cixous believes that the expression of female sexuality in literature is essential in order to break the deadlock of masculinist writing. As regards female sexuality, she counters Freud's theory of penis envy with the argument that women are not focused on just one object, namely the penis. In the consequence, the female libido is not restricted and is, therefore, more sophisticated than men's sexuality.

## **Recommended Reading**

Ann Rosalind Jones: "Writing the body: Toward an Understanding of 'L'Ecriture Feminine'", *Feminist Studies*, Vol.7, no. 2 (Summer, 1981),

Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987)

Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction To Literary And Cultural Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002)

Morag Shiach, Helene Cixous: *A Politics of writing* (London: Routledge, 1991)

Diane Griffin Crowder: "Amazons and mothers? Monique Wittig, Helene Cixous and theories of Women's Writing", *Contemporary Literature*, Vol.24, no. 2, *L'Ecriture Feminine* (Summer, 1981), p. 126.

Carola Hilfrich, Helene Cixous: <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/cixous-helene>