INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. Each original is also photographed in one exposure and is included in reduced form at the back of the book.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

UMI
A Bell & Howell Information Company
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA
313/761-4700  800/521-0500
STRAIGHT TALK:
THEORIZING HETEROSEXUALITY IN
FEMINIST POSTMODERN FICTION

by

ANN MARIE HEBERT

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English
CASE WESTERN RESERVE UNIVERSITY

August, 1995
Copyright © (1995) by Ann Marie Hebert
CASE WESTERN RESERVE UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE STUDIES

We hereby approve the thesis of

Ann Marie Hebert

candidate for the Ph.D.

degree. *

(signed) Lela Hunt (chair)

Mary Coni

Cathy Wrenalow

Gardell Stroman

date 6/14/95

*We also certify that written approval has been obtained for any proprietary material contained therein.
Straight Talk:
Theorizing Heterosexuality in Feminist Postmodern Fiction

Abstract

by

ANN MARIE HEBERT

"Straight Talk" asks: how is heterosexuality constituted? How, precisely, are subjects produced as presumptively heterosexual? And where might one locate agency in this production? Enabled by feminist theory and queer theory, which have so successfully analyzed gender and homosexuality, this study articulates a theory of heterosexuality as "scripted" in the interplay between psychic structures and social structures. "Straight Talk" reads the feminist postmodern fictions of Fay Weldon, Angela Carter, and Kathy Acker as investigations into the relationship between signification and the gender-specific solicitation of subjects into a coercive heterosexual script. This script, simultaneously "written" by various institutions, discourses, technologies, the family psychodrama, and even our signifying system, has as its goal the preservation of current systems of power. "Heterosexuality," as signifier and as practice, is fundamentally, then, a regulatory ideal which, in the interests of its own self-replication, operates as a performative script, an utterance which not only says
something, but which does something. In my readings of the fictional texts, I argue that heterosexuality is constructed through repeated skirmishes between a performative script and self-conscious performances of that script which may subvert and subsequently alter future performances of the heterosexual script. The fictions of Weldon, Carter, and Acker expose the conventional heterosexual script as a script and imagine a performance of sexual scripts which destabilizes the heterosexual performative.

The heterosexual script, which is comprised of multiple sub-scripts that operate more or less co-extensively, solicits female subjects into a normative reproductive sexuality which works to limit the amount of social power available to them. Nevertheless, I argue, agency is possible. In my analysis of Weldon's, Carter's, and Acker's texts, my use of Althusser's theory of ideology, Freud and Lacan's psychoanalysis, and Peirce's semiotics is guided by the project's double intention: first, to investigate the often obscured connection between power, semiotic and cultural apparatuses, and individual subjects' positioning in the sex and gender system; and, second, to examine how these particular novels reflect, critique, and participate in the culture's construction of heterosexuality, as both erotic desire and social system.
Acknowledgments

Many people have contributed to my thinking about this dissertation, have provided inspiration and occasion for dialogue, and have supported me through the process of its writing. It is a pleasure to thank them.

I want to thank Mary Grimm, Gary Stonum, Colin McLarty, and Sally Robinson for engaging my thinking thoughtfully and critically.

I would especially like to thank Lila Hanft for her excellent reading of the entire text and for her generous friendship.

I thank as well my reading group for their gifts of friendship, time, and perceptive criticism: Lisa Maruca, Bonnie Shaker, and Mary Giffin. I am grateful, too, for the friendship and support of Dave Roberts, and the affection and assistance of Dennis Bye.

I thank my mother, Annamae McCarthy, for always asking the right questions.

I thank my dear friend, Rusty, who provided passionate dialogue always, courage when I lacked it, and love when I needed it.

I thank my children and my friends, Chris and Heidi and Debi and Thomas, who have encouraged me, engaged me intellectually, and loved me through it all.

And finally, I thank Jay, whose unyielding patience, kindness, encouragement, and love have sustained me through not just the writing of this dissertation, but through many years of shared joy.
### Table of Contents

**Introduction: Performing the Heterosexual Script**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sexuality Has a History</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminist Theory and Queer Theory</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Politics of Female Heterosexual Desire</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexuality and Literature</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexuality and &quot;Linguistic Capital&quot;</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Fay Weldon and the Technologies of Conscription:**

**Learning Her Lines in the Hetero-Feminine Script**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When Eros and Domesticity Collide: <em>The Fat Woman's Joke</em></td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology and the Family Romance</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romance Kills: <em>The Life and Loves of a She-Devil</em></td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excess, Exaggeration, and &quot;Hyperbolic Femininity&quot;</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Capital: &quot;Happy endings are not so easy&quot;</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Angela Carter and the Politics of Desire:**

**Unveiling the Phallic Script**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Law of the Father and the Pretender to the Throne</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;I take my desire for reality&quot;: <em>The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman</em></td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire, the Simulacrum, and the Real</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boy Gets Becomes Girl: <em>The Passion of the New Eve</em></td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blurred Desire and Identification: The Desire to Have... to Be...</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Kathy Acker and the Quest for Meaning:**

**Plagiarizing the Heterosexual Script**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Performative as Citation</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signs, Effects, Habits, and Scripts</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From &quot;Significate Effect&quot; to Psychic Script</td>
<td>232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plagiarism: Citing and Contesting Authority</td>
<td>244</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Oedipus: Micro- and Macro- Political Structure</td>
<td>256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Abject and an Aesthetic of Disgust</td>
<td>270</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Conclusion: Seizing the Script**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

v
Traditionally, the human world has been divided into men and women. Women're the cause of human suffering... Men have tried to get rid of their suffering by altering this: first, by changing women; second, when this didn't work because women are stubborn creatures, by simply lying, by saying that women live only for men's love. An alteration of language, rather than of material, usually changes material conditions.

Kathy Acker

I'm telling you stories. Trust me.

Jeannette Winterson
Introduction
Performing the Heterosexual Script

Once upon a time there was a prince who... thought, I'll go out into the wide world. ... There are plenty of marvelous things to see there. ... And he followed the road no matter where it led him. ... [And] Snow White opened her eyes, sat up, and was alive again. ... The prince said, "I love you more than anything else in the world..." and their wedding was celebrated with great pomp and splendor... and they lived happily every after.

Brothers Grimm

Lucy: "This Snow White has been having trouble sleeping, see? Well, she goes to this witch who gives her an apple to eat which puts her to sleep. Just as she's beginning to sleep real well... you know, for the first time in weeks... this stupid prince comes along and kisses her and wakes her up."

Linus: "I admire the wonderful way you have of getting the real meaning out of the story."

Charles Schultz, "Peanuts"

"Are you Fun to be with?" "Are you attractive to Men?" "How do you make a man Propose?" the chapter headings in Arthur Murray's Popularity Book ask (67, 7, 11).\(^3\) Written in the 1950s, the Popularity Book assumes a female reader and assumes

---

\(^1\) Every reader, of course, recognizes the form of the traditional fairy tale. I have reiterated it here as a synthesis of three fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm, "The Prince Who Feared Nothing," "Snow White," and "Briar Rose" (also commonly known as "Sleeping Beauty").

\(^2\) Charles Schultz' irreverent Lucy, provides a variation on the happily-ever-after theme in her wonderful misreading of Snow White, the first of many misreadings which will be presented in this study. Maria Tatar called this comic strip to my attention in her Off with Their Heads!

\(^3\) The actual purpose of the Popularity Book was to solicit customers for the Arthur Murray Dance Studios, the locations of which are listed on the back cover. Although there are a few chapters dealing with dance, most of the book instructs women in how to win men: "It's Easy to Be Popular," "Glamour Girls Are Made—Not Born," and "How to Attract the Stag Line" (57, 58, 78).
(as well as produces) her anxiety about being left an "old maid." "We can't go around simply willing men to swoon at our feet," the book cautions. "To bring about this state of mind needs outward expressions through beauty culture, costume, and carriage" (7). This mid-twentieth-century conduct manual makes clear, however, that it takes more than beauty and clothes to win a man and instructs a woman to "become a vivid and vitally interesting creature" (13). In the chapter which advises on how to make a man propose, the text is most explicit about the goal toward which a girl's carefully acquired "charm" is directed, and about how to attain that goal:

There are scores of young women who long to marry . . . . They dream, hope and strive to win love . . . . Here Mr. Seabury [a psychologist] outlined a practical technique to help a girl make her dream come true . . . . She should first study the women who are successful . . . . When she goes to bed at night, she can picture even the details of her conduct. "I am going to speak this way and act this way," she says. She visualizes the natural, easy grace and feminine charm which she wishes to acquire. (11, 14)

The Popularity Book, like other conduct manuals, is, ostensibly, a practical guide to attaining goals that the female reader already has. Nevertheless, its effect is to produce certain attitudes, beliefs, desires and goals in the reader which are congruent with cultural goals.4

A small book which purports to be merely "advice" which a "girl" is free to take or leave, in effect, the Popularity Book actually prescribes the conduct which it allegedly merely describes. The logic of the text is: If this, then that. If you (female reader) want this (love—and, of course, you do), then you must do these particular things (smile, be charming, be cheerful, cultivate a "good personality"). In other words, if you want love, you must comply with an already "written" script. Taking as

---

4 If the Popularity Book seems like an archaic and oppressive text, albeit charming because so out-of-date, a glance at a video store shelf shows that only the technology has changed. A few of the instructional dating tapes which are sold today are: The Art and Science of Flirting, What Women Really Want, and The Art of Meeting Men (New York Times February 12, 1993, B1).
its premise the constructedness of sexuality, this dissertation attempts to understand the interplay between social structures and psychic structures in the production of "heterosexuality" as signifier and heterosexuality as practice. How is heterosexuality constituted? the project asks.

The central tenet, one which is argued rather than assumed, is that subjects are produced as sexual within a coercive heterosexual script. This script, a process of overdetermining a subject's sexuality by cultural and psychic forces, consists of taboos, threats, promises, injunctions, prohibitions, demands, cajolings, fantasies, romantic idealizations—all constructed within a system of hierarchized power relations. I use the word "sexuality" in this study in both of its common usages: first, as a broad term designating the quality of having erotic desires or potency, and, second, as a somewhat more limited term to indicate homo-, hetero-, or bi-sexuality as representing individual orientation or self-identification in late twentieth-century Western culture. The heterosexual script, which is comprised of multiple sub-scripts that operate more or less co-extensively, solicits female subjects into a normative reproductive sexuality, I argue, which works to limit the amount of social power available to them.

The term "heterosexuality," as it is used in this project, refers to an aggregation of desires, attitudes, beliefs, and practices of sex and love between women and men within a particular historical moment. Just as crucial, however, is an understanding of heterosexuality as an entire constellation of institutional structures which are bound up with a particular construction of sexuality, from legal and medical practices to matters of style and consumption, such as the clothes we wear and the houses we live in. Heterosexuality exists on so many fronts as an—or perhaps, as the—organizing principle of society: as the defining unit of capitalist production, of moral uprightness, and of social normalcy. Although the two uses, sexual desire and social system, are never entirely separable, I will use the term with an emphasis sometimes on one
meaning, and sometimes on the other. The focus, in both cases, is on the conscription of the female subject, into the heterosexual script. I argue that heterosexuality must be understood, not as a biological urge, but rather as a political institution with a history and as a normalizing apparatus which works to reproduce current power relations. I choose the phrase, "heterosexual script," to signify the cultural construction of bodies, genders, desires with the effect of naturalizing them within a hierarchized system of power which privileges masculinity and reproductive heterosexuality. The term itself contests the cultural assumption that a stable gender identity exists which corresponds exactly with anatomy and which gives rise naturally to desire for the "opposite" sex. The heterosexual script suggests a social structure constituted by presumptive heterosexuality which includes, but is far more pervasive than, sexual or romantic relationships between individuals. Even when the subject of analysis is romantic love, however, it must be understood within the context of heterosexuality as an organizing principle of the culture at large.\footnote{In Monique Wittig's otherwise quite wonderful essay, "One Is Not Born a Woman," she argues that "lesbian" is beyond the categories of sex or woman or man and is outside the definition of a "woman" which is always in economic, political, or ideological relation to a man (104-05). Although her definition of the term "lesbian" is useful for a discussion of alternative social relations, I disagree with her assertion that the "refusal to become (or remain) heterosexual" offers a way out of the system (105). I argue that no one, gay or straight, is outside the heterosexual script, that, although it may be resisted, one is always implicated in the script as it shapes social, sexual, and economic relations.}

I argue that the heterosexual script is produced as a signifying habit which endlessly reproduces itself and which must be contested on the field of signifying practices, a contest in which resistant signifying acts may produce resistant signifying habits. Courtship rituals, sex acts, reproduction, passion, and pleasure are given meaning and value within a system of signification. As this study's analysis of heterosexuality demonstrates, our sexual beliefs and practices are the result of a
signifying process which may be understood as the development of meaning-habits. Such meaning habits are circulated and reproduced through institutions, technologies, and representations. How, this project asks, do our conventions of representation construct women's sexuality in such a way as to conscript them into a defined role within conventional and presumptive heterosexuality? And how, precisely, is heterosexuality enforced, regulated? I take as a premise Michele Foucault's analysis of power which claims that power, that "great anonymous," is everywhere," that it "is exercised from innumerable points" (History of Sexuality, vol. 1, 95, 94). Although it might be argued that heterosexuality, if not merely a dictate of biology, must then be chosen, this project seeks to elaborate how the cultural production of heterosexuality, structured in such a way as to reproduce the status quo, operates to limit the sexual choices of individuals. And yet, if, as I argue, heterosexuality is discursively produced, I argue also that the possibility exists of intervention into our own conscription. What, then, are the possible sites of intervention? What specific practices may become grounds of contestation? If, as this dissertation claims, women and men are interpellated into normative heterosexuality by ideology, which is, of course, always invisible, and by signifying acts which pre-exist the subject they name, where can we locate agency?

These questions achieve particular edge in a historical period, such as our own, in which sexuality is strongly contested and negotiated. As we approach the end of the millennium, bodies and sexualities fuel hotly debated questions of economic assets, social moralities, and, above all, political power. AIDS, abortion, and new reproductive technologies mobilize political and religious energies in skirmishes for position as socially authoritative discourses which will regulate sexuality in new arenas
of contest. Sexual harassment, sexual abuse, child pornography, and sex on the Internet spawn millions of impassioned—or just titillated—words in newspapers, on electronic bulletin boards, and on talk shows. The radical Right has been successful at exploiting the logic of epidemic and a perception of perverse sexual-desires-out-of-control for purposes of their own. In the face of substantial public support for interventionist regulation of sexuality and interference with freedom of choice and relationship, feminist and gay rights movements challenge conventional claims to authority by the dominant power regime. What is at stake in current debates is the power of definition and the power of regulation. What qualifies as "sex"? Who gets to decide? What are the political implications of the sex debates taking place in popular culture, in medical discourse, in legal practice, and in theoretical inquiry? And what is

---

6 It might be helpful here to distinguish between "discourse" and "script" as these terms are used in this dissertation. I use "discourse" in the commonly understood poststructuralist sense of a shared language and set of ideas common to a particular group. Although this understanding of "discourse" assumes a political component, i.e., assumes that language does something, the political implication of "script" is even stronger. I would define "script" as the discursive model of the imperative, and would add that "scripts" always include the notion of performance. These two characteristics of scripts—that they are imperative and that they involve performance—shall be developed by this project.

7 That the sex debates have been heated among feminists, as they have among various cultural groups, may be seen by comparing the conservative anthology, The Sexual Liberals and the Attack on Feminism, edited by Dorchen Leidholdt and Janice G. Raymond, and the liberal anthologies, Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality, edited by Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson and Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality, edited by Carol Vance. The feminist sex debate has been framed (depending on the bias of the speaker) as a struggle between "radical" or "separatist" or "cultural" feminists (like Andrea Dworkin and Robin Morgan) who view sex between men and women (as well as its various representations) as inherently oppressive, and "liberal" or "pro-sex" feminists (like Carol Vance, Amber Hollibaugh, and Alice Echols). "Pro-sex" feminists attempt to differentiate between oppressive systems and actual sexual relations between real people and argue that radical feminists have suppressed women's pleasure. Although the debate has concerned many complex issues of sexuality, its most vigorously fought ground has been pornography.
the relationship between stories and the gender-specific solicitation of subjects into the heterosexual script?

This dissertation argues that recent feminist novels deliberately and strategically engage questions about the relationship between heterosexuality and the construction of subjectivity and that they do so in such a way as to contextualize such questions in terms of power relations. In order to analyze how the heterosexual script is internalized by individual subjects, how cultural representations of heterosexuality become self-representation, I turn to the novels of three feminist postmodern writers: Fay Weldon, Angela Carter, and Kathy Acker. Their texts represent a working through of the problems of subjectivity and signification as effects of power, mediated by the heterosexual script. Investigating the production of sexual desire as presumptively heterosexual, Weldon's, Carter's, and Acker's work focuses on how sexed subjects are produced in a system of hierarchical power relations among the white middle class in late twentieth-century culture. The novels locate the construction of heterosexual identity squarely in what Teresa de Lauretis calls "the micropolitical practices of daily life" (Technologies 25); by holding the microscope of fiction up to those practices, each writer makes visible the often obscured connection between power, semiotic and cultural apparatuses, and individual subjects' positioning in the sex and gender system.

The goal of this project is to examine how fiction reflects, critiques, and participates in a culture's construction of heterosexuality. As Michel Foucault suggests in his "genealogies," we are continually negotiating questions of meaning and the control of definitions of reality. In my readings of Weldon's, Carter's, and Acker's fictional texts, I argue that heterosexuality is constructed through repeated skirmishes between a performative script which demands compliance and self-conscious performances of that script which may subvert and subsequently alter future performances of the heterosexual script. The performative, in this study, as in
conventional use, designates both the category of an utterance that effects an action by being spoken and the particular instance of that category, the utterance itself. In its particular use in this project, *performative* is intended to convey the force with which normative sexual meanings, values, prohibitions, and idealizations, as well as the power relations which structure them, are circulated in, what I, metaphorically, term, "the heterosexual script." My claim is that normative and normalizing sexual scripts not only describe meanings and behavior, but effect that which they purport to merely describe; thus, such scripts may be considered instances of the performative, or, in fact, performatives themselves. This study requires a reconfiguration of the performative as it is theorized in speech-act theory, which both extends its scope and limits its force in ways which introduce the possibility of agency, of a *performance* of sexuality which renegotiates its terms.

**Sexuality Has a History**

Sexuality is merely a cipher, an empty signifier until it is given meaning by social discourses and practices. My point of departure is that heterosexuality is a political construction, one which has a history, a specificity of time and place, and a legitimizing ideology; I attempt, in this study, an analysis of how it is produced and to what ends. The project seeks to challenge two common and frequently reiterated understandings of sexuality: one, that sexuality is merely a matter of biology—genes or brain structures or hormones—and two, that it is merely a lifestyle choice. I do not claim nor do I seek an etiology for homosexuality or heterosexuality. An assumption

---

8 I agree with Eve Sedgwick's contention that "there is no unthreatened, unthreatening conceptual home for a concept of gay origins" (*Epistemology of the Closet* 43). In this study, therefore, I do not posit an origin, either biological or social, for heterosexuality, homosexuality, or bisexuality, arguing, rather, that meaning, value, and style—those characteristics which give sexuality its flavor—are culturally constructed.
that sexuality is the effect of an indeterminate complex of anatomical, social, and psychic structures guides this study, but my overriding preoccupation is with the meanings and values assigned to sexuality by culture and with the way it operates as an effect of power.

In this I follow Thomas Laqueur, whose comprehensive history of sexuality, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, insists that the ways in which bodies and sexual difference have been and are imagined has less to do with what is known about biology than what is demanded by culture. The body can mean almost anything and has been and continues to be used to further social agendas. The imperatives of ideology dictate how data is interpreted, which findings are emphasized and which rejected, which differences count and how they are valued. In the twentieth century heterosexuality has been accorded a privileged status, as it has been defined explicitly against homosexuality and implicitly against deviance, the abject, the unintelligible. These three constructions of non-normative sexuality—deviance, the abject, and the unintelligible—are subject to analysis in the chapters which follow.

Although the feelings of love and lust for an other-sexed person—and the acts which those feelings lead to—have been around since Adam and Eve (a cliché I employ self-consciously, because its meaning depends on our recognition of the Judeo-Christian *story* of original heterosexuality), the term "heterosexuality" itself was invented in the late nineteenth century. Not the oppositional "normal" case to a

---

9 By way of example Laquer offers Freud's invention of the vaginal orgasm, an idea that clearly flew in the face of centuries of physiological knowledge. The shift of primary erogenous zone from the clitoris to the vagina in mature women in Freud's account must be understood to represent the cultural ideal of fully socialized heterosexual procreative sex. "The tale of the clitoris is a parable of culture, of how the body is forged into a shape valuable to civilization despite, not because of, itself" (236).
homosexual "deviance," as it is considered today, heterosexuality was, in its first use, considered a deviance. As Jonathan Ned Katz puts it: the "first exercise in heterosexual definition described an unequivocal pervert" (21). From its first American appearance in an article in a medical journal in 1892 by Dr. James B. Kiernan until into the 1920s, "heterosexuality" signified a perversion of "psychical hermaphroditism," a condition in which an individual felt both so-called male attraction to women and so-called female attraction to men. The "hetero" thus referred to the person's desire for two different sexes, not for the "opposite sex" (Katz 19-20). Heterosexuals were guilty, too, of engaging in modes of sexual pleasure which were not linked to reproduction (20). In fact, in Kiernan's article, which employed both the new terms "heterosexual" and "homosexual" as pathological, the point of transgression was from an increasingly contested, but still insistently defended, procreative ideal of sexuality. In 1893, in what would be a far more influential study, Richard von Krafft-Ebing (in a translation by C. G. Chaddock of his Psychopathia Sexualis) first used the term "hetero-sexual" to mean normal sex in contrast to the pathology of the "homo-sexual" (both hyphenates), thus initiating a discursive history for the terms parallel to, and ultimately more lasting than, Kiernan's. In Krafft-Ebing's work, hetero-sexuality is linked implicitly with procreative sex, and homo-sexuality with non-procreative, thus pathological, sex, constructing a sexual binary which continues to exercise its power of surveillance and regulation a hundred years later. Krafft-Ebing's use of the terms "hetero-" and "homo- sexual" helped establish gender and erotic desire as the

---

10 Jonathan Ned Katz' recent excellent historical account, The Invention of Heterosexuality, which traces the invention of "heterosexuality" as an instance of ideology masquerading as nature, fills in the fascinating details of Michel Foucault's earlier The History of Sexuality, which provides a broadly political account of the way in which "sex is put into discourse" (11).
fundamental features of a conceptual ordering of sexuality which would last into the present (Katz 21-28).

Eve Sedgwick denaturalizes the binary opposition, homosexuality and heterosexuality, established by Krafft-Ebing, but, today seen as natural and inevitable, arguing that out of the myriad possible axes of differentiation,

of the very many dimensions along which the genital activity of one person can be differentiated from that of another . . . , precisely one, the gender of object choice, emerged from the turn of the century, and has remained, the dimension denoted by the now ubiquitous category of "sexual orientation." (Epistemology of the Closet 8)

Why not, Sedgwick asks, distinguish people along the lines of the masturbator or the hysterical or the pedophile, all part of the "rich stew" of sexuality in the late nineteenth century (8-9)? Instead there occurred a "world-mapping" by which every person, just as he or she was assigned to a male or female gender, was necessarily assigned also to a homo- or a hetero-sexuality, "a binarized identity that was full of implications" (2). This "world-mapping" of sexuality into gay and straight persons, undertaken for the first time in the late nineteenth century and vigorously pursued today, has, nevertheless, been constructed as timeless and transhistorical.

Ian Hacking, making a case for what he terms "dynamic nominalism," argues not that there is a kind of person who comes to be recognized as such by different discourses, but rather that such a kind of person actually comes into being at the same time as (and I might add as a result of) the kind itself being invented. This "making up people," as Hacking describes it, actually changes the possibilities for personhood. Thus, even though our possibilities may be inexhaustible, they are, at any given time, limited by the ideas of personhood circulating at that time. According to this theory of dynamic nominalism, therefore, it was not possible to be a heterosexual kind of person
before the nineteenth century, for, as Hacking claims, "that person was not there to choose" (79). 11

John Boswell, like Hacking a theorist of homosexuality, argues that, although terms like "heterosexuality" and "homosexuality" are constantly reified in contexts from the popular press to theoretical discourse, they are defensible only as shorthand for entire congeries of ideas, behaviors, and persons. Even when used in a strictly limited historical context, i.e., the American present, an abstract category like "homosexuality" is merely a useful intellectual strategy which stands for a group of signifieds. This understanding of the terms "heterosexuality" and "homosexuality" as useful intellectual strategies, as a kind of shorthand, informs my work, although I would argue that the reification of the terms in popular and theoretical discourses undercuts such an understanding by producing the signifying effects which they purport to describe. The heterosexual script, in other words, produces and works to maintain rigid boundaries between the categories, "homosexual" and "heterosexual." However, despite tendencies to reification, the categories are constantly being pushed against, as this project demonstrates, and the labels soon fit less well, suggesting that, although we are, to some extent, created by our naming, we may, perhaps, be re-created by our re-naming. Weldon's, Carter's, and Acker's texts participate in this process of re-naming, a process which is, of course, limited by available cultural concepts. "An alteration of language, rather than of material, usually changes material conditions," the epigraph which introduces this dissertation claims (from Acker's Don Quixote). This

11 Although I agree with Hacking's analysis of the possibilities of personhood, I quarrel with his use of the word "choose." Although some may claim that they have consciously chosen to be gay or straight, I argue in this dissertation that even that "choice" has, to some degree, itself been scripted. Not an attribute that a subject freely chooses, sexuality is, rather, that which produces the subject itself. Within a heterosexual system that shapes sexuality, however, there is, of course, some choice.
study is, at least in part, about the terms of that relation between language—categories, names, and scripts—and material sexuality.

Heterosexuality and homosexuality, not, necessary, immutable identity categories, are, on the contrary, as I have argued, encoded in "sexual scripts" which individuals receive as the raw material of their identity formation. The category of heterosexuality is, fundamentally then, a regulatory ideal which, in the interests of its own self-replication, operates through what I have termed the "heterosexual script." This coercive script, simultaneously "written" by various institutions, practices, technologies, and discourses, has as its goal the preservation of current systems of power. The paradox of conventional heterosexuality is that it depends on the construction of woman as lack to man's presence, as object to his subject—and yet, the performance of the heterosexual script demands woman's consent, even her enthusiastic participation. How is this consent won? this project asks. And how might women seize control of the scripts by which they are simultaneously conscripted into femininity and heterosexuality?

Taken together, two hierarchized sets of binaries—male/female and heterosexual/ homosexual—define and limit gender and sexuality today in most of Western culture. Sexual scripts and gender scripts are written by the same regulatory powers; in practice this means that gender scripts include being scripted into the sexual roles required by reproductive sexuality and that these roles, which are subject to intense surveillance and regulation at virtually every site of power, set limits on the kind of sexual performances which we can even imagine. If, as Judith Butler argues, only certain ideas are "culturally intelligible," an identity in which gender does not follow

12 "Sexual scripts," a metaphor for conceptualizing behavior as socially produced, is a term coined by social scientists, William Simon and John H. Gagnon ("Sexual Scripts" 53).
from physiological sex and in which desire does not follow from either sex or gender is, without a real reach of imagination, dismissed either as a logical impossibility or as a gender failure (Gender Trouble 17). Cultural intelligibility, our received history of representations, in other words, limits what we can even think about.

What we can think about sexuality at this moment in history is constrained by the formative influence of Sigmund Freud on twentieth-century constructions of sex and gender. For Freud “femininity” is the “riddle,” the “problem,” the “enigma,” and he is the objective masculine cryptanalyst who will decode the feminine. These are the terms in which Freud describes “woman” in his famous lecture on “Femininity” in which he sets out many of the basic principles of his theory of sexuality: the Oedipus Complex, penis-envy based on “the boy’s far superior equipment,” the “phantasy” of the daughter’s seduction by the father, and “the truly feminine vagina” (Standard Edition, vol. 22, p. 129, 125-27, 120, 118). 13 Although he struggles with the relationship between physiology and social constructedness, first offering one explanation of gender, then another, Freud’s attempt to describe “not what woman is” but “how she comes into being” was a radical recognition of the constructedness of woman (a constructedness in which Freud himself did not hesitate to participate) (SE 22, 116). His insightful work on gender formation paved the way for Simone de Beauvoir to claim that “one is not born a woman,” as well as for the feminist critique of the masculine constitution of woman, including the critique of Freud himself. Repeatedly laying claim to scientific objectivity, Freud fails to recognize his own

13 All references to Freud will be to the Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, which will henceforth be cited as SE. The citations which follow in this chapter are to Freud’s lecture on “Femininity,” in volume 22.
cultural and personal biases. Often tautological, frequently based on "an unhesitating certainty" or on the claim that "we are entitled to keep our view," his language betrays his complicity in the sex/gender system he is ostensibly merely observing (SE 22, 113, 118).

Freud's Oedipus Complex, with its component theory of the castration complex, is chief among the explanatory narratives of sexuality in twentieth-century Western culture. This family psychodrama, according to which subjects enter a system of sex and gender which privileges masculinity and reproductive sexuality, has assumed a position uniquely influential in both popular and psychoanalytic constructions of sexuality. According to the Oedipus narrative, which is subject to greater scrutiny in my reading of the fictional texts, there are only three possible outcomes of the girl's discovery that she is really a castrated male: neurosis, a masculinity complex, or "normal femininity" (SE 22, 126). Normal or mature femininity demands of the woman an acceptance of her castration, a shift from the clitoris to the vagina as the "leading erotogenic zone," a shift of her "love-object" from mother to father, and an eventual sublimation of her penis-envy into a desire for a baby (SE 22, 118, 119, 128). It is within and against Freud's valuation of heterosexual reproductive sexuality as "normal," and his consequent denigration of alternative sexualities as "pathological," that most theorists of sexuality have operated in this century; even when not explicitly present, his theories of sex and gender have provided the background noise to most discussions of sex in the last hundred years. The Oedipus Complex, itself, is paradigmatic of the performative heterosexual script which has produced subjects within a fixed hierarchical system of value and meaning.

14 Freud's theorizing of sexuality has frequently been critiqued by feminists as flawed by an un-self-conscious masculinist bias. See, for example, Luce Irigaray's Speculum of the Other Woman and Sarah Kofman's The Enigma of Woman.
Jacques Lacan's reformulation of the Oedipus Complex as the founding moment of subjectivity, language, and desire elaborates upon Freud's system of asymmetrical gender relations. Sexuality, hetero- and homo- (and all the other possibilities which are virtually unthinkable because outside the culturally established binary), is given shape, value, intelligibility, limits, a lived-outness within what has come to be called, after Lacan, the Law of the Father.¹⁵ As a specialized term of psychoanalysis, "the Law of the Father," which originates in the incest taboo and the threat of castration, initiates and structures desire, language, and subjectivity in a system that privileges masculinity. The Law of the Father is rooted in the Oedipal moment, but with broad implications for psychological and social organization.

Feminist theory has engaged with the Law of the Father, both as a psychoanalytical concept and as a broader, less specialized, derived term which suggests a system of masculine privilege and power under patriarchy. Using it for its explanatory value, while contesting its authority, feminist theory has pointed to the function of the Law of the Father as deceptively prescriptive. Organizing fictions which purport merely to describe sexual relations, the Oedipus Complex and the Law of the Father are seen in this study, through the novels which interrogate them, to be crucial mechanisms by which sexuality is actually produced and regulated. Put another way, heterosexuality is an effect of the systems of power implicit in both psychoanalytical narratives. This study proposes a model of heterosexuality which includes but goes beyond the Oedipus Complex, and that assumes, but challenges the Law of the Father. Useful as explanatory tools, these theoretical models, nevertheless, as developed by Freud and

¹⁵ Chapter three includes a summary and critique of some of the most important elements of Lacanian psychoanalysis.
Lacan, leave unexamined crucial questions of authority, power, and gender, as well as their own complicity in the narratives which they offer as objective accounts of reality.

Weldon, Carter, and Acker, each distinctly feminist in the oppositional stance she takes in relation to the performative force of dominant scripts such as the Oedipus Complex and the Law of the Father, attempt to imagine a new performance of gender and sexuality which would have the potential to destabilize the old performatives. Elizabeth Meese claims that such a feminist oppositional stance seeks to subvert the system of patriarchal control through "a language of defiance" and through "sexual defiance" (17 and 117). The three writers I discuss are clearly engaged in feminist acts of defiance, in both their use of language and their construction of sexuality. In a 1990 Dia symposium on "critical fictions," shortly before her death, Angela Carter presented a paper in which she attributed the success of patriarchal power to its social fictions and urged that women confront those fictions as fictions (Critical Fictions 143-45). At the same conference, bell hooks argued that women's critical fictions (which challenge conventional ways of knowing) work to connect art with "lived practices of struggle" and provide alternative readings of history and of present reality told from the standpoint of those who have been excluded from conventional representations (59). Such alternative readings require of the reader a paradigm shift, hooks claimed (57). I argue that Weldon, Carter, and Acker undermine the heterosexual script by challenging their readers to a paradigm shift in which the conventional terms of sexual identities, relations, and practices, seen from an unconventional perspective, are revealed as normalizing mechanisms which prop up a system of domination and inequality.

Stories produce and structure our "reality," produce even the subject who perceives "reality." Thus, this investigation does not take for granted the meaning of sexuality, but rather asks throughout what meanings have been assigned by the dominant power regime to sex and sexuality, and how such meanings have been
deployed for political purposes. As Foucault contends, knowledge is never
disinterested, but is always mediated by desire. Whose power? and whose desire? are
the questions which motivate this project. Whose interests are served by the stories we
tell? Because power and desire are always disguised by ideology as morality or
normalcy or as "the nature of things," it is difficult to contest interested knowledges put
forward as truth claims. Each of us is born, not in truth, but in a web of power
relations and competing knowledges. We are produced as desiring subjects by an
ongoing set of interested scripts. Without these scripts we can be intelligible neither to
ourselves nor to others. Within these scripts, however, no ahistorical or transcendental
or innocent standpoint exists from which we may view and critique "our" scripts.
There is no outside, no other place, no unmediated reality against which we can
measure the "reality" which the script generates.

In terms of this study, if sexuality is part of what constitutes the subject, in
other words, is a script which enables or produces the subject, not something a prior
subject has or chooses, how can we theorize agency? How can we even "see" the
script? Myra Jehlen, in a fascinating, but ultimately unsuccessful attempt to find a
standpoint from which one might launch a feminist critique of Western thought, argues
in "Archimedes and the Paradox of Feminist Criticism," that women must attempt to
find "a feminist terrestrial fulcrum," a place at once on and off the world (577). As
Archimedes, who tried to lift the earth with his lever, needed someplace else on which
to locate himself and his fulcrum, so, it would seem, do feminists. Questioning the
assumed order of the universe, proposing, as Myra Jehlen puts it, "to remove the
ground from under their own feet," feminists need some "other" place on which to
stand (576). This is, in some ways, the most fundamental—and impossible—question
of feminism, as well as of all postmodern theories: how do we manage to step outside
of that which we are critiquing in order to see and analyze it? Archimedes, of course,
never managed to find a standpoint off this world and, neither, I'm afraid, will we. I wish to acknowledge, at the outset, my dependence on and situatedness within the scripts which I am critiquing. I am embedded in and an interested party to not only the heterosexual script, but also the theories of subjectivity and signification which this project both uses and critiques. The entire project has, nonetheless, been conceived as a partial response to this problem of standpoint, that is to say to the how and the where of agency. The chapters which follow, thus, focus on two questions: How does the heterosexual script work to produce subjects? And, if, as the project asserts, subjects are subject to an oppressive heterosexual script, from where do they summon the resources to resist the script?

Feminist Theory and Queer Theory

Two theoretical perspectives both enable and demand this project: the feminist critique of gender and the queer critique of homosexuality present an opening and a model for an analysis of the constructedness of heterosexuality. Drawing heavily on a Foucauldian analysis of power and of the discursive constitution of subject positions, both feminist theory and queer theory suggest strategies by which one might theorize heterosexuality as constructed and contingent. Heterosexuality represents a largely untheorized ordering of sexuality within which most men and women live out their lives. The question occurs: why, then, in the presence of a recent body of sophisticated work theorizing gender and theorizing homosexuality, has there been so little attention to theorizing heterosexuality?¹⁶ I would speculate that, as "white" has

¹⁶ As an example of the disparity between numbers of analyses of heterosexuality and of homosexuality I would point to the MLA Bibliography which, from 1981 to 1995, lists 24 entries under the search word "heterosexuality" and 705 under the search word "homosexuality." A parallel search in the popular press (New York Times, Los Angeles Times, Chicago Tribune, Time, Newsweek, and the Christian Science Monitor) during the same period yields an even greater discrepancy. As further
been invisible as a race, "heterosexuality," widely assumed as the norm and
obsessively represented as coextensive with "normal" sex, has nevertheless been
invisible as a sexuality. Despite its invisibility, however, heterosexuality is
omnipresent. It is, in fact, invisible because it is assumed and is, as such, always
being dealt with. This dissertation is an attempt to subject an always-present, if
always-invisible, heterosexuality to self-conscious analysis.

Heterosexual/reproductive/male-female sex has been so thoroughly naturalized
as to seem inevitable, given, presumed. As long ago as 1980, however, in the essay in
which she coined the term "compulsory heterosexuality," Adrienne Rich suggested that
"heterosexuality, like motherhood, needs to be recognized and studied as a political
institution" (637). As a glance at any university press catalogue will demonstrate, the
representation of motherhood has since been the subject of numerous studies;
heterosexuality remains largely untheorized, however. More recently Elizabeth Weed,
citing the "apparent difficulty" that mainstream feminism has with heterosexuality,
argues that the feminist focus on lesbianism, pornography, and motherhood has acted
as a "displacement" from the topic of heterosexuality (xxiii). Diana Fuss, too, claims
that an analysis of heterosexuality, absent within feminism, is crucial and hopes that a
constructionist view of homosexuality will lead to studies of all sexualities (108). This
dissertation is an attempt to address such a theoretical gap. My intention is to generate
critical discussion of heterosexuality as it has been fabricated in late twentieth-century
Western culture as an identity, as a set of beliefs and practices, and as a mechanism of

evidence of the neglect of heterosexuality within scholarly research I offer the 1995
Routledge catalogue. Routledge, perhaps the most important publisher of feminist
theory, has sixteen listings under the category "Sexuality" in their current catalogue:
two deal with gender, one with the influence of geography on sexuality, one with the
Marquis de Sade, eleven with homosexuality, one with the "straight male," and none
with the heterosexual woman. Although the usefulness of this kind of statistic can be
disputed, the imbalance in numbers suggests the invisibility of heterosexuality
considered as such.
power. The focus, as well as the means, of the project's interrogation of heterosexuality is fiction as a site where heterosexuality is both produced and contested.

Before turning to the fiction, however, I will briefly outline the two theoretical histories which have converged to enable this study: feminist theory and gay and lesbian theory, or, at it is more commonly known today, queer theory.\textsuperscript{17} To understand the premises and assumptions of this project and to understand its specific contribution it is necessary to look at the scholarship which contextualizes it and the arguments which frame it. Almost two decades of gay and lesbian theory has, in part, been structured as a debate about homosexuality as "essential," that is innate, or as socially "constructed," with recent analyses favoring constructionism.\textsuperscript{18} A similar debate about gender has motivated feminist theory and, as in queer theory, the question has been "decided" on the side of gender as socially constructed. Arguably, the most important contribution of feminist theory has been to introduce gender into various discourses as a category of analysis, and to question its absence or its unexamined asymmetrical structure in conventional masculine narratives of culture and subjectivity. Feminism has challenged understandings of knowledge and of power and of our social life by making visible and problematizing gender relations as a hierarchized system of power. "Gender" has been refigured as a contingent and historically specific set of

\textsuperscript{17} The term "queer" has both a more theoretical and politically charged valence than "gay and lesbian," and, as de Lauretis argues, in her introduction to the "Queer Theory" issue of \textit{differences}, presents a common political alliance of gay men and lesbians (v). Some political activists have suggested that "queer" may even be inclusive of supportive straight allies.

\textsuperscript{18} There is a division between the strategies of queer theory and queer activism: while most theorizing of gay and lesbian identity has favored constructionism, most political action has favored essentialism and innateness as a more persuasive claim to equal rights.
social relations, a concept which has achieved currency in the last several decades as it has been constructed by feminists to meet current theoretical and political needs.

I would like to frame my discussion of feminist theory as it has produced my particular project with two texts, Gayle Rubin's 1975 "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex" and Judith Butler's 1990 Gender Trouble.\textsuperscript{19} I choose these two texts because they represent an evolution of feminist thinking about that which Rubin terms the "sex/gender system." Rubin locates the origin of gender systems in the transformation of natural biological sex into gender, a distinction of terms that informed most of feminist theory until Judith Butler's challenge which argues that there is no "before the law," no pre-discursive moment when sex is "natural," unconstructed, unmediated by language. Gender is the "very apparatus of production by which the sexes themselves are established," Butler claims (7). Sex is, in fact, gender all along. Whereas Rubin accepts the opposition of nature/culture and sex/gender and assumes a "natural sex" that is radically unconstructed, Butler argues that we have no access to a body that is not always already interpreted, assigned meaning by a culture. A danger in the kind of brief history which I attempt here is that it assumes a teleological shape, with the most recent theory representing the pinnacle, the inevitable and inevitably sophisticated "correction" of the older, primitive theory. Butler's indubitably brilliant and influential analyses in her recent work, however, does not diminish the power and influence of Rubin's own thinking.\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{19} Paving the way for the texts which are discussed here are the second-wave feminists such as Betty Friedan, Ti-Grace Atkinson, Shulamith Firestone, and Kate Millet whose radical critiques of femininity and sexuality established women as a class of people oppressed on the basis of their "sex."

\textsuperscript{20} Rubin's "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," published in 1984 to expand her argument, describes the "modern sexual system" as a system of sexual stratification, in which sexual populations are "stratified by the operation of an ideological and social hierarchy" (285). This concept is crucial to an understanding of heterosexuality, because it is clear that, within this hierarchy,
"The Traffic in Women," written by Rubin as a response to Claude Lévi-Strauss' theory of the kinship system and the origin of culture, sets out to construct a "theory of women's oppression," one that might account for, in Rubin's famous phrase, "the oppression of women—in its endless variety and monotonous similarity" (201, 160).21 Rubin argues that Lacanian psychoanalysis and Lévi-Strauss' theory of kinship systems, useful conceptual tools for understanding the "domestication of women," are complementary descriptions of the formation of the sex/gender system: "the precision of the fit between [them] is striking" (198). The Oedipal complex is the psychic mechanism which both inscribes and replicates the social mechanisms of kinship systems. Rubin makes quite explicit women's position within Lévi-Strauss' analysis of the kinship system: women are the gifts, men are the exchange partners. The ultimate locus of women's oppression is the "traffic in women": the fact that men have rights over women, but women don't have those same rights over men or over themselves. Rubin's most devastating critique of Lévi-Strauss is of his failure to ask the next question: why? The fact that he "describes" the exchange of women as the originary moment of culture without ever examining the underlying assumption of gender hierarchy is the basis of her most urgent question: "Why is he not, at this point, denouncing what kinship systems do to women, instead of presenting one of the greatest rip-offs of all time as the root of romance" (201). Rubin is useful in this project, as in many prior feminist studies, as a model for using masculine theoretical

---

21 Lévi-Strauss, using Saussurian linguistics as a model, argues that the incest taboo with its concomitant exchange of women has an essentially positive function, to establish ties between men through which they raise themselves from a biological to a social organization (493). The function of the exchange of women and of language, which the exchange initiates, is communication and male bonding, making possible the move from nature to culture.
tools, but asking the next question: Why does the foundational assumption of gender hierarchy go unheorized, undenounced? This is the question which my project poses to all the theories of subjectivity and signification which provide tools for my analysis.

My understanding of gender has also been shaped by Teresa de Lauretis' two influential texts, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema and Technologies of Gender*, both published between Rubin's essay and Butler's book. In *Alice Doesn't* de Lauretis reminds readers that

language and metaphors ... need not be thought of as belonging to anyone ... . One must be willing "to begin an argument," and so formulate questions that will redefine the context, displace the terms of the metaphors, and make up new ones. (3)

This refusal to accept that language and the "argument" belong to someone else is the basis of de Lauretis' work, of my own, and of Weldon's, Carter's, and Acker's, whose texts appropriate conventional language and metaphors, begin arguments with them, and formulate new questions which recontextualize received language, metaphors, and scripts. De Lauretis' fundamental difference from Rubin is that, for her, despite the rigid opposition of two biological sexes, the meaning assigned to the sex/gender system varies according to historical (ideological) conditions. Not the transhistorical universal system of oppression that Rubin describes, women's oppression, according to de Lauretis, is a political construction, constituted in specific discourses and cultural representations. She claims, in *Technologies*, that "gender, ... both as representation and as self-representation, is the product of various social technologies, such as cinema, as well as institutional discourses, epistemologies, and critical practices" (ix). Her understanding of the constant slippage between Woman and women as they experience their lives opens the possibility that the dominant culture's representation of Woman may be rejected as an ideological misrepresentation by the women whom it has failed to fully contain. This insight informs my reading of
the fictional texts as three women's refusal to be contained within the conventional heterosexual script.

"In what senses, then, is gender an act?" Judith Butler asks in Gender Trouble (146). Butler raises this question as a conclusion to a discussion of drag as an imitation of gender, an imitation that implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself, as well as its contingency (137-140). Offering a new metaphor for the successful construction of gender, "the sedimentation of gender norms," Butler cites repetition, the practices of repetitive signifying, as that which produces identity (73). She asks:

Consider that a sedimentation of gender norms produces the peculiar phenomenon of a "natural sex" or a "real woman" or any number of prevalent and compelling social fictions, and that this is a sedimentation that over time has produced a set of corporeal styles which, in reified form, appear as the natural configuration of bodies into sexes existing in a binary relation to one another. If these styles are enacted, and if they produce the coherent gendered subjects who pose as their originators, what kind of performance might reveal this ostensible "cause" to be an "effect"? (140)

This, then, is the question that fuels Butler's exploration of gender, identity and the possibilities of subversion. Feminism's task is to intervene in the production of a "natural" sex and gender. Arguing persuasively that, if subversion is to take place at all, it is possible only within the terms of the law itself, by somehow turning the law against itself, she urges participation in strategies of subversive repetition in an effort to undermine the "sedimentation of gender norms." Butler makes a compelling case for identity as a practice, and specifically as a signifying practice, thus, establishing grounds for an intervention into the signifying practices which constitute gender as systemic oppression—and, by extension, for an intervention into the signifying practices which "write" the oppressive heterosexual script.22

---

22 The feminist and the postmodernist critiques of identity have both begun by contesting the terms of the unified, originary liberal-humanist subject and by positing the discursive constitution of subject positions. Feminist theory has gone further and argued that subjects are positioned within culture in gender-specific configurations. For further analysis of the problem of identity and of the essentialist-constructionist
A key insight of feminist theory has been its insistence that we are implicated in the master narratives which we are critiquing. Although this is a view which feminists share with most postmodern theorists, it has been driven home to feminists in their own debates about privilege and marginality among white feminists and women of color, and upper- and middle-class women and working-class women. The often widely divergent assumptions and agendas of the various segments of the women's movement has been a constant reminder that we must examine our own situatedness and our own biases in the theories which we both critique and construct. Luce Irigaray, in "The Blind Spot of an Old Dream of Symmetry," identifies the "blind spot" as a failure on the part of Freud and other "great thinkers" to recognize their embeddedness in ideology (Speculum of the Other Woman 11-129). The great layers-down-of-law and the spinners of the Western master narratives, as part of their claim to truth, believed themselves unimplicated in their own stories. Working primarily within psychoanalysis, but, nevertheless, taking on the major masculine theorists in varied discourses, Irigaray argues that the entire Western economy of representation is regulated and determined by male subjects without the possibility of criticism or questioning by female subjects. In Speculum of the Other Woman and This Sex Which Is Not One, she juxtaposes the texts of Plato, Freud, Marx, Lévi-Strauss, and Lacan with her own, sometimes with attribution, sometimes without, thus, undertaking such a criticism and questioning. Written in the aftermath of the storming of the

debate within feminism, see Chris Weedon's Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory, Diana Fuss' Essentially Speaking, and Elsbeth Probyn's Sexing the Self. Donna Haraway's visionary "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s" theorizes the construction of identity in a presentation of the cyborg as "a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self" (205). Haraway argues for rejecting universal, totalizing theories and working, rather, to build effective "affinities," to speak with a "powerful infidel heteroglossia," and to be satisfied with a "permanent partiality" in our feminist enterprises (223, 215).
barricades of May, 1968, Irigaray's texts storm the barricades of Western
psychoanalysis and philosophy in an impertinent performance that refuses to bend the
knee to the masters. Like Kathy Acker in her fictions, Irigaray involves her reader in a
complicitous reading of sacred masculine texts by means of her brilliant mimicry,
irony, and, even, outrageous asides, delivered in a stage whisper, to the reader: "(Don't
laugh too quickly)" (*Speculum* 32). Also like Acker, Irigaray refuses to play the
conventional game of serious masculine discourse, although she plays her own game
quite seriously.\(^{23}\)

I have briefly charted two decades of feminist theory as a history of the analysis
of and the challenge to "femininity" as it has been constituted, across discourses,
technologies, and repetitive practices, as "less than." The development of queer theory,
which comes out of an intersection of feminist and postmodern theories of subjectivity
and a gay political movement, is a history of the analysis of and the resistance to
"homosexuality" constructed as "deviance." Homosexuality, which has been produced
as the necessary outside to a coercive heterosexuality, is the sexuality which has been
theorized as the problem, the sexuality in need of explanation, interpretation, cure. In
religious, medical, and legal discourses, homosexuality has been represented as a vice
indulged in by decadent individuals, a perversion freely chosen, a genetic aberration, a
glandular or endocrine disease, a brain abnormality, an acquired psychological
disorder, a crime against the family—each, in its own way, a homophobic narrative of
difference. It is important to note that the modern history of homosexuality is a history
of homophobia and persecution, and that it is in this context that queer theory has
evolved.

\(^{23}\) Both Irigaray and Acker refuse to comply with the conventions of their discourses
(psychoanalysis, philosophy, fiction); e.g., both defy legal and scholarly conventions
of citation and attribution, appropriating, at will, others' texts.
The seminal work of Foucault on the history of the regulation and surveillance of sexuality as a peculiarly modern obsession founds most of queer theory, and his analysis of the strategies of power in controlling sexuality in the interest of the status quo is a premise of this dissertation. In his "genealogy" of sexuality, Foucault claims that the model of same-sex desire shifted at the end of the nineteenth century from one of acts to one of identity, from the act of sodomy to the homosexual person. This concept of homosexuality as a historically produced identity, as well as desires and practices, is an assumption of most of queer theory today, and provides a model for theorizing heterosexuality as well. Despite the importance of Foucault's work, however, his analysis is strangely blind to gender as another constitutive identity category, one which positions subjects differentially vis-à-vis power and sexuality.

I would like to look briefly at a sampling of queer theory which has influenced this project, from Adrienne Rich's 1980 "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" to Judith Butler's and Teresa de Lauretis' recent studies of lesbian desire.24 These texts and others represent an exhilarating decade in which gay and lesbian identities were increasingly imagined, in theory and in the streets, as resistant to the constructions of a dominant homophobic culture. It is almost impossible to overestimate the influence of Adrienne Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality" in early lesbian studies. Rich argues that social and sexual life for women has been

24 Queer Theory is well-represented in publishing in the last few years. In addition to the texts mentioned above, see the monumental 1993 The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader, an ambitious and successful effort to gather together the most important texts in the young history of gay and lesbian studies. See also the anthologies Lesbian Texts and Contexts, edited by Karla Jay and Joanne Glasgow; Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories, edited by Diana Fuss; and Negotiating Lesbian and Gay Subjects, edited by Monica Dorenkamp and Richard Henke. See, too, monographs theorizing lesbian and gay sexuality by Jeffrey Weeks (Sex, Politics and Society and Against Nature), Annamarie Jagose (Lesbian Utopics), Kevin Kopelson (Love's Litany: The Writing of Modern Homoerotics), and Tamsin Wilton (Immortal Invisible: Lesbians and the Moving Image), among others.
institutionalized as heterosexual. She rejects the cultural assumption that mature sexuality for women is heterosexual and points to the overwhelming, and often violent, forces which compel women into male-female reproductive sexuality. From rape and incest to economic inequality to silence about lesbian existence, social forces deny women sexual choices. As an alternative to the conventional model of women as "naturally" heterosexual, Rich proposes a "lesbian continuum" which includes both straight and gay women, representing an entire range of women's affectional bonding. Despite her importance to the history of queer theory, however, Rich has been critiqued by some lesbian theorists for denying the specificity of lesbian sex in her grouping of all women-identified women. Moreover, I would add that, in challenging heterosexuality as "the presumed sexual preference of women," Rich merely reverses the presumptions, naturalizing woman as object choice and theorizing only heterosexuality, not homosexuality, as constructed. Nevertheless, Rich's work to make visible the social coerciveness of heterosexuality as a sexuality, rather than as the only mature and natural sexuality is critical to my project.

In response to Rich's and Foucault's models of homosexuality as identity, Ed Cohen proclaims dramatically, "fuck identity." Or perhaps more accurately, let's not make an 'identity' out of whom we fuck" ("Are We (Not) What we Are Becoming?" 174, 172). Let us, rather, he says, think of "processes" and "becomings," of "gay" and "lesbian" as dynamic categories rather than fixed identities. In the division among gays and lesbians in their self-definition between essentialism and constructionism, Cohen represents queer theorists who resist categorization, even self-categorization. "Who are 'We'"? Cohen asks ("Who Are 'We'?" 71), and calls for resistance to
academic and political pressure to suppress differences in favor of group identity. My project, taking a cue from Cohen's, presupposes the differences among straight women and insists that heterosexual women are, as individuals, positioned variously in culture, with varying degrees of privilege and marginalization. Nevertheless, as a group, heterosexual women are devalued merely by virtue of their gender, and are scripted into deprivileged roles within a privileged heterosexuality.

Mary McIntosh proposes substituting the concept of homosexual "role" for that of homosexuality as a condition which people either have or do not have, a concept which she claims is the prevailing model. Those who "have" this condition are clearly labeled as "deviant," a labeling which serves as a mechanism of social control in two ways: one, it provides a clear-cut and recognizable threshold between those who have the condition and those who do not, so that people do not easily drift into deviant behavior. Two, the social labeling of persons as deviant serves to segregate the deviants from others, containing what the culture deems unacceptable within a narrow group (27). McIntosh argues that we need to think of homosexuality as a social role which refers not only to a cultural conception or set of ideas, but to an entire "complex of institutional arrangements," including heterosexual marriage, gossip, ridicule, psychiatric diagnosis, and criminal prosecution (36). It is the relationship between this socially constructed role and individual behavior that must be studied she argues. This is precisely what I attempt to do for heterosexuality.

Whereas most of queer theory has focused on the cultural production of homosexuality and the homophobia that has constructed it as deviant, both Judith Butler's and Teresa de Lauretis' most recent studies in queer theory have been

---

25 The gap between Rich's model of sexuality and Cohen's represents the impasse between identity politics and postmodern theories of subjectivity which has had to be negotiated in both feminist and queer theory.
psychoanalytical investigations into the production of lesbian identity and lesbian desire. De Lauretis, in *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire*, contends that psychoanalysis, despite its history of defining homosexuality as illness, is useful for theorizing lesbian sexuality. Rearticulating Freud's concept of perversion, she shifts its meaning from pathology to "nonheterosexuality." Within this reframing, female homosexuality is seen as a return to the mother which is "an instinctual investment in the female body itself, whose loss or lack the fetish serves to disavow" (xix). Acknowledging that some women have "always" been lesbians and that others, like herself, have "become" one, de Lauretis argues that sexual identity is neither innate or "simply acquired," but is both manifested and overdetermined by cultural practices (xix). De Lauretis' psychoanalytic theory of lesbian sexuality, avowedly non-clinical, rereads post-Oedipal female sexuality in a new way, removing it from a realm of judgment and stigma (257, 277). Her eccentric readings of Freud and Lacan open up new possibilities for feminist theorizing of heterosexuality, as well as homosexuality.

*Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, Judith Butler's recent clarification and elaboration of the issues raised in *Gender Trouble*, explores the meaning of a citational politics which might rework abjection into political agency, a theory which is crucial for my own theory of women's position within heterosexuality. Her analysis of the "lesbian phallus," of phantasmatic identification, and, most important, of reiteration and subjectivity in the context of homosexual identity, provide tools for my analysis of the presumptive heterosexual script. Her theorizing of the process by which the term "queer" has been resignified by the gay movement, through a practice of iteration, as empowering, rather than abjecting, is a model for turning political powerlessness to power through resistance and appropriation. Identities which undercut the heterosexual imperative are occasions for a critical reframing of the hegemony of heterosexuality, and, for the last century, those identities have been
homosexual; thus, bringing homosexuality into discourse provides an immediate occasion for a critique and rearticulation of heterosexuality. I am grateful to queer theory for providing such an opportunity.

The Politics of Female Heterosexual Desire

Only a small part of the vast range of writings on gender and homosexuality have been represented here, and even those have been subject to elision and perhaps even unintended misreadings and appropriations. My intention, however, has been one of respect and gratitude for these theorists who enable my own work. I have traced the trajectory of particular arguments in feminist theory and queer theory because the analysis of gender and homosexuality which has emerged from these inquiries is the ground on which my theory of heterosexuality is constructed. That my own theorizing of women's conscription into a heterosexual script follows in such a rich tradition will, I hope, lend it the conceptual and political complexity the subject deserves. Pleasure and oppression mingle in women's lives, and this double valence is beginning to make itself felt in feminist and queer theories of gender and sexuality.26 One of the more interesting efforts to articulate women's sexual pleasure is Barbara Ehrenreich, Elizabeth Hess, and Gloria Jacobs' Remaking Love: The Feminization of Sex, written almost a decade ago. A socio-historical account of what Ehrenreich, Hess, and Jacobs

---

26 Among other theorists whose articles consider the pleasures of sex for women are Alice Echols, Carol Vance, Paula Webster, Amber Hollibaugh, Lynne Segal, and Gayle Rubin. The lesbian fiction and non-fiction writer Pat Califia has taken a controversial position within the lesbian and feminist movements, advocating the pleasures of lesbian S/M, as well as the abolition of all narrow strictures against sexual pleasure. See Califia's articles in The Advocate and her collection of stories, Macho Sluts, for a sample of her work. Joan Nestle, a lesbian feminist writer, in "My Mother Liked to Fuck," commemorates her straight mother's courage in claiming her right to enjoy sex in a culture which exacts a high price, in shame and violence, for women's sexual freedom.
claim is the unremarked women's sexual revolution, the text argues that the change in sexual attitudes and behavior that deserves to be called revolutionary belongs to women, not to men at all (2). As evidence, they point to the disappearance of the symbolic importance of female chastity and the consequent increased sexual activity of women. The conclusion of the study is that, whereas sexual equality with men "has become a concrete possibility . . . economic and social parity remains elusive" (9). This insightful study correctly locates the problem with the women's sexual revolution in its separation from other goals of social equality, and its almost complete separation from the feminist movement. Although I find much to agree with in this study, I would argue, however, that women are more conflicted about their sexual revolution and their sexual relationships than this text suggests. That women are still caught between monogamous reproductive sex and promiscuous sexual pleasure is a subject of Weldon's fiction. Despite isolated studies of heterosexual women's sexuality, like Remaking Love, much conceptual work remains to be done.

Because gender and homosexuality have been subject to such intense scrutiny within feminist and queer theory, the scarcity of theories of heterosexuality is an even more glaring omission. The fact that heterosexism continues to marginalize lesbians and gay men and that most women, most feminists even, live their lives as heterosexuals lends a certain urgency to the project of theorizing heterosexuality. Feminism still fineshes the fact that most women are heterosexual, raising the question: Is the most scandalous subject of the '90s not the gay or lesbian subject, but the feminist who enjoys sex with a man—or with both men and women? The history of feminism's reluctance to complicate its analysis of heterosexuality as oppression is a double history of heterosexism and sexism. Sexuality has been seen, by many feminists, as a means for male exploitation of women so oppressive that they feel that sexuality can't be reclaimed, or, perhaps rather, that its reclamation is not as
"important" as other goals. Faced with the terrors of rape and of virulent homophobia, many feminist have felt that it was more economical and efficient to repress "dangerous sexualities." Thus, feminist heterosexual sex and lesbian sex which could, in any way, be read as replicating heterosexuality (penetration, sex toys, the eroticization of dominance and submission), were either vilified or presumed unmentionable. Because lesbians have been targets of double discrimination, it seemed necessary, as a first priority of feminism, to validate and honor lesbian existence. Even within the lesbian-feminist movement, however, there was a policing of desire, and a commitment to expunge power from sex and to outlaw certain practices. As for heterosexual feminists, their sexuality remained unspoken (if not unspeakable) and invisible, their sexuality in uneasy relation to their feminism.

Rather than being content with merely decrying heterosexuality as oppression, however, feminism needs to uncover the ideologies and practices that produce it as coercive and oppressive, and reveal its status as a fiction which flattens out identifications and disavows difference within the categories which it establishes as differences which count: male/female, heterosexual/homosexual. An analysis which would theorize the hows of heterosexual oppression would, perhaps, clear the way for a more thorough theorizing of heterosexual pleasure. A normative heterosexual script conscripts "normal" heterosexual subjects. However, subjects are rarely in full compliance with the scripts which produce them, for reasons which are explored in this dissertation. We must go further, it seems, in bridging practice and theory; fiction, particularly feminist postmodern fiction, is a site where the two come together, a site which can be profitably analyzed in order to specify how scripts produce real subjects. I attempt to theorize heterosexuality in such a way as to open it up to performances which contest its coercive and oppressive weight. Drawing upon feminist accounts of gender and queer accounts of homosexuality, this project seeks to construct a model of
a heterosexual script as a signifying habit which acts with performative force, but which may be resisted in performances which produce counter-habits.

Sexuality and Literature

A major aim of feminist theory has been to demonstrate that aesthetics are not innocent, that a particular canon or an aesthetic theory, although it may claim aesthetic purity or objectivity is never apolitical, but always disguises (often, even from itself) a political agenda. Likewise, texts themselves have extra-literary discursive purposes and political agendas. In other words, texts do ideological work. Stories and their pleasures are never disinterested. As Jane Thompkins argues, "novelists have designs on their audiences, in the sense of wanting to make people think and act in a particular way" (xi). Jane Flax, in an article titled "The End of Innocence," concurs that there is no such thing as "innocent knowledge" (447). She cautions feminists against a "dangerously blind innocence" in which an argument for freedom or justice frames itself as a truth claim. At stake in feminist debates about subjectivity, knowledge, and meaning, therefore, even in the feminist pursuit of justice and equality, are questions of power and desire. We must acknowledge desire and power and its effects, and take responsibility for our own desire, Flax urges: "what we really want is power in the world, not an innocent truth" (458). The mechanisms of power, nevertheless, produce meanings which, as part of their production, represent themselves as truth. I would go so far as to claim that meaning production, i.e., "truth" production, propagated by the power of the norm, is the principle mechanism of power.

Power fabricates stories which work to insert subjects into a normative heterosexual script, reinscribing unequal relations of power and constructing such relations as not only "natural," but as seductive and desirable. Being the object of desire (as opposed to a desiring subject), for example, has been marketed as seductive
and appealing—for women. So, as Marita Golden asks in her introduction to *Wild Women Don't Wear No Blues*, "if there were no fairy tales, could there be love?" (xi). For Acker, Weldon, and Carter, the answer is a definitive "no." "Love," romantic love, in late twentieth-century Western culture is, their texts demonstrate, defined by the heterosexual script. Fictional texts, of which the fairy tale is exemplary, may be seen as both origin and effect of the heterosexual script which is circulated in stories, as well as in various other discourses. The contest for producing the meaning of sex and of love, i.e., naming their "truth," is both thematicized and enacted in the novels which this project reads. The texts themselves theorize heterosexuality as oppressive and violent, but also as pleasure, particularly Weldon’s *The Leader of the Band* and Carter’s *The Passion of the New Eve*. For Acker’s female narrators, too, despite the pain which Acker doesn’t flinch from representing, heterosexual sex has its pleasures. These feminist writers, self-conscious of the difficulties of their position, contest, not heterosexuality itself, but heterosexuality as it has been scripted as sexist and heterosexist.

The relation of literature to power and to our social and sexual lives renders the question of who is telling the stories crucial. Bodies are inscribed with sex and gender by the cultural and psychic scripts into which they are born, of which literary stories are a piece. To reconfigure our sexual relations, we need new stories, and, to authorize women as subjects of desire and of their own stories, we need women story-tellers. Women storytellers, telling women’s sexuality, tell of, not only oppression or pleasure, but of ambivalence, conflicted desire, and duplicity. "I'm telling you stories. Trust me," Jeannette Winterson writes in *The Passion*. This double-edged imperative, designed both to assuage and to arouse mistrust, turns on the oscillating meaning of stories—a true account of what really happened?—or a fib, a lie? "Trust me," the narrator enjoins the reader, playing with the ambiguity. Believe my "stories," an
injunction embedded in what is clearly a tall tale, puts into question the authority of stories and story-tellers, and at the same time, demands that the reader trust on a different level, the level on which stories are always "true," because they produce their own truth. The power of stories to command trust is a premise on which my analysis proceeds.

When women writers set out to tell the "truth" about their own sexuality, they cannot ignore the fact that they themselves and their own sexual experiences and relationships have been produced in a culture structured by masculine stories. "Have you any notion how many books are written about women in the course of one year?" Virginia Woolf asks a female audience in A Room of One's Own. "Have you any notion how many are written by men?" (26). I would add a variation of the question: Have you any notion how many books are written about sex in the course of one year? Have you any notion how many are written by men? Although almost seventy years have passed since Woolf's question, and although women are increasingly gaining access to places of enunciation, the texts which speak with greatest authority still about women and sex are male-authored, as chapter five, an analysis of government texts, illustrates. This study asks, what is the effect on representations of heterosexuality when women re-write traditional stories? How does the movement of desire shift? In re-writing traditional stories, however, women writers cannot afford to ignore the structures that have used sexual difference to repress or deny the feminine. They must actively engage phallocentric fictions of sexuality in order to uncover how such fictions produce and circulate power and desire and to expose how they produce women as compliant with their own oppression.

Women, engaging masculine stories in order to write the "truth" of their own sexuality, face a difficult and contradictory task, however. Hélène Cixous, mother of l'écriture féminine, commands her daughters, "Woman must write her self: must write
about women and bring women to writing . . . (279). In a lyrical passage Cixous incites women to write their own experience:

Write! and your self-seeking text will know itself better than flesh and blood, rising, insurrectionary dough kneading itself, with sonorous, perfumed ingredients, a lively combination of flying colors, leaves, and rivers, plunging into the sea we feed . . . . But look, our seas are what we make of them, full of fish or not, opaque or transparent, red or black, high or smooth, narrow or bankless; and we ourselves sea, sand, coral, seaweed, beaches, tides, swimmers, children, waves . . . . More or less wavy, sea, earth sky—what matter would rebuff us? We know how to speak them all. (293)

The passion of Cixous' prose almost persuades us that "our seas" are, in fact, "what we make of them," that we ourselves are self-created and that we may speak that creation, may speak "woman" in our own language. But Carter, Weldon, and Acker all would argue that they must begin with the world as they find it and with language as they receive it, and that both the world and language have been produced by masculine scripts. Even the sexual "self" which they would write has been constructed within a masculine-authored heterosexual script. Women must use the tools which they find lying around, most of which were forged for masculine projects. There is no such thing as a woman's language, they would argue; even Cixous' own examples of l'écriture féminine are male. Women, like men, use the costumes, the props, the sets, the scripts even that they find at hand in order to re-tell the stories of our tradition, but from within women's experience of it. As bricoleur, the woman writer discovers a paucity of tools available to describe women's sexuality. The available language, the stories, are from male experience or fantasy. Women have lived with constructed silences about their pleasures and their displeasures: the ecstasy of women's sexual encounters with men, the specific intensities of lesbian desire, the disappointments that

27 L'écriture féminine is a concept which achieved currency in the '80s, according to which women should seek to write their bodies in a specifically women's language, a kind of "antilogos weapon," according to Cixous (284).
may follow the "happily ever after," the collisions of the erotic and the domestic, the sexual violence—all are untold within conventional stories. But, as we have already noted, to name a thing is, in some way, to produce it. And women's increasing willingness to name their own sexual experience authorizes female desire and opens up, perhaps, an expansion of female pleasures. By showing the conventional heterosexual script for what it is—incomplete, inadequate, and oppressive for women and men, Acker, Carter, and Weldon participate in the production of stories which may lighten the oppressive weight of sexism and heterosexism and of women's constructed silence.

Women novelists and women critics wrestle with and, ultimately, refuse the cultural silencing of women. bell hooks recalls her personal struggle to learn to "talk back," to challenge the prohibition against back talk instilled in her as a girl child and, later, as a black woman. Moving from silence into speech, hooks claims, is a movement from object to subject ("Talking Back" 5-9). "Speak, tell me your story," she implores women ("Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness" 152). But speech and silence are functions of power. To speak is to claim power, and to speak with authority is to violate the political and linguistic conventions of a power system which has marginalized and silenced women. In The Pink Guitar, an exploration, both scholarly and lyrical, of the female aesthetic, Rachel Blau DuPlessis argues that women write not from their bodies (as argued by proponents of l'écriture féminine) but from their psychosocial experience. The difficulty of women writing from within a sociohistorical position which has denied them full speaking subjectivity is a problem which troubles the fictions which are the object of this study. It is the central problem which DuPlessis addresses in her investigation into women's self-representation. Because women have been painted and photographed as a "pink guitar" (by Ingres and Man Ray, among others), there is, DuPlessis, says, a "deadly serious" question "I" must ask "myself" when "I" want to paint/write/play "myself":

It is
I pick up this guitar. A woman! I say
I am
For when I pick it up, how do I "play" the women whom I have been culturally given?

... My pink guitar has gender in its very grain. Its strings are already vibrating with gender representations. That means unpick everything. But how to unpick everything and still "pick up" an instrument one "picks." (158)

This is the ultimate question to be put to a female aesthetic: how to "unpick everything" and still be able to play the instrument of language which comes with a received set of conventions, with "gender in its very grain." Writing in these circumstances, "a woman is a 'marked marker,'" DuPlessis claims (161). She writes out of a context in which she has been marked by gender, sexuality, masculine language—a whole matrix of contradictory representations which, together, produce a heterosexual script that she cannot simply opt out of. She is marked by a sedimentation of gender and sexuality laid down in masculine language. Women's projects, in other words, are framed from the start by masculine conventions:

How to unpick everything, and still make it "formal," "lyric," "coherent," "beautiful," "satisfying," when these are some of the things that must be unpicked . . . (158).

To play oneself on a hand-me-down instrument, within the constraints of a received aesthetic is an impossible gesture. "And yet," DuPlessis writes, "And yet I am playing, I am playing, I am playing . . ." (159).

Acker, Carter, and Weldon are self-conscious about their relation to both narrative conventions and social conventions. The oxymoronic project of reimagining sexuality within a language and a set of representations which rely, for intelligibility and aesthetic value, on the very conventions which have produced normative sexuality and women's silence is a formidable undertaking. Women writers are aware of the difficulty—and of the ideological implications of success—in their seizing a place of
enunciation within social and aesthetic structures which have produced their exclusion. Joanne Frye points out that the novel formally links social structures and aesthetic structures. The "grounding of narrative in social expectations" doubles the ideological force of novels, she argues (30). Women who insist on exploring the links between social and aesthetic expectations, as do the three feminist writers of this study, double the ideological impact of their writing. *The Pirate's Fiancée*, Meaghan Morris's effort to understand and articulate the speaking position of women in a particular historical, critical, and publishing context, urges that women must discover for themselves, against cultural odds, a place from which to speak *and* the possibility of having something to say (6). Feminists have committed themselves to a view of literature that sees the literary text and literary criticism as implicated in historical and material conditions. We must continually recall ourselves to the analysis of the intersection of the text and the material world. That is my intention in this project: to analyze the complex web of political, economic, and linguistic relations that provide a context for the feminist text, that web of relations out of which the text claims existence and into which it is inserted. Although I recognize the material importance of the actual conditions of publication and reception, my analysis will, instead, be of the heterosexual script as political, economic, and linguistic context, as that signifying web out of and into which the literary text is produced. The novels, themselves, investigate that web of politics, economics, and signification which works to position women as powerless and silent within a heterosexual script which bolsters current power systems.

**Heterosexuality and "linguistic capital"**

My theorizing of heterosexuality takes for granted that sexuality is not a uniform event, the meaning of which is universally available to everyone, but that it is given meaning, definition, and value by cultural discourses. Paula Treichler's "Feminism,
Medicine, and the Meaning of Childbirth" provides a model for a cultural critique of the knotty relation between representation and material reality. In a brilliant analysis of the dominant metaphors of childbirth, Treichler argues that, in the contests for meaning in a culture, the winner is the one who has the most "linguistic capital." Her analysis addresses the question, "How... is 'linguistic capital' accrued?" (116). She cites Charles Peirce's insistence that "truth" is defined by those professionally authorized to name it (123). Since the nineteenth century it is the medical profession which has increasingly been vested with the professional certification to name the truth of childbirth, and they have named it a medical event. As a consequence, the place of the woman in the discourse of childbirth has virtually been erased, replaced by the physician who "delivers" the child. Treichler traces a challenge to this definition of childbirth by a local New York childbirth clinic which successfully identified, articulated and capitalized upon a variety of meanings circulating among various groups and interests: the feminist movement, the women's health movement, the consumer movement, all aligned with insurance companies attempting to contain medical costs. These meanings were skillfully mobilized by the director of the center and deployed to create a competing definition of childbirth, with a concomitant competing material organization of the childbirth event. New meanings were legitimated, Treichler claims. This politically sophisticated manipulation of meanings illustrates the power of "linguistic capital" to effect material change. All of the novelists of this study participate in the contest for the control of the meaning of heterosexuality, and Weldon and Acker explicitly thematize the struggle of women to accrue sufficient linguistic capital to enable them to engage in the battles to name women's sexuality.

Contests for discursive power are, of course, most open to leverage at moments of cultural incoherence of meaning, such as the present moment in the definitional arena of sexuality. The fictions which I read assume that for women to successfully negotiate
meaning, for them to seize a place of enunciation in the culture, is a practical problem. To seize the scripts by which they are defined is a problem of amassing sufficient linguistic capital and of learning to parlay that capital into power to effect political change. Getting published, is, of course, the most immediate practical problem, and the conditions of both publication and reception are, of course, crucial to a writer's position within the discursive community. By virtue of differences in the work itself, in publishing decisions, and in readers' and reviewers' reception, the novels of Weldon, Carter, and Acker have been differently positioned along a spectrum from the "popular" to the "literary." Fay Weldon's texts are published both in hard cover and in mass-market paperback, and have, among the novels included in this study, achieved the widest circulation. They are commonly available in most bookstores and neighborhood libraries. Two film-versions of Weldon's *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (a successful British adaptation for television and a dreadful American film adaptation) have brought Weldon's feminist critique of the male-female sexual relation to a wide audience. Weldon's texts have a broad appeal, in part because she writes of more-or-less recognizable women caught in more-or-less recognizable situations, always, however, subject to her wicked wit and her propensity for extravagance. Angela Carter's fictions, somewhat less accessible, are published in hard cover and trade paperback and are less available in bookstores and libraries. The most discussed of her texts are her fairy tales, feminist rereadings of traditional tales which have provided grist for academic conferences and articles. Her novels, however, a blend of myth, fantasy, pornography, and adventure story, have received less attention. Kathy Acker's texts, highly speculative and difficult, are somewhat more available than Carter's, but, nevertheless, still often require a special order from bookstores and libraries. Published in hard cover and trade paper, Acker's fragmented and allusive style turns many readers away, while her use of the obscene and the pornographic
attracts a few sensation-seeking readers and angers others. Her metaphysical and metafictional concerns, her punk allegiances, and her political investments infuse Acker’s work with a unique sensibility. Although all three, Weldon, Carter, and Acker, have been much praised by reviewers and each has received some critical attention by scholarly journals, Acker is the only one whose work has begun to receive a measure of serious analysis. For each, much work remains to be done. My project attempts to address this critical gap.

None of the texts which are the focus of this study is a realist text. I would argue that, although, in one sense, realism describes a particular historical literary moment, most of the novels being written and read today are realist in their intentions and in the transparency of their effect. The problem with realism as a politically progressive form is that, as mimesis, realism re-produces current power relations, including current interpellations of subjects as conventionally masculine or feminine, hetero- or homo- sexual. Realism today is inadequate for critiquing the status quo, an intention which each of the novelists claims. Postmodernism, on the other hand, is a form suitable for an engagement with the problems of subjectivity, sexuality, representation, and power, because, as a rule, it contests master narratives, critiques the unitary subject, complicates the relationship between representation and reality, and is self-conscious about its own complicity in that which it critiques and its own embeddedness in ideology. A postmodern aesthetic, playful and self-reflexive, defies either/or choices, is self-aware of its own provisionality, and foregrounds contradiction and indeterminacy.\textsuperscript{28} I would argue that Weldon, Carter, and Acker each shares these

\textsuperscript{28} This shorthand description of postmodernism is, of course, reductive and incomplete, but is intended to serve as a rationale for classifying the writers of the study as postmodern.
concerns and these traits and that each may be classified as a postmodern writer. Postmodernism is useful to feminist novelists because it offers a still-plastic form in which to represent women's still-plastic relation with sexual representations. Susan Suleiman argues that the hallmark of the avant-garde is the attempt to effect radical change in "both the symbolic field (including what has been called the aesthetic realm) and in the social and political field of everyday life" (xv). According to this definition of the avant-garde, a case may be made that both Carter and Acker are, each in her own way, members of that elite corps, although Carter would surely satirize such a labeling. Weldon, however, although not completely disinterested in experiments in the symbolic field, focuses most of her energy on effecting radical change in the social and political realm. Like Acker and Carter, she understands that political change is produced in the encounter between reader and text, and she consciously works this encounter to arouse her reader's subjectivity.

How the texts position the reader is one of the crucial questions of each chapter. This is, after all, where texts do their ideological work. What all the novels of this study have in common is that they activate their reader's subjectivity by making her or him an active, self-conscious participant in the production of meaning. In the contests for the meaning of heterosexuality in which they are engaged, Weldon, Carter, and Acker all refuse the reader the easy pleasure of identification with a protagonist who is

---

29 There is little argument that Acker and Carter are postmodern writers, acknowledged as such in analyses of postmodern fiction by Meaghan Morris (The Pirate's Fiancée), Ellen Friedman and Miriam Fuchs (Breaking the Sequence), Diane Elam (Romancing the Postmodern), Susan Suleiman (Subversive Intent), and Patricia Waugh (Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern), among others. I concur with Patricia Waugh's inclusion of Fay Weldon among contemporary female postmodernists, and also with her characterization of Weldon's The Life and Loves of a She-Devil as a kind of "contemporary feminist gothic" (189). Weldon, like Acker and Carter, displaces the conventions of realism with an emphasis on the play of meanings and desires produced within a system of power.
in compliance with the heterosexual script, or, indeed, with any protagonist. Realism, with its demand for psychological plausibility and motivation, depends on mimetic identification of the reader with the protagonist. The logic of narrative grammar, particularly in the case of a first-person narrator (which we find in most of the texts which this study reads), demands reader identification with the protagonist-narrator. These postmodern fictions, however, interrupt that identification. The movement of desire in these texts is neither a product of identification with a male hero and an assumption of his desire as the reader's own, nor is it the result of an identification with the female object (of the quest, the look) and the assumption of her desire to be desired. The movement of desire in Carter, Weldon, and Acker is connected to the active pursuit of meaning in texts which, at times, deliberately obfuscate meaning.

An early feminist account of woman's reading, Judith Fetterley's *The Resisting Reader* (1977), urges women readers to resist their "immasculation" in reading androcentric texts which treat male experience as "universal" and demand identification with the masculine hero (497). Taking gender as a biological given, Fetterley argues that the woman reader of the "great" canonical texts must read against herself, thus becoming a divided self. The "resisting reader" would work to "exorcise" the male-part of herself which is imposed by the text in order to understand how the classics exclude and alienate her (498). Fetterley's influential text, which takes the position that literature is political, assumes a masculine realist text and an identifying reader. The feminist postmodern texts which I read construct *every* reader as "resisting," not in order to free the woman reader from identifying with a male protagonist and against

---

30 Feminist film theory, particularly that of Kaja Silverman, Laura Mulvey, and Teresa De Lauretis, is useful in theorizing the movement of desire in literary narrative. The construction of the reader as gendered and as occupying a particular position within the narrative may be extrapolated for literary texts from a model intended to account for the ideological work of the Hollywood film.
herself, but rather, in order to enlist the reader, male or female, in a collaborative effort with writer and text in the production of meaning. This strategy of positioning the reader as active subject who identifies with the production of the text rather than with the diegetic world of the text itself disrupts the presumption of continuity between the characters' experiences and desires and the reader's experiences and desires. The construction of the reader as active meaning-maker precludes a narrative transaction in which a passive consumer of conventional plots and desires is inserted into those plots and desires, which, not surprisingly, are found to be "written" by the dominant ideology.

I make use of a number of analytical tools in constructing my model of heterosexuality as a coercive script which produces sexed and gendered subjects. Just as we need new stories, we need new tools of analysis, and we need to put old tools to work in new ways. Carter, Weldon, and Acker raid the cultural trove of masculine stories and turn them to new purposes; my project raids the trove of masculine methodologies and strategies of analysis and turns them to a feminist purpose. My use of Louis Althusser's theory of ideology and subjectivity, of Freud's and Lacan's psychoanalysis, and Charles Peirce's theory of signification is guided by the project's intention to investigate how subjects are conscripted into the heterosexual script and how subjects might—and do—intervene into their own production as sexed women and men. The dialogue in each chapter between fictional texts and theoretical texts challenges some veiled assumptions in the theory, demonstrates how heterosexuality is constructed by both cultural and psychic scripts, and provides an analysis of how sexual representation becomes self-representation. My use of theories of ideology and subjectivity, of psychoanalysis, and of semiotics assumes that each has a partial explanatory value in a consideration of heterosexuality as a constitutive identity category that works as a normalizing mechanism to contain subjects within regimes of
power. These theories are useful to the extent that they generate critical analyses of heterosexuality and culture and provide, for feminism, tools which open up the symbolic and the imaginary to political-literary investigation.

My use of these tools, however, assumes their own complicity in the dominant ideology which produced them. For example, Althusser’s analysis of the “ideology of ideology” implies a self-consciousness about his own position within his project. Nevertheless, after claiming an inevitability for the functioning of the “Ideological State Apparatuses,” which are the mechanisms of ideology, he exempts science, which he places alongside “reality” outside of ideology which, he nonetheless claims, “has no outside,” an exemption apparently insisted on in order to account for his own scientific critique (“Ideology” 175). This glib exception (which ignores the fact that science is itself an ideology with particular interests and biases) is typical of the blindness to its own political agendas and biases of many useful analytical tools which construct themselves as master narratives above or outside of what they are critiquing.

Psychoanalysis, like Althusser’s theory of ideology, presents itself as a story which intends to explain culture, but, in actuality, like Althusser’s theory, it enacts culture’s hierarchical power relations, reproducing, as we have noted, that which it ostensibly merely describes. I do not adopt any theory as a conceptual model which I merely apply to the reading of the fictional texts, nor do I use a single theory as an organizing schema to account for gender and sexuality. Rather, I use the tools at hand for analyzing subjectivity in an explicitly feminist project, trying both to avoid re-inscribing them as master narratives and to acknowledge my own position within ideology—as implicated in both the theoretical tools I use and in the heterosexual script which I, in some ways, both enact and critique. My own biases, those I recognize—feminist and anti-homophobic—and those I don’t, structure the assumptions of this project.
I share with Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit their belief that the only guarantee about itself which any theory can offer is to expose itself as "a passionate fiction" (vii). I remind the reader that the dissertation which follows is a result, not only of an intense scholarly and analytical pursuit, but of passionate conviction born from my particular personal history. The concerns of this project are unabashedly political, but the politics cannot be enunciated apart from the readings of the fictions which follow, readings which complicate any easy summation of the political aims which this introductory chapter suggests. Although the intent is to investigate the mechanisms and the political stakes of the heterosexual script, there is no intention to set out a politics of sexuality which would make a conclusive or definitive claim. This study is, after all, a fiction, one narrative of sexuality among many. All claims are partial and meant to be understood as a feminist contribution to current debates about sexuality and gender, a contribution which invites further discussion and analysis.

The concerns of the project are also aesthetic, or, more specifically, the focus of analysis is that point where politics and aesthetics intersect. How, this study asks, are the interests of the dominant power regime furthered by a dominant aesthetic? And how, in a particular historical moment, can individuals intervene in the aesthetic production of the political and the political production of the aesthetic? The battle which is being fought for the control of the meanings of sexuality is not being fought on theoretical or signifying grounds only, but on material grounds, over real bodies. We need to invent new sexual idioms and to enable those we already have to come out of the closet. This project envisions a queering of heterosexuality which would, without diminishing the specificity of homosexuality, render obsolete the rhetoric of deviance and abnormality which marginalizes gay men and lesbians, and which would enable women to claim an equal status in a reconfiguration of sexuality.
The fictional texts which are the subject of this study critique existing power relations and imagine a different social order, with varying degrees of optimism and pessimism. These feminist writers revisit masculine representations of gender and sexuality and, not content with offering new reified versions of heterosexuality, envision representation and self-representation as a reversible process in which women participate as full subjects. Performing, re-writing, unveiling, and plagiarizing the father's scripts, these feminist writers have stories of their own to tell. Aware, however, that stories are always born out of other stories, they are self-conscious of their position as both inside and outside dominant discourses. Too wily to attempt to portray "woman's experience" in an untainted "woman's language," Weldon, Carter, and Acker have done their part to accrue sufficient linguistic capital to intervene in the process by which hegemonic technologies, practices, and discourses conscript subjects into femininity and heterosexuality. The epigraph to Part two of Acker's *Don Quixote* reads: "BEING BORN INTO AND PART OF A MALE WORLD, SHE HAD NO SPEECH OF HER OWN. ALL SHE COULD DO WAS READ MALE TEXTS WHICH WEREN'T HERS" (39). The "male texts" may not have been intended to be hers, but the protagonist-narrator, the female Don Quixote, makes them her own, rewriting and subverting them as she plagiarizes without compunction: "By repeating the past, I'm molding it and transforming it," she claims (48). The possibility of agency depends on an ability to hold in tension both an assumption that I am produced by scripts and that I have the capacity to, myself, produce scripts. I must assume a self-concept that recognizes the possibility of agency, while limiting the claims I make for it. As the following chapters argue, the subject is discursively produced by a heterosexual script which defines and limits our understanding of and our lived experience of gender, sexuality, and desire; nevertheless, the script is never a perfect fit, and transgressive sexuality, subversive desire, and an insistence on speaking one's
own experience interrupts the replication of a normative and normalizing heterosexuality.
Chapter 2
Fay Weldon and the Technologies of Conscription:
Learning Her Lines in the Hetero-Feminine Script

The romance should fulfill readers' fantasies of ideal love. . . . The plot should not
be too grounded in harsh realities. . . . but at the same time should make the reader feel
that such a love is possible, if not probable. . . . The heroine [should be] younger
than the hero, relatively inexperienced sexually. . . . The hero should be older, more
mature, . . . more worldly and sexually experienced than the heroine. He should be
attractive, powerful and un stereotyped, but it is up to the author to ensure that the
readers will fall in love with him as deeply as the heroine does.

Katherine Orr. "Editorial Guidelines for Harlequin's Romance Lines"

Natalie in Fay Weldon's The Heart of the Country holds forth to her friend
Sonia on "her own theories of sexual attraction": "It's insensate, hopeless love—it's a
disease. It's caught from other people, just like measles" (173). For Weldon and her
characters, this metaphor suggests not only the corrupt or "diseased" aspect of
heterosexual love, but also the fact that our notions of heterosexual love are "caught
from other people," received from other members of our culture. Weldon's novels,
comic and accessible, make visible the usually invisible "germs" by which
heterosexuality is produced and transmitted. Situated at the intersection of high
culture and popular culture, Weldon's work offers a penetrating look at sexual desire,
sexual discontent, and gendered power relations among the white middle class in late
twentieth-century Western culture. This chapter argues that normative
heterosexuality and normative femininity are constructed as mutually enforcing, for
women, through cultural scripts which not only conscript subjects in gender-specific
ways, but which carry the force of performative discourse. In Weldon's satirical
fictions, which are parodies of the conventional romance novel, gender and sexuality
are shown as scripted simultaneously and almost inextricably by various institutions,
practices, and discourses. Using Louis Althusser's model of ideology and subjectivity, this chapter reads Weldon as illustrative of the way in which the feminine script and the heterosexual script position female subjects in an ideology which, while concealing its construction of "femininity" and "heterosexuality" as constructed, works to establish a system of hierarchical power relations. Contingent linguistic and political categories with crucial material effects, "femininity" and "heterosexuality" are nevertheless produced and circulated in the culture as inevitable and "natural," the effect of which is to reproduce oppressive power structures.

Together these naturalized identity categories—heterosexuality and femininity—circumscribe the production of female subjects who are, thus, thoroughly enmeshed in a conflated hetero-feminine script. This chapter will investigate how romantic love serves to perpetuate the dominant power regime by wooing women into the hetero-feminine script in its two primary manifestations, eros and domesticity.

The traditional love story, in which the hetero-feminine script is found in its most explicit form, whether fairy tale, Jane Austen novel, or Harlequin romance, ends with "and they lived happily ever after." Rereading (and rewriting) the romance novel, Weldon begins her "love story" at this point, scrutinizing the "happily ever after." Weldon's parodic romance novels, which both re-iterate and critique the hetero-feminine script—The Fat Woman's Joke, The Life and Loves of a She-Devil, and The Leader of the Band—begin just after the conventional romance novel ends, in domesticity; the "happy couple" meet obstacles to their relationship (each other), and the marriage falls apart. What is repressed in the conventional romance plot? the texts ask. Critiquing the romance novel as a cultural script which operates to produce women's identity as sexual and subordinate, Weldon exhumes the erasures and repressions that constitute the unnamed subtext of the romance.
Femininity and heterosexuality are, in Weldon, the warp and the woof of the social fabric. Picking at this fabric until she begins to unravel it, Weldon enables the reader to glimpse where the threads come together, where they cross, and how they have been woven so tightly by cultural imperatives as to appear "natural." In Weldon's texts the work of unraveling the strands of gender and sexuality production foregrounds not only the process by which gendered and sexed identities are constituted by social institutions and discourses, but also the stakes for women and for men in the designation of such gendered and sexed identities as "natural." In a passage remarkable for its representation of the uses to which "Nature" has been put, Praxis, one of Weldon's protagonist-narrators, claims that woman's role in the heterosexual script is written according to what she terms "Arguments from Nature":

It is nature ... that makes us get married. Nature, they say, that makes us crave to have babies. You must breast-feed, they say. It's natural. ... It's nature that makes us love our children, clean our houses, gives us a thrill of pleasure when we please the home-coming male.

Praxis, however, is not easily persuaded by the rhetoric of "nature"; on the contrary, she engages in quite unnatural behavior at every opportunity. That these reflections on nature and heterosexuality take place from Praxis' prison cell where she is serving a term for the "unnatural" murder of her adopted daughter's severely retarded infant reminds us that resistance to a culturally sanctioned "natural" has a price. Undaunted by the loss of her freedom, however, Praxis continues, in a direct admonishment to her female reader:

It seems to me that we must fight Nature tooth and claw.

What I am saying is ... sisters, when anyone says to you, this, that or the other is natural, then fight. Nature does not know best; for the birds, for the bees, for the cows; for men, perhaps. But your interests and Nature's do not coincide.

Nature our Friend is an argument used, quite understandably by men. (Praxis 132-33)
"Arguments from Nature" have long been among the most successful techniques for the continuing consolidation of the dominant culture and, in particular, for the continuing reproduction of the heterosexual imperative. Monique Wittig recalls that women not living up to the "myth of woman" have been accused of not being "real" women, thereby, she maintains, offering a chink in the "natural woman" assumption. In this there is already, "something like a shadow of victory," Wittig suggests: "the avowal by the oppressor that 'woman' is not something that goes without saying" (104). In this chapter I argue that the fictions of Fay Weldon cite and, at the same time, undermine the ideological production of woman's "natural" identity as prescriptively "feminine" and "heterosexual."

Weldon's scrutiny of the hetero-feminine script involves a double move: her texts operate as both a critique of the normative scripts which circulate in the culture and as a tentative exploration of alternatives. Even more important, however, is Weldon's engagement with the problem of the relation between cultural scripts and the individual subject. The crucial question at the heart of Weldon's work—as well the most pressing question today in feminist and queer theory—is the problem of agency. How is the individual subject who is subject to discourse also the subject of discourse? My analysis will focus on the way in which Weldon's fictions grapple with this question as two particular sub-questions: how are women conscripted into

---

1 This question presumes the postmodern critique of the unitary subject (by Foucault, Lacan, de Lauretis, and Butler, among others). According to this critique, individuals, rather than serving as origin of language, are themselves enabled or produced by language, are constructed as subjects by language which pre-exists them. Discourses, as noted in the introduction, are those languages and shared assumptions of particular groups, and are understood to do ideological work. Within this political understanding of the relationship of subjects to discourse, the problem of subjects as active participants in the construction of meaning within discourse is a difficult one, a problem which motivates not only this chapter, but my entire dissertation.
femininity and heterosexuality? and how do women resist, as well as acquiesce to, their conscription into the hetero-feminine script?

Brought up in an all-female household (grandmother, mother, sister), Weldon notes in an interview: "I thought the world was composed of women. I always assumed the world was female and I was astonished to discover that on the outside it was assumed to be male" (Salzmann-Brunner 179). As a satirist who is clearly "down among the women," Weldon populates her novels with unforgettable female characters and entirely forgettable, peripheral male characters, peripheral male characters who nonetheless hold all the power. Weldon leavens her indictment of male power, however, with ironic humor and a recognition that the men whom she invents are often the victims of their own self-centeredness and their own entanglement in cultural scripts. Nevertheless, Weldon acknowledges that her work is "about the impossibility of pretending that there isn't a conflict between male power and female power" and that she believes "it's in women's interests to change the way the world is, and it's not in men's interests" (Haffendon Interview 308, 312). In Weldon's texts women try, with varying degrees of success, to change the way the world is; and men try, with a fair amount of success, to shore up the status quo. For Weldon, then, sexuality is, above all, a relation of power: "The male-female war is hotting up." Weldon wrote in her first novel, The Fat Woman's Joke (98). Weldon's interest in the "male-female war" is in the arena of sexuality, and, in particular, in the social construction of a married woman's heterosexual experience.

2 "Down Among the Women," the space in which Weldon explicitly situates herself in her fiction and non-fiction writings, is the title of one of her early (1971) novels.

3 Patricia Miller and Martha Fowlkes note in their well-researched "Social and Behavioral Constructions of Female Sexuality" that because researchers (and I would add novelists) are more interested in the non-normative than the normative, adult female sexuality has been under-represented in the study of human sexuality. Married women's sexuality, in particular, has been of little interest to novelists, for
When we think of or speak of "sexuality" today, we cannot do so without bringing in the assumptions and representations with which the concept of sexuality is laden in late-twentieth century culture, what Stephen Heath terms "the whole sexual fix" (157). Sexuality, Heath claims, is as old as human beings; "sexuality," on the other hand, is only a little over a century old. Citing the maxim of the French moralist La Rochefort that people would never fall in love if they had never heard of love, Heath argues that a like maxim could be formulated for sexuality inasmuch as "sexual activity and experience are never outside of cultural forms, definitions, orders (the idea that the sexual is some naked and primordial realm of individual human being is itself a fully cultural representation" (11). Heath's formulation of "the sexual fix" as the entire matrix of available cultural representations of sexuality finds a parallel in Ian Hacking's theorizing of the possibilities for sexual personhood:

what is curious about human action is that by and large what I am deliberately doing depends on the possibilities of description. . . . Hence if new modes of description come into being, new possibilities for action come into being in consequence. (81)

I concur with both Heath and Hacking that the limits of sexuality as personal and subjective are established by "sexuality" as discursive and social. But what remains largely untheorized by Heath and Hacking, and what this project will address, is how the social becomes the subjective and how new modes of description and new possibilities for action come into being. People cannot fall in love or be sexual unless they have heard of love and sex.4 The fairy tales, the love songs, the romance novels whom the wedding, or, perhaps today, the declaration of love has been the plot goal and denouement.

4 This statement, which seems counter-intuitive, is an attempt to distinguish between biological sex and cultural sex. Sexual acts and feelings exist in every time and place, of course, but how they exist is determined by culture. "Love," for example, is defined and experienced within historically and culturally specific constructions.
script our love lives and provide us with the feelings we feel, as well as the very words we speak. Personal stories are given shape, value, and meaning and are, at the same time, limited by the cultural stories which circulate in a historically specific time and place. In Weldon's texts the stories which shape an individual woman's experience of sexuality have the weight of scripts which pre-exist her and which delineate the sexual behaviors available to her. A woman is deemed mature to the extent that she has learned the lines and acquiesced to the plot of the hetero-feminine script.

Despite the recent interrogation of the universal subject as natural, transhistorical, and transcultural, the organizing myths surrounding sexuality yield only reluctantly to new paradigms of thought. In the popular mind, as Praxis noted above in "Arguments from Nature," sex is the last bastion of Nature, reproduction (survival of the species) is the goal of sex, and biology is translated into cultural imperative. One of the most persuasive critiques of such a biologically determined understanding of sexuality is the script theory of sociologists John Gagnon and William Simon, as developed in *Sexual Conduct: the social sources of human sexuality* and refined in their more recent "Sexual Scripts." Our sexual behavior, like all human behavior, is "scripted," Gagnon and Simon argue. Our blindness to these sexual scripts, ironically, can be attributed to our having learned well the particular script that finds the source of all sexual behavior in an urgent biological mandate. Nevertheless, without the proper script that "defines the situation, names the actors, and plots the behavior nothing sexual is likely to happen" (*Sexual Conduct* 19). Even physical arousal, they argue, depends on perceiving the event as sexual, on an ability to place the sexual stimulus and stimulator in a sexual script. Simon and Gagnon's analysis includes a delineation of three levels of scripting: cultural scenarios, interpersonal scripts, and intrapsychic scripts. Cultural scenarios are the signs and
symbols circulated by institutions which specify appropriate sexual roles. Interpersonal scripts adapt the abstract scenario for behavior in particular situations. Intrapsychic scripts, a symbolic level of scripting, provide a possibility of "internal rehearsal" when alternative behaviors are available.

Although Simon and Gagnon's model of sexuality has been constructed and theorized specifically within the discipline of sociology, it has provocative uses for literary studies. Since the social paradigms which the model establishes are imagined as "scripts" which are enacted in language, they bear on literary representations as well as real-life behaviors. The "scripts" which are the object of study in this project may be seen as existing on two levels. First, the representations of heterosexuality within a fictional text, i.e., the sexual desires, behaviors, and constraints on behavior of the characters, are read as reflections of cultural scripts circulating in a particular time and place. In other words, this study claims that social scripts are concretized as literary representations. Second, the text itself is seen as a script which works on readers to produce either congruence with dominant cultural scripts or resistance to dominant cultural scripts, or, in some cases, both. An analysis of scripts on both levels, I argue, the diegetic script of the characters' interactions and the extra-diegetic script of the reader-text interaction, brings together the ideological work of a fictional text as reflecting culture and as partipating in the production of culture. Put another way, careful literary analysis shows texts at work re-producing culture and producing counter-cultures.

Simon and Gagnon's conceptual model of sexuality turns on their argument about "congruence" as that which binds together cultural scenarios, interpersonal scripts, and intrapsychic scripts, ensuring some degree of consistency between the culture and the individual. How this congruence is achieved is never fully articulated in their argument. This is, of course, the point at which most constructionist identity
theorists falter: how does what is "out there" get "in here"? Gagnon and Simon argue cogently that cultural scenarios have their most "coercive power," predictability, and congruence with other scripting elements in paradigmatic societies (those with strong, shared master narratives) and in societies in which concerns for sexual pleasure are exclusively those of only one participant—the male ("Sexual Scripts" 54-55). This insight about the gendered nature of sexual scripts does not extend to their entire argument, however. Their failure to pursue the lines of their own argument beyond a brief mention of gender undermines this otherwise useful, and, within sociology, quite influential, study.

As a result of Simon and Gagnon's failure to politicize their findings and to follow up the implications of their own model of sexual scripts by including gender and other identity categories as tools of analysis, their argument falls short in four ways. First, the intrapsychic is conceptualized by Simon and Gagnon as the arena in which the "self" rehearses for its behavior in interpersonal encounters (58). This conceptualization assumes the self as a prior being who chooses and rehearses scripts, rather than a being who is itself enabled or produced by scripts. Second, in its description of the "self," Simon and Gagnon's model lacks an appreciation of the complexity and gendered specificity of the psychic process, and, specifically, fails to fully account for the unconscious. Equally important, however, is the failure to develop a theory of the dynamic interaction between psychic processes and social scripts. The third way in which Simon and Gagnon's failure to consider gender weakens their model is in their discussion of cultural scenarios as representing

---

5 For explorations of this question of identity formation, see, for example, Steven Epstein's "Gay Politics, Ethnic Identity: The Limits of Social Constructionism" and Edward Stein's "The Essentials of Constructionism and the Construction of Essentialism." See also, among many others, Teresa de Lauretis, Technologies of Gender; Paul Smith, Discerning the Subject; and Diana Fuss, Essentially Speaking.
"desired expectations" (53). Whose desire? they fail to ask. Whose expectations? Furthermore, they claim that these scenarios may have "coercive powers" (54), prompting, for me, the unasked question: Are these powers experienced as equally coercive regardless of race, age, class, sexuality, or gender? A fourth problem with their otherwise useful model is their insistence on personal freedom. The focus on "our selection of interpersonal and intrapsychic sexual scripts" (55, emphasis mine) raises the question: are we, in fact, so free to select our script? What are the limits on this freedom? And what role, if any, does gender play in our freedom to select our own interpersonal scripts from among available cultural scenarios?

My four-part critique—the assumption of a "self" prior to scripts, the absence of a dynamic theory of the relation between psychic and cultural scripts, an inattention to the generative forces and the identity-specific effects of coercive cultural scenarios, and an inconsistent appeal to personal choice—is grounded in the model's failure to recognize that sexual scripts are inseparable from the structures of power in which they are implicated. Sexuality is always embedded in relations of power which structure sex roles, genital acts, reproduction, domestic living arrangements, pleasures in ways which reinforce the dominant culture. It is these relations of power, embodied in race, sexuality, class, gender—and what Judith Butler wittily refers to as the "exasperated 'etc.'" of identity categories (Gender Trouble 143)—which position subjects unequally within cultural and political systems. And it is these unequal subject positions which determine into which sexual script individuals will be conscripted and what degree of agency they may exercise in "selecting" among available scripts.

Cultural scripts, through a complex process of signification which this dissertation explores, become psychic scripts. Such cultural scripts, never disinterested, are "written" by masculine institutions to preserve heterosexual male
privilege. The construction of heterosexuality in a given culture cannot be theorized apart from an account of the production of gendered subject positions, or more accurately, gendered sexual positions. The effect of such hierarchically structured sexual positions is to constrain women in roles which ensure the preservation of the status quo. The hetero-feminine script, although its effect on individual women may be devastatingly singular, is, in fact, constituted in multiplicity and contradiction. Although I have used the term "hetero-feminine script" as a kind of shorthand in this study, it might more properly be argued that subjects are constructed according to gender scripts and sexual scripts, plural. There are in this post-paradigmatic society, actually, multiple, competing scripts which conscript women according to class, race, physical appearance, and other positionings within culture. Despite the heterogeneity of scripts which construct and constrain women in late twentieth-century Western society, however, the effect, produced variously across race and class, is nonetheless, common across the culture. Sexism and homophobia underwrite a kind of master script which works to limit the cultural power of women and gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals. This master script provides a plot line (adapted by the various culturally specific scripts) which ensures that gender and sexuality will continue to be constructed in such a way as to reinforce heterosexual male privilege. Among the multiple and contradictory discourses which comprise the ideology of presumptive heterosexuality for white middle-class women, two competing scripts exercise the greatest tyranny: eros and domesticity. Together the erotic and the domestic make up a crucial field of regulation because here, where pleasure and work are organized, is a site of intersection between individual bodies and the social body. Here is a space where the individual's self-interest can most productively be brought in line with dominant social interests, using what Linda Singer terms "the currency of pleasure as lubricant" (*Erotic Welfare* 76).
What is at stake in Fay Weldon's consideration of the contradictory scripts, eros and domesticity, is nothing less than the question of the possibility of women's intervention into the discursive practices by which they are constructed. These two tropes of the feminine within sexual iconography operate on two levels: first, as representations circulating within the culture—the housewife-mother and the femme fatale—which function as prescriptive images/narratives. On the second level, these images/narratives of the hetero-feminine script are internalized by individual subjects as constitutive of their identity. Identity formation, the "I" of "I am," occurs in the context of received scripts which structure gender and sexuality. Perplexing for both women and men, but of particular urgency for women, is this relationship between representation and the individual subject. Agonizing over this relationship, Samuel Beckett's Molloy claims, "Saying is inventing." then recants immediately, "Wrong, very rightly wrong. You invent nothing, you think you are inventing, you think you are escaping, and all you do is stammer out your lesson, the remnants of a pennum one day got by heart and long forgotten" (32). Saying is both inventing and being invented, but the "penums," including the hetero-feminine script, have, for the most part, been written by men.

How are these "penums" internalized? How do cultural scripts become psychic scripts? Louis Althusser, analyzing how a subject is "in" ideology, describes

---

6 Beckett's trilogy, *Molloy, Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable* are, I believe, literature's most anguished expression of the struggle with the inadequacy of language, a problem central to feminist efforts to enunciate ourselves. Molloy speaks of the effort "to contrive a being" as, ultimately, a question of language (28). Language, the material out of which we construct ourselves, is arbitrary and unreliable, he reflects. But it is all we have.

7 Beckett's use of the somewhat rare word "penum," which means a duty or an assigned lesson, suggests precisely my understanding of the hetero-feminine script as a lesson which is learned by rote.
the process of *interpellation* in which a social representation is accepted by the individual and becomes real for that individual, becomes self-representation.\(^8\) Teresa deLauretis, extending Althusser's analysis to how a woman is caught "in" gender, maintains that the central question of her work is, "not only how the representation of gender is constructed by the given technology, but also how it becomes absorbed subjectively by each individual" (13).\(^9\) This is, I would agree, the crucial problem.

How does what is outside become inside? De Lauretis makes concrete the femininization process:

\[\ldots\] since the very first time we put a check mark on the little square next to the \textit{F} on the form, we have officially entered the sex-gender system, the social relations of gender, and have become en-gendered as women; that is to say, not only do other people consider us females, but from that moment on we have been representing ourselves as women. Now, I ask, isn't that the same as saying that the \textit{F} next to the little box, which we marked in filling out the form, has stuck to us like a wet silk dress? Or that while we thought that we were marking the \textit{F} on the form, in fact the \textit{F} was marking itself on us? *(Technologies 12)*

The scarlet \textit{F}, constructed by the various technologies of gender and sexuality, is an emblem worn by every woman, as a necessary consequence of being in society.

De Lauretis' narrative of gender assignment as the story of "the \textit{F} next to the little box" that sticks to every woman "like a wet silk dress" could profitably be retold as a parallel narrative of sexual assignment. I would frame a moment in the process by which a woman is caught "in" sexuality in this way: When we received our first Barbie doll for our fourth birthday we received with it the script of presumptive heterosexuality. This script, which, of course, pre-dates our Barbie play and has

---

\(^8\) In my readings of Weldon's novels I examine more closely Althusser's theory of the ideological production of the subject.

\(^9\) Although she uses Althusser's theory of ideology and sees gender as an instance of ideology, DeLauretis disagrees fundamentally with his conclusions which ignore gender and deny agency to the subject.
subtly directed our coming into gender and sexuality from the moment of birth, is, at
last, explicitly spoken by (and through) us as little girls. At this moment we have
officially entered the sex-gender system, the social relations of sexuality, and have
become heterosexual women; that is to say, not only does our Barbie date Ken, but
from that moment on we have been rehearsing lines in which we locate our identity
in and through our relationships with men. Now, I ask, isn't that the same as saying
that the plots that directed our Barbie-Ken play stuck and continue to direct our adult
lives? Or that while we thought that we were slipping those tiny stiletto-heeled shoes
on Barbie's feet, in fact those high heels were constraining our own steps?

By attending closely to a little girl's Barbie and Ken play we may hope to
learn more about how the hetero-feminine script is transmitted, i.e., how the cultural
script of coercive femininity and heterosexuality is "written" onto a single girl-child.
Little girls, who join a community when they get their first Barbie, "play Barbies" in
pairs and in groups, reinforcing and filling in the gaps in each child's understanding of
how men and women are in relation. "No, not that dress," one child says to another.
"Ken is taking her on their first date. Wear the red one." Love is about clothes and
shoes and hair, girls come to understand. Little girls watch big sisters, watch
"Melrose Place" to learn the lines that go with being Barbie, to learn how to dress,
how to get a date with Ken, how to kiss. Patricia Storace's poem "Barbie Doll," is an
adult meditation on Barbie as signifier. Reflecting on that elongated plastic body
with big breasts and wasp waist, Storace recalls the rigidity of Barbie's body, which,
unlike the baby dolls which little girls take to bed, resists caresses. In Barbie's body
and its fashion-model to-be-looked-at-ness Storace finds a link between consumerism
and the marriage market:

The waist is rigid as a doctrine,
the body formed to carry clothes,
the feet shaped to stiletto heels, frozen into point, the toes.
Marked with factory signature,  
yields to credit or to cash,  
made not to caress, but pose;  
modeled for some camera flash.  

The fingers durable and plastic  
webbed together, for a hand,  
the third emerges like a thorn,  
soliciting a wedding band.  

From the start, Barbie play links money and romance in a dream which the Mattel Corporation and the child-owner share. Barbie, who must be the real thing, not an "imitation Barbie," is figured by both as every little girl's success story: the reward for performing the hetero-feminine script well, as Barbie attests, is money, a handsome boyfriend, leisure, and, most important to both Mattel and the little girl, lots and lots of accessories—from tiny pairs of stiletto-heeled shoes to swimming pools, beach houses, and townhouses. Both Barbie and child (and Mattel, of course) reap the rewards of Barbie's status as a beautiful pampered woman in an idealized romantic script—the thrill of a new "outfit" or a new boyfriend.

The link between consumerism and love is quite concrete in Barbie play. If your parents can't afford to buy you lots of Barbie clothes and accessories, they probably can't afford to buy you a Ken doll either. Many of the stories and poems collected in *Mondo Barbie*, the anthology which includes Storace's poem, recall the bitterness of not owning a Ken doll, of being too poor to have a boyfriend doll. For adult and childish fantasies blend in Barbie play, in endless variations on the same story: Barbie puts on an expensive "outfit," Barbie and Ken go on a date, and Ken kisses Barbie. Unless, of course, there is only one Ken for two Barbies. In "Barbie-Q" Sandra Cisneros describes the female rivalry that results from competition over a single Ken:

Every time the same story. Your Barbie is roommates with my Barbie, and my Barbie's boyfriend comes over and your Barbie steals him, okay? Kiss
kiss kiss. Then the two Barbies fight. You dumbell! He's mine. Oh no he's not you stinky! (30)

Because the "kiss kiss kiss" is an integral part of Barbie play there must be a Ken doll for every Barbie, for, by the time a girl gets her first Barbie, she has figured out that girl dolls don't kiss each other—they need a boy doll for that. In these few lines, Cisneros figures the crucial revelation that slowly dawns throughout childhood: what counts, for a woman, is a man. Getting him has something to do with glamorous clothes and big breasts and big hair. Barbies can be friends, but friendship collapses when threatened by rivalry over Ken. Cultural beliefs, attitudes, practices, and values are rehearsed in Barbie and Ken play, as little girls learn the lines which will enable them to assume the role of mature heterosexual woman in a carefully circumscribed hetero-feminine script.

Repetition is the key to the power of the Barbie experience, a power which is attested to not only in the Mondo Barbie collection, but in articles in publications as varied as People and the Utne Reader, in women's outcry when the talking Barbie proclaimed "I hate math," and, perhaps most tellingly, in the trunks of Barbie clothes carefully preserved in the attics of adult women. Playing Barbies is a matter of assuming over and over again a culturally prescribed role within a hetero-feminine script which is widely available for childish imitation. It is the reiterative play which both lends the script force and authority and, at the same time, enables the little girl to become a practiced woman. For it is only with considerable practice that any woman could walk in those stiletto heels—and, more crucially, only with considerable motivation, motivation which the Barbie and Ken story provides. A close reading of Barbie play yields, if only in the most superficial way, an exemplary moment in the process by which women are conscripted simultaneously as gendered and as sexed within a regulatory and self-replicating hetero-feminine script. The inculcation of
gender and sexual scripts happens across a multitude of mundane signifying acts, but most such transactions are so small and so subtle as to be almost invisible. The Barbie doll presents us with both a materialization of the cultural ideals of femininity and a concrete mechanism of the transmission of those ideals.

Since the nineteenth century, as noted in the introduction, every person has been assigned to two identity categories: a male or female gender and a homo- or hetero-sexuality. These identity binaries, which are replicated in Barbie and Ken play, have powerful implications for every aspect of social organization. Although the assignment to a sexual classification is less formal and less clearly articulated than the box on the form that authorizes gender classification, the results are no less far-reaching. The institutionalized discourses by which subjects are produced and regulated—medical, legal, military, psychological, literary—and, of course, children's play—are as eager to affix the "homosexual" or "heterosexual" label as the $M$ or $F$. The dominant culture rigorously delineates parts within the social drama, using all of its diffuse power to conscript women into those roles which bolster the status quo. Women wearing the hetero- and the feminine labels as evidence of their assignment in the sex-gender system begin, even as young girls, to self-identity as heterosexual feminine women. When a girl first checks the $F$ or picks up her Barbie doll she sets in motion (or, more properly, she has had set in motion for her) the hetero-feminine script with its almost infinite set of assumptions, expectations, and limitations. A cultural script, in this way, becomes, for an individual subject, a psychic script.

And thus, in very crude outline, representation becomes self-representation. Continual iterations of a "normal" sexual script produce a "normal" sexual subject. We see ourselves as "normal" or "deviant" according to the ideology which has written our script. As Foucault has argued, "normalization" is one of the great (and I
might argue, the greatest) instruments of power in modernity. Normalization, lubricated by pleasure, is the fuel that drives the hetero-feminine script. It is the allure of normalcy that blinds women to the oppressive nature of the hetero-feminine script as written, and it is the allure of pleasure that binds them as such willing conscripts into the regimes of eros and domesticity. Interrogation of such binding scripts becomes possible only because of the inevitable contradictions and discontinuities which surface among the competing discourses surrounding female sexuality.

Fay Weldon's texts exemplify the production of heterosexuality as scripted behavior and, further, they make visible the apparatuses by which women are conscripted into the hetero-feminine script. The questions which will motivate my analysis of Weldon's fictions are: What are the technologies by which the hetero-feminine script is produced and circulated? How do cultural hetero-feminine scripts become psychic scripts which produce and regulate individual women's sexuality? Is resistance to the "coercive power" of sexual scripts possible? Where, in the territory between the psyche and the culture, does the possibility of agency reside? Through close readings of two of Weldon's novels I will attempt, in my pursuit of the hetero-feminine script, to negotiate this tricky terrain, this borderland, between the world and the subject.

**When Eros and Domesticity Collide: The Fat Woman's Joke**

To illustrate Weldon's simultaneous reiteration and interrogation of the hetero-feminine script, I would like to look closely at her first novel, *The Fat Woman's Joke*.

---

10 See *Discipline and Punish* for an elaboration of Foucault's theory of "the power of the Norm" (184).
Fusing sardonic humor and pain in a tone that continues to define Weldon's texts, *The Fat Woman's Joke* keeps the reader off-balance by revealing the painful, funny, and, finally, productive dissonances among the various scripts by which woman is constructed. In *The Fat Woman's Joke*, as in her other novels, Weldon fulfills Laurie Anderson's dream: "If I were the President, if I were Queen for a Day, . . . I'd rewrite the book of love. I'd make it funny." In Weldon's re-writing, the "book of love," both darker and funnier than any Harlequin romance, becomes a satiric parable of women's entrapment within the hetero-feminine script. Esther, a middle-aged married woman and the "fat woman" of the title, has left home as a result of her husband's infidelity, and, perhaps even less forgivable, of the diet that he decided they should go on and that he polices. Holed up in a tiny, damp rented basement room, Esther eats until she makes herself sick, and then, eats again. The everyday technologies that construct and enforce the hetero-feminine script are enumerated in Esther's words to her perfect—and perfectly contained—friend, Phyllis, who is trying to reconscript Esther into her traditional role. Esther explains her leaving home:

> I did it because the state I was in seemed intolerable, not because I hoped for anything better. And yes, it is true that . . . I have been conscious of a sense of sin, not against Alan, but against the whole structure of society. It is a sin against Parent Teachers Associations and the Stock Exchange and the Town Hall and the Mental Welfare Association and the Law Courts . . . it was a willful sin against all those human organizations that stand between us and chaos, marriage being one of them. My mother was very shocked when she rang home and found me gone. (158)

In Weldon's texts mothers, children, beauty pageants, the PTA, Law Courts, the Mental Welfare Association, the dole, husbands, lovers, doctors, priests, auctioneers, the romance novel—all conspire to uphold what, at first glance, appears to be a univocal hetero-feminine script. However, there are contradictions, discontinuities,

---

11 See Laurie Anderson's "My Eyes" on the album, *Strange Angels*, for the complete lyrics.
tiny slippages between the interested discourses and institutions with their various claims. Holding a magnifying glass up to these disjunctions, Weldon reveals the contradictions that are usually repressed among the scripts which structure women's lives.

In the passage cited above, a catalogue of institutions which Esther feels are arrayed against her, there are a number of cultural codes operating. Most conspicuous among them is the code of sin and salvation. Replacing God as the salvific principle of the universe are "human organizations," "the whole structure of society," and it is against this principle of cultural organization that Esther is conscious of having sinned. Order and chaos, in this account, vie for Esther's soul. An entire constellation of signifiers in the passage above, including "Parent Teachers Associations . . . the Stock Exchange . . . the Town Hall . . . the Law Courts" and, most important to Esther's current crisis, "marriage" stand on the side of order; on the other side, alone, stands Esther's "willful sin." And what is Esther's sin? Of what is she guilty? Esther is fat. She is continuing to eat voraciously. And she has left home. In *Fat Woman* these acts are mutually complicit, both the fat and the abandonment of her husband and home signs of a rebellion against the scripts which have ordered her life. Susan Bordo proposes in "Reading the Slender Body" that body shape and size have the symbolic function in our culture of standing in for "the state of the 'soul'" (88). She argues that fat is a gendered symbol, because self-management is decisively coded male, while hunger and sexuality have always been coded female, and, as such, have always been seen as demanding containment and control (101-103).  

12 Bulges, cellulite and flab have become a metaphor. Bordo

Although, for the most part, I agree with Bordo's persuasive argument about the "meaning" of body size, I would demur that the cultural messages about male self-control are more contradictory than Bordo indicates. While it is true that self-management is most often coded male, it is also the case that uncontrollable male
argues, for anxiety about women's internal processes out of control—anxiety, I would add, about women's attending to their own desires. As fat has been coded as a moral term in the recent discourse of the slender body, Esther's fat is read repeatedly in the novel as the manifestation of her moral condition. Her eating is conflated in her own mind and in the minds of the other characters with her abandonment of her husband. She is fat and an undutiful wife: a sinner.13

In Weldon food has a complex of meanings.14 Just as Eve was forbidden food—and knowledge—by God, Esther is forbidden both by Alan. Both God in the old order and Alan in the new wish to keep women in submission, dependent on them for their very existence; at a dinner party Alan pronounces: "women are what their husbands expect them to be; no more and no less" (28). Eating the apple represents for both Eve and Esther a challenge to patriarchal authority. Reflecting on our postlapsarian state, Kim Chernin mourns: "We have lost an innocence where food is

sexuality is presumed to interfere in masculine rationality. The penis with a mind of its own is an all-too-familiar cultural belief. In other words, self-management and untrammelled sexual appetite are deployed as male characteristics on different occasions and for different purposes, as particular interests require.

13 Patricia Parker, in Literary Fat Ladies, considers the topos of the fat woman in the phallic literary economy, which, she argues, links fat female bodies to female loquacity. She traces the semiotics of the fat woman/wayward woman from the Old Testament Rahab, the redeemed harlot of Jericho, through Renaissance "fat ladies" to Molly Bloom, whose sexual and verbal openness represents most clearly the connection between the copiousness of texts and the copiousness of female bodies. In Weldon's text, Esther's monologues to Phyllis, often spoken while eating ravenously, place Esther in this tradition, and the fear of woman-out-of-control which the trope represents is borne out in Esther's resistance to the hetero-feminine script.

14 M.F.K. Fisher, who wrote about food for over forty years, reflects, "People ask me: Why do you write about food, and eating and drinking? Why don't you write about the struggle for power and security, and about love, the way others do? ...The easiest answer is to say that, like most other humans, I am hungry. But there is more to it than that. ...it happens that when I write of hunger, I am really writing about love and the hunger for it" (353). Esther's insatiable hunger is about a hunger for love, as well as a hunger for autonomy.
concerned" (184). Perhaps, I might argue, this lost innocence is a gain. For Esther, who has spent her adult life tailoring her needs to those of a son and a husband, discovers food as an arena in which to fight for her own identity. In a kind of mock-heroic version of Scarlet O'Hara's "I will never go hungry again," Esther renounces self-denial as she reaches for more frozen fish sticks: "I have no intention, ever again, of doing without what I want" (23). Esther's sin, like Scarlet's, is uncontrolled female desire.

Laura Mulvey, in her influential article, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," argues that one of the solutions to male castration anxiety is to posit woman's castrated condition as the result of either wrong-doing or sickness (13, 15). Narrative drive, according to this argument, stems from an investigation into either the woman's transgression and guilt or into her illness (often psychic). In Fat Woman the diegetic progression derives from a demonstration that Esther is both guilty, as noted above, and sick; furthermore, both the sickness and the sin are depicted as deliberately chosen. Repeatedly Esther is told (by her mother, her friend, her husband) that her having left Alan can only mean that she is "very ill," even "mad.

"Have you seen a doctor?" they ask. Her friend Phyllis counsels her, "You can have your frontal lobes cut, do you know, and then you never worry about a thing. You're just happy all the time. All the time" (170). Esther, however, has found the site of her resistance, a filthy, damp basement apartment where she continues to eat. By alternating Esther's own narrative voice with that of an omniscient narrator, Weldon achieves the double purpose of, one, showing Esther as sick and guilty according to the normative guidelines of hetero-femininity and, two, of showing the normative guidelines themselves as sick and guilty. Although Esther is in no way exonerated nor held up as a healthy response to a sick culture, the culture itself is held accountable for her eating disorder.
In addition to theorizing women's sickness and guilt as a narrative solution to male castration anxiety, Mulvey analyzes another cinematic response to castration anxiety—the fetishization of the female body (13-14). Mulvey's argument about the filmic use of fetishization has value for my present analysis of literary narrative. Esther, as the "fat woman," is fetishized, but with a twist. The usual fetishistic overinvestment in the female body as erotic object is reversed in Weldon's text: the body which is fetishized, held up for scrutiny and voyeurism of sorts, is, in Esther's case, de-eroticized and devalued. The reader's first glimpse of Esther is of a woman wearing an old black dress, reading science fiction novels, watching television, and eating cocoa and chocolate cake: "And she ate, and ate, and drank, and ate" (7). Food is at issue on nearly every page of the text. In the first few pages Esther is shown wearing her food: "When drops of butter fell on to her black dress she rubbed them in with her hand" (9). While her friend Phyllis watches in horrified fascination, Esther eats without pause: "Butter ran down Esther's chin. She salvaged it with her tongue" (9). The voyeurism that is represented by the various visitors to Esther's apartment is shared by the morbid reader; disgust with the mixture of dirt and unpalatable food is mingled with awe at the unapologetic spectacle: "Esther surveyed her plump hands and wrists and laughed. It was a grimy flat, and the butter mingled with the dirt round her nails" (9). A kind of reverse, perverse scopophilia is at work here, both diachetic and extra-diachetic; the characters—and the reader—make of Esther's body a kind of horrible fetishistic object. The food which Esther chooses to eat is, itself, disgusting:

She ate frozen chips and peas and hamburgers, and sliced bread with bought jam and fishpaste, and baked beans and instant puddings, and tinned porridge and tinned suet pudding, and cakes and biscuits from packets. She drank sweet coffee, sweet tea, sweet cocoa and sweet sherry. (8)

The de-eroticized spectacle which Esther presents for our fascinated consumption is contrasted with the "other woman" of the novel, the young and beautiful Susan who is
fetishized in the usual erotic fashion. Interestingly, food is the mode of fetishization here too, but in this case, the woman is metaphorized as food, deliciously available for male consumption. A dialogue between Alan, the husband-antagonist, and Susan his young lover, makes this clear:

"When you stop talking," he said, "you are wonderful. You are a comforting, delicious child, all peaches and cream. Your breasts are like melons, your breath is like honey, your hair is like—no, spun silk is inedible."
"Spun toffee?"
"Wonderful! I would rather make love to you than eat a dozen creamcakes . . . . " (87)

Susan colludes in her own fetishization in this scene, a collusion that women are taught from childhood.

Alan is suffering a mid-life crisis, marked in the text by his diet, his affair with his secretary Susan, and his newly-awakened and unwarranted self-image as a sensitive artist. The castration anxiety which underlies Alan's mid-life attempts at virility is alleviated by projecting the anxiety onto his wife Esther. When Esther complains that Alan has taken everything from her and gives nothing in return, "no love, no affection, no sex, nothing," Alan retorts, "Take a look at yourself. You are disgusting. What do you expect?" (180). By blaming his own lack (of love, of sex) on Esther's disgusting appearance, Alan is free to believe in his own potency. The gaze of the male subject, in this case Alan's venomous scrutiny of Esther's body, equates Esther's castration, or lack, with her sin, overeating. In this way male anxiety (Alan's) is alleviated, for the moment at least, because Esther deserves her castration. She is, after all, both a sinner and mad.

The cultural codes which have been the subject of analysis so far—sin and sickness—work to regulate women's bodies, keeping them within the dominant scripts of a particular time and place. The discipline exercised by the various ideological institutions which shall be the focus of the remainder of this chapter
produces what Foucault terms "docile bodies." 

Using a double system of gratification and punishment, the "disciplinary networks" or "mechanisms of normalization," as Foucault variously calls the judicial functions of medicine, psychology, education, public assistance, law, and social work, provide a "new micro-physics' of power" which produces subjected bodies (306, 139). Although Foucault, as has been noted earlier, fails to use gender as a category of analysis, his analytics of power lend themselves particularly to a study of the sexual positions made available to women by cultural scripts. A segment of dialogue from The Fat Woman reads like a bit of theory straight out of Foucault:

"Marriage is too strong an institution for me," said Esther. "It is altogether too heavy and powerful." And indeed at that moment she felt her marriage to be a single steady crushing weight, on top of which bore down the entire human edifice of city and state, learning and religion, commerce and law, pomp, passion and reproduction. Beneath this mighty structure the little needles of this feeling which flickered between Alan and her were dreadful in their implication. When she challenged her husband, she challenged the universe.

(11)

Here, as throughout the text, Weldon makes clear that Esther's quarrel is not only with her husband, but with the "entire human edifice of city and state" with which he is identified. Alan is, indeed, identical with "the universe" in this passage. Marriage is the most powerful and immediate of the institutions which are crushing Esther; most overwhelming, however, is the fact that the entire edifice is crushing her with a "single steady weight." The "feelings" between Esther and Alan, which, it might be expected, would provide some relief from the oppressive weight of the culture, are, instead, "dreadful in their implication." It is Esther herself who is full of dread because she perceives, although dimly, that it is the feelings between her and Alan which have betrayed her; it is these feelings, promising love and pleasure, which have

---

solicited and won her compliance with the oppressive system of "passion and reproduction," now associated in Esther's mind with the other oppressive institutions of city and state, "learning and religion, commerce and law." Understated as "little needles of feeling which flickered," these feelings nevertheless have heavy implications here, for they have been instrumental in producing Esther as a "docile body," one who has learned well the dominant cultural scripts.  

16 The Fat Woman's *Joke* may be read as one woman's attempted rebellion against her docility, as she digs in in resistance to the received scripts. Armed only with desperation, however, Esther's resources, as will be seen, are insufficient to the task.

**Ideology and the Family Romance**

Massed in a struggle against Esther's solitary desperation are the institutional forces which conspire to fix her sexual position. Althusser's theory of Ideological State Apparatuses, or ISAs, provides a tool for analysis of how this works. Althusser theorizes that individuals are hailed or interpellated as concrete subjects by ideology; i.e., ideology functions in such a way as to "recruit" subjects, calling, as it were, to an individual, "Hey, you there!" ("Ideology" 173-74). This hailing, which is always material, operates concretely as an apparatus of power and has the effect of

---

16 Foucault's genealogies of power, discipline, and sexuality have demonstrated that there is a powerful economy of desire and pleasure which increasingly replaces legal coercion, or at least supplements it, as the dominant mode of social regulation. See, for example, the discussion of the "perpetual spirals of power and pleasure," in which Foucault argues that the institutions which regulate sexuality (medicine, psychiatry, the schools and the family) function as a mechanism with a double purpose: pleasure and power, including the pleasure that comes from exercising power and the pleasure that comes from evading it (*The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1. 45). Power that is exercised as complicity from below, through the experience of pleasure, is, Weldon's texts demonstrate, added to the institutional weight of power from above in keeping women in their places. Esther dimly perceives this effect of pleasures and thus, characterizes them as "dreadful in their implication."
constituting subjects within a given ideology. The ISAs enumerated by Althusser parallel almost exactly the institutions and practices which Esther sees allied as her foes: religious, educational, legal, political, cultural ISAs, and, of course, the family ISA (143). The principal difference between Ideological State Apparatuses as theorized by Althusser and the mechanisms of power in Weldon is that, for Althusser, performing a Marxist analysis, the term suggests the complicity of so-called democratic governments in furthering the goals of capitalism; for Weldon, on the other hand, the enemy is not the state, per se, but the institutions themselves as they oppress women. Although apparently disparate and contradictory, the ISAs, nevertheless, constitute a unity. Althusser argues, operating beneath the ruling ideology (146). This is a crucial claim, for if, as both Althusser and Esther claim, the structures of power operate as a single oppressive weight, and if, as Althusser also claims, it is impossible to be outside ideology, resistance would be impossible. I will argue, however, that, there are, in fact, cracks in the seemingly monolithic ruling ideology; I will argue, too, that, competing ideologies, although working to reproduce existing power relations, do, simultaneously, produce contradictions, dissonances, disjunctions.

Althusser's theory of Ideological State Apparatuses, as a Marxist analysis, is intended to demonstrate that, "in order to exist, every social formation must reproduce the conditions of its production . . ." (128). This claim is useful for a feminist analysis of the production and re-production of heterosexuality. It is necessary, we might conclude, based on Althusser's argument, for the existing social formation, in order to guarantee its own continued existence, to reproduce the current conditions of gendered and sexed power relations. Althusser's ungendered theory, however, fails to acknowledge the fact that men and women are interpellated into subject positions
within ideology in gender-specific ways. Esther understands this; she complains, "there's one law for husbands and another for wives." "Of course there is," responds Alan. "Wives need husbands more than husbands need wives . . . . Such is the structure of our society" (97). With little social power available to her, Esther, nevertheless, makes an effort to escape this structure which hierarchizes wives and husbands. She retreats from the scene of her conscription, her marriage. Althusser describes the assent of the subject to his subjection as the inscription in life of "the admirable words of the prayer: "Amen—So be it" (181-82). Esther, however, in the middle of her life, finds herself refusing to gracefully and gratefully utter these words of acquiescence. Her rejection of her sexual position, however, leaves her without viable alternatives in a system in which she is subject to the law of wives.

"Amen—So be it" carries with it, in the context of the marriage-family institution, echoes of those other "admirable words," "I do." Bodies become docile bodies in the material embeddedness of the family, and, for Esther, the consequence of her marriage vows was submission to the hetero-feminine script, written with a subtext of pregnancy, domestic servitude, and economic dependence on her husband. Ironically, but also, not surprisingly, the most ardent apologists for the hetero-feminine script is a woman, Esther's friend Phyllis. Phyllis is herself, single-handedly, a kind of ISA. The self-effacing work of ideology is made visible by Weldon as Phyllis attempts to cajole Esther into returning to her proper role as a woman. When Esther announces firmly that she "will never be a wife again," Phyllis appeals to "nature." "It's not right to think like that. It's perfectly natural for women to be wives, and to look after husbands who are not really fit to look after themselves" (101). That the main argument for remaining contentedly within the conventional hetero-feminine script is given to a woman is illustrative of how thoroughly internalized the script can be. Phyllis, who is, herself, exemplary of exaggerated femininity, sees the male-
female relationship in the most reductive way, on what Esther calls a "comic-strip level" (102). Moreover, her comic-strip femininity is precisely that which makes a woman most desirable to men. In a scene in which he seduces Phyllis, Alan tells her that she is a "proper feminine woman":

You are gentle and docile and slim and pretty and neat, like a doll. You have pretty little eyes that never see more than they should. You are not in the least clever and you never say anything devastating. I should have married you." (125)

A docile body is what Weldon's male characters invariably want, a doll, decorative rather than clever.

*Fat Woman*, like many of Weldon's novels, is framed as a narrative in which one woman tells another her story as a cautionary, instructive tale. Phyllis ostensibly visits Esther to offer her help, but even the impenetrable Phyllis senses that Esther is on to something. "You are so clever and I am very stupid, but it's not my fault," she cries (111). Phyllis, although she functions as an apparatus of the status quo, is not so thoroughly stupid that she is completely unmoved by Esther's rebellion. Frightened by Esther's sternness and recalcitrance, she says, "Esther you've made me afraid."

"You are right to feel afraid," Esther replies. "Why am I right to feel afraid, Esther?" Phyllis persists. "What is there to be afraid of? I think and think but I can't make it out. You make me feel all kinds of things are going on underneath which I don't understand" (13). What is going on underneath, the reader soon realizes, is the slow surfacing of the repressed plots of the hetero-feminine script, the oppressive underside of the conventional happy ending.

The controlling subplots of the hetero-feminine script that surface in *Fat Woman* are eros and domesticity. Here, as well as in other Weldon texts, the cult of eros and the cult of domesticity collide in ways which are often debilitating and, in some cases, finally enabling for women. In the nineteenth century and even into the
twentieth these two models of feminine identity, eros and domesticity, were kept relatively separate. Useful for my reading of Weldon is Steven Seidman's documentation, in *Romantic Longings: Love in American, 1883-1980*, of the increasing eroticization of marriage in the second half of the twentieth century. In the nineteenth century marriage was primarily a domestic arrangement; eros was relegated to sex outside of marriage. Prior to World War II, sex was constructed as romantic love, according to Seidman, whereas after the War there was an increasing differentiation of the erotic from the romantic. Sex became framed, particularly among the middle class, not only as a way to express and maintain romantic love but, specifically, as erotic pleasure and self-expression. At the same time as there were increasing erotic expectations of marriage, however, it could be argued that expectations about the role of the wife as domestic grew also. John Kenneth Galbraith's reading of consumer culture argues just that. He claims that "the higher economic purposes of women" in a capitalist economy are to serve as managers of consumption. With the disappearance of a servant class in this century, "the richer the family, the more indispensably menial must be the role of the wife" (508). In order to conceal the economic nature of the role of wife in industrial culture, Galbraith argues, her service is placed securely in the domain of the family and the soul, unassailable myths that disguise her labor as a matter of the heart. I want to suggest that the increasing tyranny of the scripts of both eros and domesticity in the life of a single woman inevitably leads to conflict.

The crucial site of this conflict in *Fat Woman* is the diet. The focus of Esther's performance of the domestic script has been, throughout her married life, her preparation of food. Food has occupied her days and been the source of shared pleasure with her husband at night. The diet—Alan's decision that she should be thin—threatens all this. The erotic script, closely allied here to compulsory thinness,
is in explosive competition with the domestic script. As the role of a married woman has been sexualized in the latter half of the century, eros has increasingly become conflated with beauty, and beauty with thinness, with the result that ordinary women find themselves in bondage to the beauty regime. Sexuality for women has come to be seen as equivalent to beauty: beauty = sex = happiness, the movies and ads tell women. Analogous to Galbraith's scrutiny of the cult of domesticity in the fifties, Naomi Wolf's and Susan Faludi's analyses of the cult of beauty (read eros) in the nineties both address the question of "why now?" about what each calls the "beauty backlash." 17 I would answer that, as women's desire becomes particularly problematic in a culture and is perceived as being a threat to the status quo, as it is today, women's bodies are subject to increasing symbolic and material regulation. Just as the cult of domesticity was not about a clean house, the cult of beauty is not about a thin body; both are about the control of women and the preservation of male privilege.

Issues of control and male privilege are at the heart of the collision of the domestic regime and the erotic regime in Esther and Alan's marriage. At this point in their life together, comfort, identified by both of them with food, is at the center of the relationship. Eros has given way to domesticity; their lives are dull, predictable, and delicious. Esther is a good cook. A pattern of shared pleasure in food has evolved in their marriage. Alan phones from work to inquire about dinner plans so that he may anticipate the pleasures of the evening; Esther lavishes time and attention on the meals she shops for, prepares, and enjoys with Alan each night. The diet that Alan decides upon is, at once, a denial of the pleasure which he and Esther share, an

attempt on his part to regain the eros of his youth, and a determination to exercise
control over his wife. He monitors every bite she puts into her mouth during the diet,
falling into a rage when he finds her "cheating." Alan's rage which reflects the
current cultural obsession with compulsory thinness, like that cultural obsession, is
not about beauty, but about female obedience. He wants Esther thin and he wants her
obedient. Esther understands this, telling Phyllis:

A woman has all too much substance in a man's eyes at the best of times.
That is why men like women to be slim. Her lack of flesh negates her. The
less of her there is, the less notice he need take of her. (66)

And yet, Alan is infatuated with the slender Susan who has come to represent for
him erotic possibility. My reading of the sexual script which links Susan and Esther
and Alan is an attempt to elucidate this paradox.

The hetero-feminine script, which circulates widely in the culture and which is
absorbed, not only by little girls, but also by little boys as an entitlement, promises
that women will fulfill two functions for them when they become men: one,
nurture, comfort, and domesticity and, two, erotic pleasure. Esther's position in
the text is that of a woman who had succumbed years before to the tyranny of the
domestic script (a tyranny exercised, in part, through the tedium of housework), but is
finally pushed into a realization of her intolerable situation. She says, in frustration:

Running a house is not a sensible occupation for a grown woman. . . . Was I
to die still polishing and dusting, washing and ironing, seeking to find in this
way my fulfillment? (73-74).

Susan, in contrast to Esther, is shown giving an enthusiastic performance of the
erotic script. Telling her friend Brenda about her affair with Alan, she describes a
"kind of lightning love" which she explicitly contrasts with domesticity and
"matriarchal destiny" (38). Esther's embeddedness in the domestic script must be
read next to Susan's recent recruitment (after a life-long initiation) into the erotic
script.
A letter which Weldon writes from the future to the young Rebecca West, on the occasion of her giving birth to an illegitimate son by H.G. Wells, throws some light on what is going on in the Susan-Esther pair. Weldon writes:

It is a phenomenon commonly enough observed: a man takes up with a woman who seems to be the opposite of his mother, turns her into his mother, and then deserts her for her opposite. Heaven protect the woman who encounters such a man. She will throw away her life, her identity, and be deserted for her pains. (91)

This particular version of the Oedipus plot permeates the Fat Woman narrative. Alan and Esther's marriage can be read as the story of a man who, repressing his desire for his mother, marries a woman who seems to be her opposite, and who then turns his wife into his mother. Esther says to Alan, "You make me sound just like my mother. Is that what you really think of me?" (31). The truth is that, while ostensibly marrying his mother's opposite, Alan was unconsciously looking for a replacement for his mother as the object of erotic desire and as the source of comfort and nurturance. Seeking Mom, the erotic object, he has turned her into Mom, the domestic nurturer. Bored now and wishing to recapture his youth, Alan is seeking a new erotic object. Baldly stated, the plot looks like this: Man marries mother figure as eros, turns her into mother as domestic, seeks new mother eros. Alan's new erotic object, Susan, moreover, looks more like a daughter than either a wife or a mother. She is, in fact, the same age as his wife when he married her and his mother when he was an infant, thus enabling him to relive both early desires.

In Weldon's text there are two distinct clusters of signifiers associated with Esther as wife and Susan as mistress. Esther is, of course, "fat." Her "resistance" to Alan's command is particularly frustrating to him because he is accustomed to her compliance; as a third element of the signifying cluster, Esther is, throughout the text associated with "permanence" in Alan's life. Susan, by contrast, is thin. She is not only compliant, but is complicit in a business relationship of domination and
subordination. Above all, she is temporary. "She is thin. She is temporary," Alan tells Esther (30). The playful resistance which she offers to his regime is tolerated because of the evanescence of her position as a temporary secretary and as his mistress, and, of course, because her resistance is playful, part of the sex games they play. Alan himself is dimly aware of the double standard by which he judges Susan's actions. When considering her skimpy, sexy clothing, he thinks, "it scarcely seemed suitable attire for a secretary in an advertising agency. It would never have been allowed in a permanent girl" (63). What is allowed, what is, after all, desired in a "temporary girl" is altogether of a different order than what one expects of one's wife. When describing Susan to Esther, Alan tells her that she, Esther is different: "You have a clear notion of what is important in life. Namely, money, comfort, food, order and stability" (30). And yet, despite his stated contentment with Esther's priorities, Alan, moments later, puts his wife on a diet, setting in motion a conflict in which the cultural scripts of domesticity and eros jostle for supremacy in Esther's psyche, leaving her with an irreconcilable sense of dissonance.

The incestuous nature of Alan's relationship with Susan is suggested repeatedly in their little-girl/daddy exchanges. "Stop playing the little girl," he says to her playfully, acknowledging indirectly that it is this, in fact, which attracts him to her. Susan, telling her friend that she feels "quite like a daughter to him," adds, "And when one's father turns lascivious eyes upon one, that's it, isn't it? You get all stirred up inside" (37). Much of the pleasure which each takes in the affair is bound up with transgressing the Oedipal taboo. The Oedipus plot which grounds the Esther-Susan-Alan narrative has one additional major character: Peter, Esther's and Alan's son. The incest taboo is explicitly evoked when Peter starts sleeping with his father's mistress. In a complicated scene in which Peter tells Susan that she reminds him of his mother "in her thinner moments," he continues, "You would have made a smashing
stepmother. In an incestuous kind of way" (129). As the novel ends, Peter and Susan are a couple, and the scripted cycle repeats. Susan confesses to Peter that she is tired of living the way she does (i.e., having affairs), and Peter assures her that it is just because she has never met the "right man." And "he put his arm around her, conscious that here his father's arm had been before him" (131). Peter's attraction to Susan is fed by the knowledge that he is supplanting his father in her bed. And so, in a literalization of the Freudian family romance, Peter will marry a woman who not only reminds him of his mother, but who has, in fact, slept with his father, thus, winning the seemingly unwinnable Oedipus game. He will, the text seems to predict, turn Susan into his mother in her fatter moments, and the erotic script will give way once again to the domestic script.

The father-son rivalry in the text is paralleled by a mother-daughter antagonism. When Esther lists the mechanisms of power that conspire to keep her in the role of conventional wife, she concludes the complaint with "My mother was very shocked when she rang home and found me gone" (158). In Fat Woman mothers are the most fanatic transmitters of the hetero-feminine script and the most vigilant of the slightest deviance from normalcy. The two women who try to resist complete conscription, Esther and Susan's friend Brenda, both have mothers determined to wring submission from them. Esther's mother ascribes her daughter's "madness" to too much thinking (echoes of the nineteenth century): "You were too clever that was the trouble . . . . Your father would stimulate you, that was the trouble. He encouraged you to think, when what you needed was the exact opposite" (159). Brenda's mother suspects Lesbianism when Brenda tells her that she wants something different than her mother has had. And of the promiscuous Susan, Brenda's mother says confidently, "inside your friend Susan, struggling to get out, is a dumpy little woman in a checked apron with a rolling pin in the pocket" (132). As it turns out, she
is right about Susan. Why? Because, as Weldon's text demonstrates, the hetero-
feminine script circulating in the culture is prescriptive rather than descriptive, and
the normative representations of feminine sexuality are monitored and reproduced by
mechanisms of power as varied as bosses, the PTA, the Law Courts—and mothers.
Female subjects are interpellated into the hetero-feminine script so successfully that
they themselves, in many cases, become the most ardent advocates of the script to
deviant women. For Phyllis, both mothers, and even Susan—all the women except
Esther—the cultural scripts which constitute female sexuality as "heterosexual" and
"feminine" have become psychic scripts.

Esther's singular resistance comes after years of living within the hetero-
feminine script, and is, as we have seen, produced by a painful collision between two
sub-scripts: the erotic and the domestic. It is true that she thinks too much. She
alone, of the female characters, is given insight into what is at stake in her
acquiescence or resistance. Weldon uses Esther's voice to name the institutions by
which women's identities are scripted: her pain opens up for her a clear vision of
whose interests are served by the hetero-feminine script. The diet, which confounds
Esther's sense of her own femininity, forces her to see that it—and she—are subject to
male authorization. Until the diet, within her own domain, her kitchen, she felt
autonomous. When even this limited site of autonomy has been usurped by her
husband, she rebels. Near the end of the novel she asserts, "I am not going back"
(160). But in the end she goes back. Esther has been a threat to the cultural status
quo, and, as such, has been visited by a parade of interested persons who have
attempted to bring her back within the script. The threat which Esther poses will not,
however, bring down the edifice of male power. Her rebellion, born out of despair
and stubbornness, can conceive of no alternate script. Although she sees the hetero-
feminine script for what it is, saying definitively "Marriage is a con trick," she lacks
the cultural power to achieve any kind of real change in her life (77). Her retirement to the bleak basement apartment is a desperate attempt to create an independent space. She says defiantly, "I wanted to save my outrage for myself" (170). But she has been damaged by a script which has granted her so little autonomy as an adult.

If we read Esther's eating as a resistance to the hetero-feminine script, her declaration at the end of the novel, "I don't feel hungry any more" can be read as defeat (184). The pressure to return to the script, together with her inability to imagine an alternative, has stolen her hunger for life. Faced with the relentless nagging of both Phyllis and Alan, who have joined forces to bring her home, Esther is finally "defeated." She tells Phyllis, "I wait to die" and, a few pages later, "I might as well be there [Alan's house] as here. It doesn't seem to make much difference where one is" (185, 188). Esther's desire, represented in the text, by her insatiable hunger, has been squelched; her discontent has become resignation. Although her psychic script has not, perhaps, been brought into line with the cultural script, her body has been reclaimed. A "docile body" will once again perform the functions of the hetero-feminine script. Esther, weakened by her years of submission to the cultural imperatives of femininity and heterosexuality, lacks the resources to sustain her resistance or to imagine an alternative. In *Fat Woman*, her first novel, Weldon begins to explore what I see as a life-long preoccupation: how the hetero-feminine script is written and circulated in the culture by various mechanisms of normalization. A critique of the script as prescriptive for women continues to motivate her later fiction, as well as an increasingly sophisticated engagement with what I have framed as the problem of how cultural scripts become psychic scripts. Esther is defeated by her conscription into the hetero-feminine script; in subsequent Weldon texts, however, intervention into the scripting process seems, at times, to be possible—for a price.
Romance Kills: *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*

Ruth, the protagonist of *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*, believes of women who lead narrow, unhappy, sometimes suicidal lives, that "Love has killed them" (7). As represented in novel after novel by Weldon, it is the ideology of romantic love that wins women's compliance with the conventional hetero-feminine script, a script which puts women at the mercy of husbands, as well as the entire "world of power—of judges, priests and doctors, the ones who tell the women what to do and how to think" (137). Although the text explicitly challenges the world of judges, priests, and doctors, Weldon reserves her most biting satire in *She-Devil* for the ideology of romantic love, particularly as inscribed in the false banalities of the romance novel. Offering pleasure—or, more often, merely the promise of pleasure—romantic love, according to Weldon, obscures the oppressive nature of marriage for women. My analysis of *Fat Woman* focused on Weldon's scrutiny of the ideological institutions through which the hetero-feminine script is produced and circulated. My reading of *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* will take as its point of departure Weldon's critique of the romance novel which, the text demonstrates, operates as a powerful transmitter of the hetero-feminine script.\(^\text{18}\) The romance works both as a representation which circulates in the culture and as a psychic script for individual women which produces and regulates their identity as congruent with the cultural imperatives of femininity and heterosexuality. Stories are powerfully persuasive conventions which produce and circulate the clichés of a culture; as perpetuators of a congruence between the social meanings surrounding romantic love and individual

\(^{18}\) For feminist critiques of the romance novel, see Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance*, an analysis of romance reader's motives and reading habits based on field research, and Tania Modleski's *Loving with a Vengeance*, in which she argues that the romance stresses the "cost of revolts" against what I call the hetero-feminine script.
beliefs and expectations, they are, perhaps, unmatched. The process by which this
congruence is obtained and, on occasion disrupted, will be the subject of my reading
of She-Devil.

In She-Devil, as in Fat Woman, the body, which is the primary locus of
patriarchal control over women, serves as both the reality and the metaphor of
women's oppression. The power of the norm, which appears in She-Devil in the guise
of the romance novel, is deployed to produce women as "docile bodies." I will
ground my argument about the romance novel as a crucial site where cultural scripts
become psychic scripts in current theories of performativity and performance, arguing
that it is in the space between the two that the possibility of agency exists. The
hetero-feminine script in She-Devil is as inexorable as in Fat Woman. But, whereas
Esther was pushed to the edge of tolerance by the catastrophic diet, Ruth, the narrator-
protagonist of The Life and Loves of a She-Devil, is pushed over the edge by her
husband's affair with the beautiful, tiny, wealthy feminine writer of romance novels,
Mary Fisher. This event acts as the catalyst for another explosive collision of the
erotic and domestic scripts, with a similar effect of unveiling the hierarchical power
relations which ground the hetero-feminine script. The difference between the two
novels, however, is that, unlike Esther, Ruth finds the will, i.e., is able to summon the
resources, to act. The very possibility of will, I will suggest, is enabled by such a
collision of competing scripts.

Ruth Patchett, the she-devil of the title, concludes her narrative with the
biographical summary, "I am a lady of six foot two, who had tucks taken in her legs.
A comic turn, turned serious" (276, 278). Weldon's satiric novel, a study of sexed
and gendered power relations, deserves a close reading because the text foregrounds
the paradoxical relationship between scripts which produce subjects and subjects who
participate in the production of those scripts. In the course of this comic-serious
novel, Ruth undergoes a virtuosic high-tech transformation: she has six inches lopped off her legs and undergoes extensive and technically fantastic plastic surgery to entirely alter her appearance, duplicating exactly the face and figure of Mary Fisher, romance writer and lover of Ruth's husband Bobbo. Giving full vent to her obsessive hatred (coded as empowering in the text), Ruth casts off the constraints of the heterosexual feminine script, cures herself of "niceness," and becomes a she-devil. When Ruth sets fire to her own house and delivers her unattractive children and pets to Mary and Bobbo to care for, Mary's exquisite Tower house and her perfect life rapidly disintegrate into chaos; even in the High Tower domesticity elbows out eros. Over a period of several years Mary loses her beauty and wealth, succumbs to the demands of querulous children and a demanding mate, and dies of cancer. Bobbo, once a self-centered, fatuous, and unfaithful husband, loses his lover, his career, and his freedom when Ruth's scheme to implicate him in major embezzlement puts him in prison.

A plot which, in outline seems mean and vicious, is actually, in Weldon's hands, deftly comic. The sheer excess of the revenge plot lightens the tone, while the serious interrogation of the romantic plot lends weight to a comic novel. The text and the sub-text occupy parallel planes in a matrix of fantastic plot lines: equally improbable are Ruth's physical transformation and her psychological transformation, her fabulous plastic surgery and her equally fabulous manipulation of the power regime. In its critique of the mechanisms of power and its interrogation of the ideology of the body and of marriage, Fat Woman anticipated the concerns and even the characters of The Life and Loves of a She-Devil. In Fat Woman, which reads almost like a textual commentary on the later book, Esther scolds Phyllis for having a breast enlargement to please her husband:

You ought to be ashamed. It was a degrading thing to do. To allow your body to be tampered with by a man, for the gratification of a man, conforming to a wholly masculine notion of what a woman's body ought to be. That you,
a decent woman, should offer yourself up as a martyr to the great bosom-and-ass mystique; should pander to the male attempt to relate not to the woman as a whole, but to portions of the female anatomy; should be so seduced by masculine values that you allow your breasts to be slit open and stuffed with plastic! (136-37)

What would Esther say to Ruth (if she could get into her novel). Ruth, who choosing to have her entire body slit, cut, plucked, stuffed and rebuilt, is almost a caricature of contemporary technologies of the body?

The doctor performing this extreme version of cosmetic surgery is accused by his wife of being a "reductionist" for transforming Ruth into the feminine ideal, "an impossible male fantasy made flesh" (259). His self-justification is that "all she has ever wanted is to be like other women" (253). Yes and no. For Ruth, representation—out there—has literally become self-representation, as she transforms her body into the ideal female body; the cultural script of female sexuality has become a psychic script with physiological effect, reversing the essentialist claim that "biology equals destiny." And yet, despite Ruth's seeming recuperation by the dominant ideology of female sexuality, I will argue that Ruth's active collusion with the hetero-feminine script is a self-conscious negotiation with the realities of current power relations. To assume that Ruth's embeddedness in the patriarchal definition of woman is a failure of Weldon's feminist point of view, as some critics do, is to both confuse Ruth's point-of-view with Weldon's and to assume that feminist heroines always achieve self-definition and liberation. At the same time harmed by her oppression and made cunning by that oppression, Ruth spends several years in two

19 Alan Wilde is such a critic who argues for Weldon's ultimate rejection of feminism in favor of an "ethic of means and middles" (412). His analysis of The Life and Loves of a She-Devil, one of a small number of critical studies of Weldon ultimately, I believe, misses the point of the novel, because he substitutes his politics for Weldon's. Dismissing, at once, Weldon's feminism and the "dispensation" of poststructuralism, Wilde reads the novel as a parable of the over-reacher.
parallel pursuits: one, learning the rules of power which enable her to amass the capital she requires to transform her into Mary's duplicate, and two, destroying the original Mary and bringing Bobbo completely under her power.

Ruth's gradual accession to power is chronicled in the metaphor of the Tower as a kind of biblical refrain or Greek chorus which is introduced in the first line of the text: Mary Fisher lives in a High Tower . . . ." Each recurrence of the refrain measures the progress of Ruth's scheme to wreak revenge on Mary, whose fall from power is marked as the refrain changes. In early versions, Mary's life in the Tower reads like one of her romances:

Mary Fisher lives in the High Tower with my husband, Bobbo, and writes about the nature of love, and sees no reason why everyone should not be happy. (55)

And:

Mary Fisher lives in the High Tower. She loves it there. Was there ever a more enchanting address? (73)

A later version of the refrain, after Ruth's intervention into her life, reveals that her story-book life has changed into a comic tale of horror:

Mary Fisher lives in the High Tower and wishes she didn't. She doesn't want to live anywhere, in fact. Quite frankly, she wants to be dead. She wants to be at one with the stars and the foaming sea, she wishes the flame of her life to burn out and be over, forever. She is romantic, even when suicidal. (243)

As this passage indicates, Mary Fisher sees herself always as one of her own romantic heroines; this illusion contrasts more and more vividly with Ruth's hard-won clarity of vision. The High Tower, which provides a trope for the literal self-transformation of the large, clumsy, powerless Ruth into the tiny, fragile, seductively powerful Mary Fisher, operates also, paradoxically, as a central signifier of phallic power, to which women have access, the text maintains, only by virtue of their beauty. Looking closely at power relations, Ruth determines that, for a woman, living within what
appears to be an almost Orwellian dominant ideology, beauty is power, fragility is strength, and smallness is greatness. She says, "I want to look up to men, that's what I want" (174). Ruth's longing to replace her large body with a small one is evidence of what Catherine MacKinnon has called the "eroticization of women's subordination" (221). In the Orwellian system in which Ruth finds herself (a world familiar to the reader), subordination, when eroticized, perversely yields a measure of power. The final chapter, in which the transformation of Ruth into Mary is complete, begins with Ruth's assertion of her newly acquired power, signified by her possession of the Tower:

Now I live in the High Tower . . . . (276)

When she invites Mary's former servant-lover to her bed, Ruth makes sure that her husband Bobbo knows, claiming that that is the only pleasure which she takes in Garcia's body: "To join with him is a political, not a sexual act" (276). In Weldon's wicked satire, beauty is power, pleasure is always troubled, and sex is always political. Ruth accedes to the Tower, however, only through an act of spectacular and grotesque self-mutilation, an act in which she ruthlessly eradicates her own identity, replacing it, ironically, with the "ideal woman" of the romance novel.

Weldon's feminist parody of the romance novel heaps blame on the real thing for the "lies" told to women about love. In the opening lines of She-Devil, Ruth introduces her obsession: Mary Fisher "writes a great deal about the nature of love. She tells lies. . . . She is a writer of romantic fiction. She tells lies to herself, and to the world." Later, after Mary has stolen her husband, Ruth says that she could forgive her many things, but that she can't forgive her novels (211). For it is the novels that conscript the middle-class women in Eden Grove and the working-class women of Bradwell Park into the hetero-feminine script, and it is the novels that anaesthetize them to the material conditions of their lives. Narcotized readers, of course, are blind
to the ideological work of the romance novel which operates to keep women in
subordinate roles, with the result that they buy the entire hetero-feminine script when
they buy her latest book. Vickie, one of the conscripts from Bradwell Park, a young
single mother, a reader of romance novels and a victim of their promises of love,
looks around her with

surprise that the saucepans should be so thin, beds so broken, debts so
worrying, and the children not just prone to sore throats and chilblains, but so
obstreperous. It was not what she had meant at all. (199)

It was not what the Harlequins had promised.20

If we read Weldon’s text as a sort of perverse parody of the romance novel,
Ruth’s critique of romantic “lies” and her decision to opt out of the domestic script in
order to use the erotic script to achieve power immediately thrusts us into the problem
of agency. To begin to address the difficult question of how Ruth uses the romance
script for her own ends I would like to raise the following questions. If the function
of ideology is to make itself invisible in its interpellation of subjects, how, precisely,
does Ruth manage to see what is at stake in her conscription into the hetero-feminine
script? If we assume that Ruth cannot step outside of the hetero-feminine script to
critique it, how does she gain the distance to see her own subjectivity as an effect of
power? If cultural scripts operate by concealing their work in the formation of
psychic scripts, how does the text manage to foreground this usually hidden work?
And how does the Weldon text position the reader to challenge her own seduction by

20 Rachel M. Brownstein, in her delightful and persuasive analysis of the heroine of
the romantic novel, argues that “getting high on heroines,” for young women, is really
about loving an idealized image of themselves (xiv-xv). “To want to be a heroine is
to want to be something special, something else, to want to change, to be changed,
and also to want to be the same,” Brownstein claims (xv). While I agree with her
contention that romances raise important questions for women, e.g., about the relation
of intimacy and identity, I would also insist that the romance novel does “tell lies” to
women about locating their own identity in a man and about the “happily-ever-after”
as the culmination of the story, when it is, in every case, just the beginning.
the romance plot? These, then, are the questions which motivate my attempt to elaborate a theory of the performative which gives way to performance. Such a theory would be one approach to locating agency in the movement from cultural script to psychic script.

Any attempt to theorize the process of normalization in which cultural scripts are internalized as psychic scripts must begin with J. L. Austin's theory of performatives. As first theorized by Austin, performatives were peculiar and special utterances, used not just to say things, but rather to do things. Austin established rigorous conditions which must be met in order for an utterance to be a performative; only institutional acts, following a prescribed formula, met such standards. Examples of such explicit performatives, which Austin termed "illocutionary" acts, are:

I hereby pronounce you man and wife.

I hereby christen you Mary.

I hereby find you guilty.

Such a definition of performative is particular and narrow, confining itself to ritual and ceremonial functions uttered by a speaker vested with the authority to make his word deed.

Austin subsequently revised his theory to include most (or, perhaps, all) utterances, even those normally assumed to be merely descriptive of reality, providing new insight into the \textit{how} of normalization. If a performative is language which \textit{produces} the effects which it \textit{names}, cultural scripts, it may be extrapolated, work to

\footnote{Austin's development of his performative theory is recorded in his William James Lectures, delivered at Harvard in 1955, which are collected under the title, \textit{How to Do Things with Words}. For a scholarly, but accessible, treatment of Austin's theory and the subsequent theorizing of performatives, the implications of which are formidable for feminist theory, see Stephen C. Levinson's \textit{Pragmatics}. Levinson, does not however, include gender or sexuality in his discussion of the work of performatives.}
produce material feminine sexual subjects which the hetero-feminine script names "women" in its widely circulated discursive scripts, including, of course, the romance novel. Recognizing the performative force of what are ostensibly descriptive utterances regarding truth conditions in the world is crucial for a critique of the hetero-feminine script, for nowhere is this weight felt more heavily than in the Western construction of love. The hetero-feminine script is, at once, a descriptive, a prescriptive, and, most disturbing, a performative mode of discourse. In Weldon's texts the culturally embedded utterances which define women only in their relation to men—"You are my wife." "You are the mother of my children."—have radical consequences because of their performative force. As in my example of the child who puts on a heterosexual "play" starring Barbie and Ken, or as in de Lauretis' example of the adult who checks the box marked F or M, such performative acts produce the subjects they ostensibly merely describe. In these purportedly descriptive discursive acts, little girls and women are in fact conscripted into the hetero-feminine script.

The critical moment in the text is the moment when Ruth decides that all that is required for her liberation is a decision to break the rules, a decision which leads her, eventually of course, to take on the rule-makers. "Self-reproach and good behavior" are the rules that root themselves deeply in women, Ruth muses. These rules of feminine behavior are so deeply rooted that "you can't ease them out gently," Ruth says; "they have to be torn out, and they bring flesh with them" (56). That an individual woman cannot change the rules, however, the text makes explicit; finding that she cannot change them, Ruth, nevertheless, learns the rules that frame gender and sexuality, and self-consciously breaks them. Most important, discovering that there is a currency of power, Ruth accrues what I will call cultural capital in order to reposition herself in relation to the rules. Similar to Paula Treichler's "linguistic
capital," discussed in chapter one, cultural capital, which includes Treichler's
discursive power within an economy of meaning, includes also such assets as
money, beauty, political savvy, and education—the many capital assets which Ruth
sets about acquiring. Mired in domesticity and powerlessness for most of her adult
life, in large part because of her physical unattractiveness, Ruth is suddenly
confronted by the tantalizing embodiment of the erotic script in the person of the
Other Woman, arousing in Ruth a burning desire for the erotic power which Mary
seems to possess. Having neither money, education, class status, nor beauty which
might provide access to power, and, of course, being of the wrong gender, Ruth sets
out to acquire the capital she needs to throw off the constraints of the hetero-feminine
script. The crucial step in this enormous project of redefining her position within the
power structure is her forfeiture of her identity as "woman," becoming instead a she-
deevil for whom anything is possible. The text constitutes sexuality as a relation of
power, and, once Ruth relinquishes her yearning for the illusions of romantic love,
she begins a systematic pursuit, instead, of power. As a she-devil, free of shame,
guilt, and the "dreary striving to be good," she eschews pleasure, accepts pain and
degradation, and, breaking all the rules, single-mindedly seeks power (48).

Before Ruth's transformation into a she-devil, she, like Mary, like Vickie,
believed the promises of "love everlasting." The love story, indeed, bears the full
weight of the script as performative, and it is at this precise point—the "I love you"—
that the hetero-feminine script is most successful and the normalization of women
most complete. When Ruth tells Bobbo that she expected him to love her forever, he
laughs and tells her that she thinks in clichés. The clichés, of course, are those
garnered from his lover Mary's romance novels which Ruth reads in the park when
she takes her children to play. Bitterly Ruth asks Bobbo if Mary Fisher thinks in
clichés. "Of course she doesn't," Bobbo replies. "She is a creative artist" (22).
Bobbo, of course, is wrong, as Mary herself has been produced by the romantic lines of the hetero-feminine script. Writing the romances which perpetuate the oppressive myth of romantic love, Mary is herself both the victim and the tool of patriarchy. Her reply to Bobbo's question about why she loved him is a blur of clichés straight out of her novels:

> it was because he was lover and father and what was forbidden and what was allowed all rolled into one, and anyway love was mysterious, and Cupid was willful and why did he want to know, couldn't he just accept? (39)

Mary Fisher, novelist, seemingly the producer of the lies which the romance circulates, is, in fact, only the re-producer of lies already at large in the culture. Her romance novels allude to and repeat all the romances ever written. As Beckett's Molloy says, there is no origin; Mary is herself the effect of the novels she writes. The question remains, however: how, precisely, does the romance script work to produce subjects? As a way into this question, I would like to scrutinize the position of the reader in relation to the romance novel, a position analogous to Ruth's position in relation to the hetero-feminine script.

The metaphor of the mirror is useful in understanding the relationship of the reader to the text, as well as the reader of cultural scripts to the larger culture which produces her as subject. It is, as we shall see, a metaphor that has been tapped by more than one theorist of subjectivity, and is, not only peculiarly appropriate here in an analysis of the construction of woman as beautiful, but also peculiarly useful in analyzing the process by which Ruth "breaks" with the hetero-feminine script. Althusser uses the metaphor of the mirror to describe how we recognize ourselves in ideology:

> ... what ... is ... ideology if not simply the "familiar," "well known," transparent myths in which a society or an age can recognize itself (but not know itself), the mirror it looks into for self-recognition, precisely the mirror it must break if it is to know itself? What is the ideology of a society or a period if it is not that society's or period's consciousness of itself, that is, an
immediate material which spontaneously implies, looks for and naturally finds
its forms in the image of a consciousness of self living the totality of its world
in the transparency of its own myths? ("Brecht and Bertolazzi" 144)

Althusser argues here that the subject constantly finds itself again in the same
ideological representations by means of which it first came to know itself. In other
words, the key to the successful reproduction of ideology is the repetition of familiar
myths, and, I would argue that the mechanism of such reproduction is the
performative script. In his discussion of breaking the mirror, Althusser does not
suggest, however, that the subject can somehow transcend ideology for that, he
claims, is impossible. To break the mirror is, however, to become aware of the
operations of ideology, a project in which Weldon's text is engaged.

The romance novel, on the other hand, has no interest in breaking the mirror;
its narrative depends completely on its recognizability, its embeddedness in
"familiar," "well-known," unexamined ideology. Althusser's cultural mirror of
ideology has a parallel psychic mirror in the relationship of the film-viewer to a film,
another model which helps to illuminate the ideological work of the romance novel
which Weldon self-consciously parodies. Theoreticians of cinema, interested in the
identification of the viewer with the male lead, label the process by which filmic
identification is accomplished as "suture." Kaja Silverman argues, as part of an
analysis of "suture" as a process by which the subject is constructed as gendered, that
the viewing subject's position is a "supremely passive one" (The Subject of Semiotics
232). What appears, through a kind of "cinematic sleight-of-hand" to be attributes of
the characters within the film, are in fact qualities of the machinery of enunciation,
i.e., the camera and the minds behind it, Silverman notes. Many of the insights of
film theory, based on an understanding of the Hollywood film as dependent on the
transparency of the medium, can be extrapolated for the realist novel. The realist
novel, relying, like film, on the concealment of the apparatuses of enunciation,
enables reader identification with the protagonist. In a process of identification similar to suture, the realist novel depends, as film does on a passive viewer, on a "supremely passive" reader. Although it might be argued that the romance novel, the formulaic genre novel which we are considering in this chapter, is not a realist novel, the romance participates in the same process of psychological identification with the protagonist as the Hollywood film and the realist novel. The qualities of the heroine, which should properly be understood as a strategic effect of the narrative, are instead, ascribed by the reader to the female character. In a love story which is seductive and which exhibits the inevitability of the "happily-ever-after" ending, the female reader, through the gendered and sexed process of suture, takes up a position of identification congruent with the hetero-feminine script. The narrative of the script, in effect, constructs material reality; to alter the script is to alter material reality:

"Sometimes it was all so like her novel," Mary thinks (118). Suture, which may be seen as an ideological mechanism of normalization, uses the process of filmic and fictional identification as a performative which produces, in viewers and readers, the effects it names, thereby winning compliance with the dominant culture.

If the realist novel and the romance rely on identification, a Weldon text relies on the disruption of such reader identification. Pursuing this argument, we find readers on at least two levels: the passive reader in the text (the readers of the romance novels) and the active reader of the text. In contrast to the reader of the romance novel who is constructed to identify with the heroine, the reader of the Weldon text is positioned to identify, not with the character, but with the process of enunciation. Weldon's reader, in other words, is encouraged by the text to actively participate in the textual production of meaning, providing an analogue for the active subject (in this case, Ruth) who consciously breaks the mirror of ideology in order to participate in the production of her own subjectivity. This division of reader-
functions parallels Barthes' division in S/Z of texts into readerly and writerly, the first inviting an act of consumption, the second an act of production.

**Excess, Exaggeration, and "Hyperbolic Femininity"**

The goal of the romance novel is to produce a readerly reader, consuming the text as written, identifying fully with the heroine. Nevertheless, because the successful heroine has all the attributes the reader most longs for, yet believes she does not possess, the reader enters into a love-hate relationship with the idealized female protagonist. As long as her identification with the heroine can be sustained, i.e., is not flouted too brazenly by the material reality of her own life, the reader fully complies with the text's demand that she perfectly identify with and assume as her own the qualities of the heroine. When the reader, like Ruth, however, is faced with the flagrant failure of the romantic promises, she comes to hate the image of the romantic heroine for the distance between them, for the impossibility of being the heroine. Weldon's fictions, in deliberate contravention of the aims of the romance novel, work to position her reader, like Ruth, as a writerly reader, co-producing meaning with the text. Weldon's narrative strategies, which create an ironic distance between reader and character and which solicit the reader's participation in the textual work, include excess and exaggeration, humor, and what I will label narrative negation, techniques which provoke a kind of cognitive dissonance similar to that aroused in Ruth by the disjunction of the erotic and domestic scripts.

Narrative negation—reversal of her own narrative line or cutting the ground from under her own assertions—is Weldon's subtle, but provocative device for subverting meaning. Her genius lies in repeating the lies of the romantic plot, reinscribing the lines of the hetero-feminine script, but undercutting them by irony,
qualification or inappropriatness of tone. The following passages are performatives
turned upside down, statements in which the utterance becomes the negation of itself:

I live . . . in a place called Eden Grove. A suburb. Neither town nor
country; intermediate. Green, leafy, prosperous, and, some say beautiful. I
grant you it is a better place to live than a street in downtown Bombay. (4)

It is a good life. Bobbo tells me so. He comes home less often, so does not
say so as often as he did. (5)

Bobbo is a good-looking man, and I am lucky to have him. The
neighbors often remark upon it. "You are so lucky, having someone like
Bobbo." (7)

In each of these passages Ruth claims a satisfaction that is immediately undercut by a
suggestive disclaimer. Eden is paired with Bombay; Bobbo's assertions of the "good
life" with the reality of his absence; Ruth's own claim of good fortune with its actual
attribution to the neighbors. Presence is replaced by absence in these narrative
negations, provoking an unsettling cognitive and affective dissonance. This strategy
of Weldon's which produces an active reader can be read as an example of
Showalter's "double-voiced discourse" or of the interplay of text and subtext, what
Gilbert and Gubar have called, "palimpsestic" (Showalter, 263 and Gilbert and
Gubar, 73).

The very premise of She-Devil, the transformation of Ruth into Mary, as well
as the use of caricature, of the grotesque, and of horror are exemplary of Weldon's
use of excess and exaggeration to provide the reader with the kind of ironic distance
necessary to disrupt identification. The humor of She-Devil, too, participates in
Weldon's extravagant ironic style. Much that might, in other hands, be horrifying is,
in fact, funny. Ruth's curses of Mary, for example, which might, in another context,
be disturbing or vicious, are, here, colorful and unique and, further undermining their
sadistic words, are paired with a mundane refutation of why they will never be
fulfilled:
Mary Fisher, I hope that tonight you are eating canned red salmon and the can has spoiled and you get botulin poisoning. But such hope is in vain. Mary Fisher eats fresh salmon, and in any case her delicate palate could be trusted to detect poison, no matter how undetectable it might be in other, cruder mouths. How delicately, how swiftly she would spit the erring mouthful out and save herself. (11)

Horror becomes humor, too, in Ruth's unapologetic manipulation of those around her to further her own designs. Because, within the structure of the novel, Ruth is so clearly the wronged party, not just by Mary and Bobbo, but by the entire culture which has produced the hetero-feminine script, the reader is enlisted on her side in a kind of awed appreciation of the lengths to which she will go to defeat the dominant power regime which has placed her at such a disadvantage. Umberto Eco's theory of "frames" as those "sets of rules or expectations for acceptable social behavior within a culture" is useful for understanding how Weldon's humor undermines the performatives that construct the hetero-feminine script (2). In his essay "Frames of Comic Freedom," Eco argues:

In humor we smile because of the contradiction between the character and the frame the character cannot comply with. But we are no longer sure that it is the character who is at fault. Maybe the frame is wrong. (8)

In Weldon, although the character is implicated and guilty, it is always the frame that is most profoundly "at fault." Humor, according to Eco, subverts the law, makes us feel "the uneasiness of living under a law—any law" (8). "Uneasiness" is precisely the feeling that a Weldon text induces in the reader; both woman's compliance and non-compliance with the hetero-feminine script carry heavy penalties. Weldon refuses containment within patriarchal law, but she also steadfastly refuses a facile solution. Her humorous, but nevertheless searing, critique of the current construction of heterosexual gender relations is complicated by the fact that no one, man or woman, in Weldon's texts, is innocent. This makes her novels unsettling, at times, to conservatives and feminists alike.
Nancy Walker defines feminist humor as, among other things, the
"nonacceptance of oppression" (143). Weldon's performance of what I would
unhesitatingly categorize as feminist humor meets Walker's definition and also
precisely fulfills Naomi Weisstein's description of feminist humor as "fighting
humor," particularly in Ruth's grotesquely exaggerated enactment of the feminine
woman. Women should use the absurdity in their situation for their own purposes.
Weisstein argues:

It is quite a feat to turn what is defined as a ridiculous state of being into your
own definition of the ridiculous, to take control of the quality of the
absurdity, to turn it away from yourself. We must at the same time show that .
. . nobody is either WOMAN or "lady," and that all this is very funny indeed.
(138)

In Ruth Patchett, Weldon creates a female character who, although fundamentally
damaged by the hetero-feminine script, manages to take control of the absurdity of the
conventional construction of woman, and, by hypostasizing feminine sexuality, turns
it into a darkly humorous indictment of current power relations. Ruth manages, in the
process, to perceive her own subjectivity as an effect of power, and to accrue the
necessary cultural capital to intervene into the process by which she is produced as a
sexual subject.

Given the performative weight of the hetero-feminine script, how can Ruth
escape the plot and live to tell the story? "Power is everywhere," argues Foucault,
and speaks of "the great anonymous" which coordinates the tactics necessary to
preserve power that is diffuse and exercised from innumerable points (History of

---

22 Nancy Walker's *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture* is a
long-overdue inter-disciplinary study of American women's humorous writing which
I find an exciting challenge to the culturally sanctioned ideal of ladylike behavior, a
challenge which parallels Weldon's own. For other critical work on women's humor,
see *American Women Humorists: Critical Essays*, an anthology edited by Linda
Morris, which brings together scholarly essays on the subject from the late nineteenth
to the late twentieth centuries.
Sexuality, vol. 1, 93-95). It is the polymorphous, multiple nature of power that makes resistance so difficult and recuperation so easy. And yet Ruth does, in fact, resist. How to account for her resistance and change? Judith Butler's theory of performance as elaborated in Gender Trouble and in her more recent Bodies That Matter offers a way into the question. Her declaration in Gender Trouble that the body is not a "mute facticity" (129) nor a "being, but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated," (139) serves to establish the body as a category in crisis, a boundary open for negotiation, a surface ripe for transformation from "woman" to "she-devil." Butler's deconstruction of the binarism of free will and determinism, which I pursue in this project, clears the way for my critique of the performative as mechanistically deterministic.

By positing gender as an act and identity as a practice, a "signifying practice..." Butler reintroduces agency into the process by which bodies are constructed as sexual and gendered (145). "Construction is not opposed to agency," she claims; "it is the necessary scene of agency, the very terms in which agency is articulated..." (147). Her central argument in Gender Trouble, as noted in the Introduction, is that it is through repetition that the rules that govern identity and enable the assertion of an "I" operate. In other words, repetition—the practices of repetitive signifying that constitute identity—is key to the subjective internalization of the hetero-feminine script. The accumulated weight, the layering, of many, many repetitions of the script results in a kind of sedimentation of norms by which gender and sexuality are constituted. It is only within the practices of repetitive signifying that subversion of identity norms is possible. The critical task, Butler argues, is to "locate strategies of subversive repetition"; agency is located within the possibility of a variation on that
repetition. This, then, is the framework for Butler's assessment of gender as an act, and of the parodic value of drag to subvert the notion of sex/gender as "natural."

Although Butler's example of subversive repetition is drag within gay culture, Ruth's performance of the ultra-feminine woman compels the question: Is drag a potential tool for subversion for the heterosexual woman? Does the self-conscious appropriation by the straight woman of "hyperbolic femininity" offer the possibility of (mis)using the hetero-feminine script for subversive ends? 23 "Hyperbolic femininity," performed with self-consciousness, irony, and an eye to effect, can, indeed, subvert the hetero-feminine script. Ruth's transformation in She-Devil enacts this subversion by foregrounding the constructedness and contingency of femininity as well as its negotiability as a unit of exchange which, although usually controlled by men, can, under certain circumstances, be claimed by women themselves. Moreover, Ruth's relation to the heterosexual market is not one of availability. Although she has acquired the most important cultural capital which women bring to the heterosexual market—beauty—Ruth is not on the market. Her power lies, precisely, in the constructed tension between her marketability within the heterosexual economy, which she uses for her gain, and her explicit refusal to trade for love or romance. Ruth's exaggerated performance of the norms of femininity and sexuality, in fact, operates to contest those very norms.

---

23 In her deft analysis of female drag, "Making a Spectacle, or Is There Female Drag?," the article in which she coins the term "hyperbolic femininity," Debra Silverman "take[s] issue with heterosexuals who claim to wear femme as drag." Although heterosexual drag "may at times be campy, it stays dangerously close to constraining conventions," Silverman concludes, because, for drag to be subversive, it must include a "sleight of hand, the joke of not being on the heterosexual market" (86-87). Although I share Silverman's concerns about the misreading and recuperation of straight female drag, I would offer Ruth's drag performance as an example of a straight woman who manages to control her spectacle for her own purposes.
Butler's apt metaphor of gender as a sedimentation of norms provides a provocative trope for the cumulative effect of cultural scripts. And it provides a useful lens for viewing Ruth's intervention into the repetitive "mundane signifying acts" by which the hetero-feminine script is transmitted, seen in the text most concretely, as well as most extravagantly, in her performance of the "Litany of the Good Wife." The Litany, which reveals the insidiousness of the simultaneous idealization and devaluation of woman, is illustrative of the sedimentation of gender and sexuality norms as they have operated with performative force in Ruth's life. Generative rather than expressive, the terms of the Litany have, over the years, produced Ruth as "good wife." Her final repetition of the "Litany of the Good Wife," which has been the dogma of her domestic life, occurs in the context of her newly-roused awareness of the possibility of the erotic life. This particular repetition of the Litany, which presupposes many prior recitations, may be read as a movement from the performative to performance, chronicled in the text as Ruth's movement from "woman" to "she-devil." This last recitation of the familiar Litany is a performance with a difference. Anguished at the discovery of her husband's infidelity, Ruth attempts to compose herself in order to "return to [her] matrimonial duties, to wifedom and motherhood" (26). Reminding herself of her role within the hetero-feminine script, she tries some fancy (inherited) performatives on herself as she recites the "Litany of the Good Wife":

I must pretend to be happy when I am not; for everyone's sake.

I must make no adverse comment on the manner of my existence; for everyone's sake.

I must be grateful for the roof over my head, and the food on my table, and spend my days showing it, by cleaning and cooking and jumping up and down from my chair; for everyone's sake. (26-27)
The Litany, which, like all litanies, has undoubtedly been said over and over as an invocation against disaster, has never made her husband love her; instead, Bobbo, who has insisted on Ruth's selfless adherence to the Litany of the Good Wife, has fallen in love with her opposite—a frivolous, decorative woman. And this time "the Litany doesn't work"; in this performance the repetition is subverted. Ruth runs upstairs, "loving, weeping"; when she comes downstairs, "unloving, not weeping," the grateful housewife will have effected her transformation into—what?—she doesn't yet know. But her husband, in a rage at her abdication of her submissive role, knows exactly what she has become: "You are a bad mother, a worse wife, and a dreadful cook. In fact I don't think you are a woman at all. I think that what you are is a she-devil" (47). After a moment of shocked reflection, in which she almost relents in the face of this accusation, Ruth realizes, "But this is wonderful! This is exhilarating! If you are a she-devil, the mind clears at once" (48). Defiantly appropriating yet another male attempt to name her, to fix her "nature," Ruth seizes on the label "she-devil" as potentially liberating from the constraints of "woman," freeing herself of the dreary catalogue of "must"s of the Litany of the Good Wife.

The received "must"s, drawn from all the discourses which script women's sexuality—from the marriage vows, "I must love him through wealth and poverty, through good times and bad . . . ," to popular women's magazines, "I must build up my husband's sexual confidence . . ." (26-27)—give way, before her new clarity of mind, to a sense of her own desire. Replacing the "musts," in Ruth's embrace of she-devil status, is a newly discovered list of "want"s:

I want revenge.
I want power.
I want money.
I want to be loved and not love in return. (49)
The textual movement from a routine repetition of the powerful scripted Litany to a particular encounter with it as odious and oppressive is exemplary of the movement from performative to performance. Ruth has, as Butler has suggested is possible, inserted herself into the "pervasive and mundane signifying acts of linguistic life," and, in the process, has introduced a subversive variation on the repetition of the hetero-feminine script, creating a space, at the same time, for female desire. "Nothing is impossible, not for she-devils," she rejoices. "Peel away the wife, the mother, find the woman, and there the she-devil is" (49). Ruth's words suggest an essence, a core underneath the constructed mother and wife, underneath the scripted woman; beneath her newly awakened sense of her own desire is a confidence that the she-devil exists full-blown, that she-devils "create themselves out of nothing" (153). The text, however, undermines Ruth's own assertions about her identity as essential she-devil.

Ruth's progress from womanhood to she-devilhood, which I am theorizing as a progress from the performative to performance, is slow, painful, and would certainly meet the legal requirements for premeditation. Nevertheless, despite the claim to self-origin, to have created herself "out of nothing," Ruth's performance as she-devil, if read carefully, is clearly constructed in the context of available scripts. A profound shift in her worldview accompanies her transformation. Repeating the fairy-tale version of the love story in which the maiden, whose life has thus far been without meaning, is rescued by the knight, Ruth reflects, "One day, we vaguely know, a knight in shining armour will gallop by, and see though to the beauty of the soul, and gather the damsel up and set a crown on her head, and she will be queen" (63). As a she-devil she firmly rejects that script, however, immediately acknowledging that she must replace the conventional love story with a story of her own self-actualization: "since I cannot change the world, I will change myself" (63). Like the Litany, in this scene, too, there is a clear intrusion of intentional performance
into the space of a culturally sanctioned performative. The problem remains, still: how does this occur? How does Ruth, constituted in the cultural script of the romance, contest that script? In *Gender Trouble*, Butler's call for intervention into the mundane signifying acts by which identity is constituted is never fully articulated in terms of where and how a subject can intervene in the process of its own subjection. The very possibility of will is teased out only reluctantly from Weldon's unravelings of the performative status of the discourses surrounding femininity and heterosexuality.

The text, working at cross-purposes at times to the textual production of Ruth's own consciousness, makes clear that two conditions enable agency, competing scripts and what I have called cultural capital. Ruth's will itself is, of course, enabled by a matrix of competing scripts. The central paradox of the text is that Ruth's resistance is generated (as Foucault would insist) by the same scripts which oppress her. The fact that scripts are multiple, however, interrupts the seamless reinscription of the status quo. In the case of *She-Devil*, the erotic script, transmitted through the vehicle of the romance novel, is in felt contradiction with the equally powerful cultural script of domesticity. Women are fabricated according to both scripts in late twentieth-century Western culture, and the two scripts co-exist in uneasy tension. Little girls are given baby dolls for mothering and Barbie dolls for sex play, with the result that they learn the lines for two scripts which, in adult life, they often find, are cruelly incompatible. The Litany of the Good Wife loses some of its performative power for Ruth when she suddenly realizes that there are other scripts (besides the domestic) which offer women more power, more pleasure. She sees Mary occupying a position in such a script, and determines to trade in the domestic script for the erotic. The difference in the two performances of the sexualized, feminine woman, Mary's and Ruth's, however, is that, although both are pre-scripted, prescribed, Ruth
is able to see the ideology which has produced her script; for her, the ideological mirror has been broken in the explosion of competing scripts. The text makes explicit the collision of the erotic and domestic scripts in a passage in which Ruth gives vent to her jealousy of Mary:

And I tell you this: I am jealous! I am jealous of every little, pretty woman who ever lived and looked up since the world began. I am, in fact, quite eaten up by jealousy, and a fine, lively, hungry emotion it is. But why should I care, you ask? Can't I just live in myself and forget that part of my life and be content? Don't I have a home, and a husband to pay the bills, and children to look after? Isn't that enough? "No!" is the answer. I want, I crave, I die to be part of that other erotic world, of choice and desire and lust. (25)

In this binary of home/husband/children and choice/desire/lust, the text lays out the conflicting parameters of the hetero-feminine script. It is the energy released in the clash of these incompatible sub-scripts that fuels Ruth's passionate challenge to the performative weight of the dominant culture's construction of female sexuality.

In order to take advantage of the instability engendered by the collision of competing scripts, however, a subject must have sufficient cultural capital to negotiate meaning within the social context. In Ruth's case, the capital with which she sets in motion her resistance is jealousy, hate, and the courage that comes of having nothing to lose, "fine, lively, hungry emotion[s]" (25). These qualities which fund her transformation into a she-devil are parlayed, through cunning and patience, into assets which have a marketable value in the culture: beauty and money. "Anyone can do anything, if they have the will and they have the money," Ruth says (131). In a capitalist economy, she-devils understand, money is the crucial capital. As evidence of the centrality of money, accounts of Mary's "lies" as a writer of romance novels and of her beauty are interspersed with specific bookkeeping details of her fortune (acquired by virtue of her "lies" and her beauty). The text continues to juxtapose dramatic narrative and high-finance, unwaveringly according money a primary place in Ruth's success, detailing her manipulation of international money
markets for her own ends. More intangible than money, however, the psychological capital available to Ruth, which enables her attempt to become the scriptor of her own life, is virtually untraceable. I would suggest that Barthes' analysis of the origin of texts as lost in intertextuality is applicable here to the subject: texts (and, I would add, subjects) are constructed of anonymous, untraceable fragments and quotations of lost origin (*Image, Music, Text* 159-160). Ruth, fabricated from untraceable fragments and quotations of lost origin, at a particular interstice of competing scripts, is enabled, by those scripts, to muster the psychic capital which will, in turn, enable her to acquire the cultural capital—beauty and money—which she can use as currency in the market of power.

Ruth and Mary Fisher, trapped in the hetero-feminine script like Rapunzel in her tower, are both complicit in their own objectification. Mary, unwittingly, Ruth with almost complete self-knowledge. Mary Fisher confuses her self with her text; she believes that she is one of her own heroines. Ruth, on the other hand, self-consciously "kills herself into art," as Susan Gubar has said in another context (298). How one reads Ruth's motive in her transformation determines whether or not her accession to power is a subversive act which threatens the hetero-feminine script as romance. Patricia Waugh writes of Ruth's "enchainment to the myth of love" (190).24 Ruth's exaggerated and excessive performance of the hetero-feminine script, her self-mutilation to fit the masculine ideal, is not an acquiescence to the "myth of love," however, but rather a devastating and profound critique of that myth. Ruth makes her choices, fully aware of the consequences, I believe, a powerful she-devil. Although damaged by her oppression and unable to merely walk out of the hetero-

---

24 See Patricia Waugh's *Feminine Fictions* for a reading of *She-Devil* as a feminist *Frankenstein*. 
feminine script, she nevertheless, uses it to gain access to power, choosing to adopt female drag as a means to the Tower, an emblem in the text of phallocentric power. But, because the possession of the phallus is not permitted to a woman, a woman who has the phallus (as opposed, in Lacanian terms, to being it) is, according to the hetero-feminine script, no longer a woman.\textsuperscript{25} For a woman to seize power, the text demonstrates, is to become not-woman, a she-devil. Paradoxically, this not-woman constructs herself as "ideal woman," a masquerade which convinces a world accustomed to measuring women by a standard set of culturally prescribed "feminine" and "sexual" characteristics. Ruth, now a she-devil, passes as a woman, while manipulating the categories of femininity and sexuality in the interest of seizing power. The price, for Ruth, of securing the authority to contest the identity categories that have inscribed her as "woman" has been a complete forfeiture of her status as woman, as well as an acceptance of pain and a foreclosures of pleasure. Hans Christian Anderson's little mermaid serves as Weldon's metaphor for the price of self-determination. When the little mermaid wanted legs instead of a tail, Ruth recalls, she

was given legs, and by inference the gap where they join at the top, and after that every step she took was like stepping on knives. Well, what did she expect? That was the penalty. And, like her, I welcome it. I don't complain. (173)

Mermaids and she-devils, fully aware of and accepting the cost of their performances, refuse to comply with the scripts they were born into, reaching instead for participation in scripting their own lives. Ruth has shifted the weight of the performative in her life and has altered the seemingly inevitable process by which the

\textsuperscript{25} In Lacan's re-reading of Freud's Oedipus Complex, men have the phallus and women are the phallus, a distinction that has profound implications for subjectivity, language, and desire, all of which are aligned with masculininity.
cultural hetero-feminine script becomes a controlling psychic script for an individual subject.

And the hetero-feminine scripts that continue to circulate in the culture? Are they unchanged in the face of Ruth's personal transformation? What of her assertion that "since I cannot change the world, I will change myself"? Despite her own disclaimer, Ruth does, in fact, have a perceptible impact on the world. As an effect of her unflinching pursuit of her own desires, Ruth's influence is felt on multiple ideological institutions which write scripts—specifically on that "world of power—of judges, priests and doctors, the ones who tell the women what to do and how to think" (137). Through her manipulation of male practitioners, the institutions of law, religion, and medicine all are subject to her influence. Even nature yields to her strength of purpose. After she takes possession of the Tower, she hires construction engineers to alter the configuration of the entire harbor so that the force of the waves no longer is directed at the tower. "Nature gets away with far too much. It needs controlling," she claims (277). And, like her predecessor in the tower, she writes a romance novel; unlike Mary, however, she refuses publication, weakening the hold, just a little, of the romance plot. Early in the novel, the text evokes the plot of the soap opera, itself a powerful encoding of the hetero-feminine script: "Now. Outside the world turns" (3). At the end, lonely and loveless, but powerful in the High Tower, Ruth muses, "the earth turns, but not quite as it did" (276). The axis of the earth has shifted, ever so slightly, the text maintains, as one woman, managing to accrue sufficient cultural capital, has turned the performative of the hetero-feminine script into a performance which, at the same time, both uses and abuses the presumptive heteroculture.
Cultural Capital: "Happy endings are not so easy"

For a writer of comedy, Weldon's conclusions are far from sanguine, raising the question of why this prolific writer has been so popular with women readers; she neither makes light of the obstacles to women's achieving autonomy within the hetero-feminine script, nor does she gloss over the cost of resistance. Esther, at the end of The Fat Woman's Joke, has gone home to wait for death, and Ruth, in Life and Loves of a She-Devil, although she has her revenge, is clearly damaged, first, by her oppression and, subsequently by the necessity to resist oppression from inside the cultural scripts which are available for women. Merely opting out of the hetero-feminine script to begin an entirely new story, is, as the text demonstrates, not a possibility. There is no outside of ideology, nor of cultural scripts.

Perhaps women, disillusioned with roles that demand selfless, other-centered behavior, read Weldon because her heroines aren't "nice." Esther and Ruth, provoking awe and a kind of perverse pride in the female reader, are selfish and take what they want, generally, however, only after a struggle to recognize and value their own desires. Weldon's fictions complicate the concept of women's "desire," which, like that of "experience," has, at times, assumed a privileged, a priori status in feminist discourse; desire, Weldon demonstrates, is always mediated by cultural scripts, always constructed within the limits of cultural intelligibility. Esther and Ruth, when their stories begin, are middle-aged women whose conventional lives, until now thoroughly contained within the dominant patterns of heteroculture, are interrupted by a revelatory moment which precipitates them into an interrogation of the terms of the received scripts. Neither, however, achieves a clear victory, and neither emerges unscathed. For both, desire remains completely bounded by the defining limit of the hetero-feminine script. They cannot imagine an alternative, an
outside to the script. Such an "outside" is, clearly, culturally unintelligible. Because
one of the functions of ideology is to limit choice, as Weldon texts make clear, the
subject has only limited access to a set of stored scripts, with some freedom of choice
among them. Particular scripts blow up certain choices and foreclose others. The
activation of a particular script, in other words, involves a more or less explicit denial
of other scripts; according to this logic, the conventional hetero-feminine script
actively denigrates or even negates as unintelligible the concept of woman as
autonomous.  26

It would seem, following this line of reasoning, that the greater the number of
accessible scripts available to a given subject, the greater the potential for contesting
the performative force of a particular cultural script. The necessary conditions for
successful resistance are, one, sufficient cultural capital to see beyond one's
embeddedness in a particular script to alternate scripts; two, a tolerance of ambiguity,
i.e., of the existence of rival scripts; and, three, a subsequent ability to de-naturalize
the dominant script. Esther and Ruth's resources for resistance were limited by the
circumstances of their lives. What of a woman with greater cultural capital, the
reader wonders? A brief look at a more recent Weldon novel, The Leader of the
Band, enables some tentative conclusions about the importance of cultural capital in
resignifying "femininity" and "heterosexuality" as culturally prescriptive norms and
as the norms within which and against which individual women's identity is
constituted.

26 In one of the few interesting readings of Weldon, Brigitte Salzmann-Brunner
argues that Weldon's heroines must fight for "memory and connectedness" (186). I
would disagree, seeing their connectedness to husband and child as that which
prevents them from developing as subjects themselves. These ties are, of course,
ideologically fashioned to accomplish just such a purpose. In order to break free from
the hetero-feminine script, Weldon heroines must break these culturally prescribed
connections. The cost, the culture exacts, is loneliness.
The narrator of *The Leader of the Band*, the multi-named "Sandra Harris, Sandra Sorenson, Starlady Sandra, Sandra the lady astronomer," (3) has a PhD, social status, money, a career, access to a vast television audience—in effect, Virginia Woolf's £500 a year and a room of her own. This narrator-protagonist, "next in line to being Astronomer Royal," is, at first glance, light-years removed from the circumstances of Esther's life, reflecting perhaps the changed conditions of Weldon's own life. *The Fat Woman's Joke* was written, Weldon says, "out of personal agony," when, finding herself pregnant just as she completed a master's degree in economics and psychology, she was forced to give up her professional ambitions and take a meager job to support her child (Salzmann-Brunner 179). *The Leader of the Band*, on the other hand, was written twenty-one years later, at the peak of a successful career. It might be expected, then, that Sandra, a far-better equipped heroine, although still a victim of cultural deception and broken promises, would have more options within the hetero-feminine script. Nevertheless, *The Leader of the Band* is framed, at least as explicitly as *Fat Woman* and *She-Devil*, as a contest between two versions of the hetero-feminine script, the domestic, here represented by a fleshless marriage of convenience to the staid Matthew, and the erotic, figured in Sandra's passionate affair with Mad Jack, the leader of the band. "She was a good girl—Why did she fall for the Leader of the Band?" the epigraph asks, setting in opposition sex for pleasure and the "good girl." Pleasure and duty are the two poles of the binary which controls the text, and which vie for control in Sandra's life. Resurrecting the Good Girl-Bad Girl dichotomy, the battle for Sandra's "destiny" is depicted in the text as a war between reason and passion, choices ostensibly available to today's "liberated" woman, binarized choices which, nevertheless, work to keep woman contained within the
hetero-feminine script. Pleasure itself becomes a duty, according to new variations on the script.27

Sandra represents the increasing accession of women to positions of power, as well as women's entry into what Ruth longingly described as that "erotic world, of choice and desire and lust"; nevertheless, a woman cannot have it all, cultural scripts remind her. Only by an act of imposture can the intellectual Sandra become the erotic Sandra. In The Leader of the Band, passion, sex, domesticity, career, child, each represent separate Sandras, which, it seems, defy integration. The price of a life of the mind, the culture has taught her, is no sex; the price of sex is no mind. The oppositional mind/body sets of signifiers are set up on the first page: Starlady Sandra is paired with her not-so-identical twin, Sandra Harris, pretending to be a secretary (secretaries, it seems pose less of a threat of impotence to musician-lovers than lady astronomers). Sandra, married to Matthew, is cool intellect, "professional searcher after truth, rejector of fantasy, organiser of eternal laws into numerical form"; finding herself unexpectedly on the road with Jack, she is passionate lover, "drugged out of [her] mind with love, zonked out of [her] wits with sex, heading south with the band toward the sun" (1). Sandra inhabits, simultaneously, the cold of deep space and the heat of the sun and of the body in the south of France, but she cannot reconcile the two. Victorian notions of femininity, rooted in the dangers, for women, of both mind and body, surface to regulate Sandra's identity, as she recalls her grandmother's advice:

Too much thought, it was supposed, could overheat and damage the female brain, too much response tip it into hysteria, too much speculation lead it into

27 In a similar vein, Stephen Heath argues, in The Sexual Fix, that our much-hailed sexual liberation is not a liberation but "a myth, an ideology, the definition of a new mode of conformity" in which orgasm has replaced marriage as the novel's happy ending; as evidence, he cites novel after novel which ends with a "shuddering and shuddering of pleasure" (101).
dangerous erotic areas. Better by far for a woman to train her mind to dwell on pleasant notions and images, to avoid introspection or self-analysis, to sidestep the consciousness of her desires, or else the winds of passion might blow the poor frail thing altogether away. Well, they may have been right. For here I was; I, the lady astronomer, altogether swept away . . . . (6)

Sandra accepts the familial and cultural performative, but does a late-twentieth-century performance of it, deciding that, although "they" may be right that too much speculation in a woman can "tip" her towards the erotic, she embraces her fall into eros.

Like Fat Woman and She-Devil. The Leader of the Band, as a calculated subversion of the romance, moves from family chronicle to a kind of bildungsroman of the adult woman, setting Sandra on a quest for her own identity. Weldon strategically engages the conventions of the genre in such a way as to make clear not only the gendered warp of the conventional bildungsroman, but of the way in which real lives are constructed by the stories we tell—romances or bildungsromans. Because marriage results in identity foreclosure for young women, as so many Weldon texts make clear, a woman's coming-of-age narrative, if it occurs at all, occurs in adulthood. All three novels are structured as a three-part quest: a flight from conventionality, domesticity, and the coerciveness of the hetero-feminine script; a drop-out period to reflect on questions of identity and authority over her own life; and re-entry into the world. In this process, the protagonists move from a sense of personal inadequacy and guilt, to a realization of the institutional and systematic oppression which makes victims of them, to an often desperate decision to seize control of their own lives, with varying degrees of self-realization.

Weldon remains unresolved on the issue of agency. Her heroines gain some degree of control over their own lives, but at a price, and, always limited by cultural scripts with an interest in maintaining male privilege. The Leader of the Band purports to be an autobiographical novel, written a year after the events recorded, of
how Sandra tried, unsuccessfilly, she claims, to elude the *Harpies, *Furies, *History: personal, political, national* (2). "No escape for any of us," she laments at the very beginning of the text. She explicitly includes the reader in the account of her struggle against the dread starred trio: "No escape . . . . But I tried, I tried. For all our sakes, I tried" (2, emphasis mine). I, the reader, am implicated from the start in her struggle to escape fate and I am told, from the beginning that the novel is a record of a doomed struggle. What are these *Harpies, *Furies, and *History? "We carry them with us in a cloud around our heads, products of our guilt, waste-matter of our fate," the text maintains (2). Greek myth and psychoanalysis mingle in Weldon's personification of fate, which plays an increasingly large role in the later novels.

Difficult to get an exact fix on, and, at times, cosmic and deterministic, fate, for Weldon, is always, at least in part, the institutions, discourses, and practices that write the hetero-feminine script, which, in Sandra's novel is identified as the *status quo*: "The force that seeks to preserve the status quo is to women the same as gravity is to the apple . . ." (98). The Furies which pursue Sandra are both personal (her mad mother and her nazi father) and political (the institutions—job, science, television, psychoanalysis, rock-'n'-roll culture—which circumscribe her efforts to define herself), all of which arouse guilt and anger which she directs at herself, punishing herself for parental and cultural crimes.

Does Sandra escape the **Harpies, *Furies, *History: personal, political, national** which I am reading as the received scripts of her life? Despite her definitive statement that there is "No escape for any of us," I would suggest that Sandra makes a limited escape from her particular experience of the hetero-feminine script as a choice between eros and domesticity. The problem of agency in the text turns, oddly, on the question of reproduction, a question which, in Weldon's hand, refuses familiar, facile political rhetoric. Sandra has had three abortions as the narrative opens, abortions
chosen to bring an end to a family line of madness and evil. Her discovery, at the end of the novel, that she is pregnant with Jack's child and her decision to have the baby is framed by Weldon as a move toward self-acceptance and self-scripting. Sandra's decision, read within the logic of the text, represents an opening out to the future by a woman who has worked desperately to close down the future by burying the past and bringing an end to her parents' line. In what amounts to a coda to the narrative, Sandra reflects:

I am the fulcrum where the past and future balance, in which I am like anyone else. But I am also the point where the mad, the bad, and the infamous meet: the possessed and the obsessed. I had better get it right—this infinitesimal spark of moral decision which is apparently required of me. Let us pray! Great Father, Cruel God, simulator of the Universe, in whose image I am made, etc? No, better not, no help there, God the Bastard! What the hell, Daddy-oh! I shall have this baby.... (155)

Like Esther and Ruth, Sandra is engaged in a war with fathers, divine and human.

Sandra will have this baby as a sign of her refusal to be bound by her father's crimes.

The image of the rebellious woman as Lucifer runs through Weldon's work, in declarations of non serviam. Such as this one from She-Devil:

She laughed and said she was taking up arms against God himself. Lucifer had tried and failed, but he was male. She thought she might do better, being female. (95)

and this from Praxis:

...we predicate some natural law of male dominance and female subservience, and call that God. Then what we feel is the pain of the female Lucifer, tumbling down from heaven, having dared to defy the male deity.... (16)

Sandra sees her decision to have her baby as a refusal, like Ruth's and Praxis', of the power of the father. These women will not serve.

The Leader of the Band, like Fat Woman and She-Devil, represents female agency circumscribed by a hetero-feminine script written, according to masculine interests, to bolster current power relations. Nevertheless, Sandra, like other Weldon
heroines, manages to intervene into the process by which she is scripted, using one version of the script against another. And, because she has greater cultural capital, she is more successful at eluding conscription than Esther or Ruth. The decision to have the baby, which might be read as a conservative move on Weldon's part, and which, on the surface, seems like a clear instance of recuperation into the hetero-feminine script, is, rather, I would suggest, exemplary, in the terms of the text, of an ungrounded hope in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. In the end, Sandra refuses complicity with the hetero-feminine script as both oppression and pleasure, recognizing that each exercises its own tyranny. Leaving both Matthew and Jack to raise her baby alone, Sandra is reminiscent of Sonia, a narrator who opts for a radical feminism in Weldon's _The Heart of the Country_. Rather than comply with hetero-feminine script, Sandra and Sonia seek new paradigms through which women can live their lives. Sonia's last words, unlike Sandra's which reflect a kind of ironic hope, are melancholy and, on the whole, pessimistic about the possibility of having it all—love and autonomy:

... for Sonia comes a proposal of marriage from a good man, who knows her every failing. She can't accept, of course. Happy endings are not so easy. No. She must get on with changing the world, rescuing the country. There is no time left for frivolity. (201)

Weldon is an iconoclast who offends both men and women. Depicting women as implicated in their own oppression, colluding with and even sleeping with their oppressor, she foregrounds the hierarchical construction of heterosexual gender relations, then contests and subverts the reproduction of those relations in the hetero-feminine script. But Weldon doesn't provide facile answers to the seemingly irreconcilable human need for autonomy and connection; within current systems of power, the conflicting needs to be independent and in relation are, for women, inevitably antagonistic. Sonia and Sandra opt out of the love story; however,
although they may contest the conventions of the hetero-feminine script, women are not free to simply choose another script. Will itself is generated and regulated by the same scripts. Cultural representations becomes self-representation in Weldon novels in small everyday signifying acts, as women internalize the patriarchal construction of heterosexuality. In a pessimistic assessment of the love story, Weldon concludes: "It is not so terrible a fate. All fates are terrible" (*The President's Child* 103).

Nevertheless, although "happy endings are not so easy," the performative weight of the hetero-feminine script has been shifted ever so slightly by Weldon's sardonic examination of it, and her own fatalism is undercut by the visionary performances of her heroines.
Chapter 3
Angela Carter and the Politics of Desire:
Unveiling the Phallic Script

The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth—it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true.

Jean Baudrillard

"I TAKE MY DESIRE FOR REALITY BECAUSE I BELIEVE IN THE REALITY OF MY DESIRES" proclaimed the slogan of the Enragés, a tiny cabal of students who began the May 1968 uprising in France. The battle being waged in the '60s between the still-alive-and-well enlightenment faith in rationality and a belief, represented by the Enragés, in the liberating power of desire is situated in Angela Carter's baroque fictions, in the context of gendered power relations. Like the other postmodern feminist writers in this study, Angela Carter both performs and critiques the heterosexual script. Her intervention into the discourse on sexuality occurs, however, not just at the site of institutions and social practices, as Weldon's does, but at the locus of the individual psyche. How is it that the subject is inserted into cultural heterosexuality? Carter asks. How do the hierarchized social and sexual relations of heterosexuality replicate themselves? How, in other words, do the cultural scripts which Fay Weldon uncovers become psychic scripts? And what is the role of desire?

---

1 My epigraph which serves also as the epigraph in Baudrillard's "The Precession of Simulacra" is cited by him as "Ecclesiastes." However, a thorough search of "Ecclesiastes" fails to turn up this passage; thus, I must conclude that these are Baudrillard's own words. This falsely attributed epigraph, therefore, stands as a performance of its own statement.

2 See Greil Marcus' Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century for a discussion of the influence of the Enragés (30, 427).
In *The Sadeian Woman*, an analysis of the writings of the Marquis de Sade, Carter argues that "sexual relations between men and women always render explicit the nature of social relations in the society in which they take place, and, if described explicitly, will form a critique of those relations" (20). Although Carter’s claim is made with reference to the work of the pornographer, she herself calls on the potential of the pornographer to act as "sexual guerrilla" in her own fictions in order to critique conventional heterosexuality (21).

Having argued thus far that heterosexuality is scripted by a dominant culture and that those scripts have a performative force for the individual subject, I must now turn to a further analysis of how those scripts are internalized by the individual. This chapter uses Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory to read two of Carter’s most provocative novels—*The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* and *The Passion of the New Eve*—as illustrative of the way in which identity is constituted as presumptively heterosexual. I argue that the hetero-feminine script, which, as Weldon’s fictions demonstrate, is the product of numerous social technologies, is perpetuated, transmitted, and depoliticized through the family psychodrama. In other words, cultural heterosexual scripts become psychic scripts through the conscious and unconscious mediation of fathers and mothers. This chapter will explore the function of desire and identification in the constitution and replication of heterosexuality as both performative and performance. *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* and *The Passion of the New Eve*, both quest novels, both re-tellings of the Oedipus narrative, operate as what Carter herself calls "a conscious critique of the culture I was born to" (Sage 56). Carter engages the psychoanalytic narratives which have

---

3 See Lorna Sage’s "The Savage Sideshow: a Profile of Angela Carter" for a brief, but useful look at Carter’s work up until 1977 and for an interview with Carter.
structured our thinking about sexuality in the twentieth century and, in her brilliant, erotic, sometimes nasty creations, carries those narratives to their logical, if also excessive, conclusions. *What if* the Law of the Father could be seen at work? *What if* the phantoms which populate our dream world were unleashed in the real world? *What if* Oedipus were a woman? In Carter texts, the Law of the Father which structures sexuality, but which is usually, as part of its construction, veiled as an asymmetrical system of power, erupts flagrantly into view. This eruption which Carter stages uncovers the place of desire in the Law of the Father, desire as both origin and effect, as that which both produces and is produced by the law. Carter's fictions map desire which, as she demonstrates, functions as the mechanism by which the law does its work. In this chapter I will examine the structure and the function of desire in the symbolic order, the order of language, within which subjects are constituted as heterosexual. Desire, which is born of the incommensurability of the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real, is harnessed by the Law of the Father to do its work of preserving current systems of power. Nevertheless, because the relationship between law and desire is, at all times, unstable, desire's potential for excess, for unpredictability, threatens the law.

---

4 The Law of the Father, as noted in the Introduction, is a Lacanian term for the law which has its origin in the incest taboo and the threat of castration, but which also initiates and structures desire, language, and subjectivity in a system which privileges masculinity.

5 For Lacan there are two registers, that of the symbolic which establishes difference and which is the order of language, and the register of the imaginary which designates that order of experience dominated by identification and correspondences. Within Lacan's theory the imaginary precedes the symbolic; however, the two orders complement each other and continue to co-exist after the subject accedes to language. The third register in the Lacanian model is the real, which is his term for the moment of impossibility, for that which always recedes before attempts to grasp it.
Carter’s two novels, which I read as performances of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, complicate that theory by suggesting that heterosexuality is constituted, not as the oppositional processes of desire or identification as in the Freudian-Lacanian model, but rather as a complex intertwined relationship between desire and identification. According to Freud and Lacan, mature sexuality, which depends on the successful navigation of the Oedipus complex (for both the boy and the girl), is based on a clear-cut identification with the same-gendered parent and a desire for the parent of the opposite gender. The castration complex ends the Oedipus complex for the boy, when the threat of punishment causes him to substitute an appropriate female object for the inappropriate primary object of desire—his mother. The boy fears his father (as the wielder of the law), and, at the same time, identifies with him; his object of desire remains unequivocally female. For the girl, in contrast, the castration complex, which for her is expressed as penis envy, initiates the Oedipus complex. When she discovers the mother’s lack of a penis, she repudiates her mother and her primary love for her, and adopts a new object of desire—her father. In order to win his love, however, she realizes that she must be like her mother, and, thus, the process of identification is set in motion. This, in simplified form, is the Oedipus complex within which, psychoanalysis claims, sexuality is constituted as mutually exclusive processes of identification and desire. For Carter, however, sexuality is more slippery: the desire to have and the desire to be (that is, identification) are never very far apart, particularly at the level of the unconscious.

 Appropriately, Carter’s texts, which explode with images dredged from the cultural unconscious, are models of excess. As Lorna Sage writes, "Angela Carter’s fictions prowl around on the fringes of the proper English novel like dream-monsters..." (51). Gothic, theatrical, brilliant creations, Carter’s novels contain a full range of literary references and are, at the same time, both formal and political. Although her
metaphysical concerns place her among postmodern writers. Carter is far more politically engaged than many postmodernists; her lavish play with language is used in the service of a feminist political agenda which has, as one of its aims, the reclaiming of desire for women. Universally admired by reviewers, Carter has not yet gotten the serious critical attention she deserves. When asked about her elaborate theatricality, about whether she embraces opportunities for overwriting, Carter responded, "Embrace them? I would say that I half-suffocate them with the enthusiasm with which I wrap my arms and legs around them" (Haffenden Interview 91). The enthusiasm for theatricality makes itself felt in Carter's imaginative exploration of the phantoms of unconscious desire. Lavish with images of repressed desire, Carter's texts are, elaborate dream landscapes. How do we know our desire? the texts inquire. Freud argues that a dream always contains our desire, albeit, in most cases, encoded as something else. The decoding of a dream is intellectual work, work that, according to Freud, the subject is often at pains to avoid.

Carter does the dream work of our culture. Repression is the source of art, she maintains, and the work of the writer is to bring to consciousness the unconscious desires which structure reality (Haffenden Interview 79). Attempting to represent at the conscious level images and wishes that are usually repressed, Carter looks to dreams and the "latent content" of fairy tales and folk stories as narrative sources (82, 84).

---

6 Several article-length studies of Carter's novels, of varying degrees of insight, include Sally Robinson's "Angela Carter and the Circus of Theory: Writing Women and Women's Writing" in her Engendering the Subject, Ricardo Schmidt's "The Journey of the Subject in Angela Carter's Fiction," Robert Clark's "Angela Carter's Desire Machine," and David Punter's "Angela Carter: Supersessions of the Masculine." The complexity of her work is reflected in the fact that the interpretations that do exist differ from each other so enormously. Robinson's article is, by far, the most ambitious and the most interesting criticism available on Carter.

7 See John Haffenden's interview with Angela Carter in Novelists in Interview for a glimpse of Carter's critical ideas about her own fiction.
Using the formal structures of dreams which she "get[s] from Freud," Carter re-reads the culture's sexual narratives (82). Jacques Lacan, reiterating Freud's claim that the dream is always the fulfillment of a wish, says of the dream that it is "the bearer of the subject's desire" (*The Four Fundamental Concepts* 55). Carter uses the mechanisms of the dream—condensation, displacement, symbolism—to encode the workings of desire in the text. For her, repressed desire surfaces in the stories we tell, bringing together public and private fantasies. Explicitly referring to her work as *bricolage*, Carter regards "all of Western Europe as a great scrap-yard from which you can assemble all sorts of new vehicles" (Haffenden 92). As my reading of the novels will demonstrate, the scraps which Carter, as *bricoleur*, appears to find most useful in assembling her texts are variations on the family psychodrama, particularly, of course, the Oedipus complex, in the context of which, Freud maintains, heterosexuality is constituted.

As psychoanalysis will be an object of scrutiny in this chapter, along with Carter's fictional texts, I would like, at this point, to reiterate my conviction that, although psychoanalysis has some "stories" to tell which are useful in an analysis of gender divisions and sexual relations, it is deeply implicated in the actual construction of that which it purports to merely describe. I do not assume the "truth" of psychoanalysis, nor do I rely on it as a conceptual grid which structures my thinking about sexuality. Because Freudian (and subsequently Lacanian) psychoanalysis has provided us with one of the more powerful myths of subjectivity and desire in the

---

8 Freud's "Wunsch" is close to the English "wish"; however, Freud's French translators have always used "désir", rather than "vœu", which corresponds to "Wunsch" and "wish", but which is less widely used in French. Lacan's work has rested on this reading of wish-fulfillment as desire. For Freud's analysis of the dream as wish-fulfillment see the *Standard Edition*, volumes 4 and 5, particularly, 4. 122. For Lacan's re-reading of Freud on desire, see "The Unconscious and Repetition" in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (17-64).
twentieth century, it is with the psychoanalytical fiction of gender, sexuality, and desire that new paradigms of sexuality must grapple. An ostensibly descriptive discourse, psychoanalysis actually enacts culture's gender divisions and power inequities, becoming, finally, a prescriptive discourse. Nevertheless, because Freud is a seductive storyteller himself, his work makes great "material" for a novelist interested in questions of desire, and so we see Carter reenacting Freudian narratives of sexuality, which she delights in refashioning so as to reveal the phallic pretense which underlies them. Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, particularly the fictions of desire and identification, operates as the master narrative within which Carter's fictions are constructed, but with a difference: Carter's accounts of subjectivity and desire foreground the role of power, which is elided in Freud and Lacan. Carter's literary narratives, which reenact Freudian and Lacanian narratives of sexuality (relying particularly on the concept of the unconscious), nevertheless recognize what is concealed in both Freud and Lacan's account of subject formation. Psychoanalysis produces woman as lack, as less than man; an ostensibly objective account, psychoanalysis is, itself, a coercive script of gender and sexuality.

In a lecture on folklore and the unconscious, Freud claims that it is more convenient to study dream symbolism in folklore than in actual dreams, because these stories delight in stripping off the veiling symbols (SE 12, 181). For Carter this "dream symbolism" of received myths and stories provides the raw material for her critique of the prevailing structures of heterosexuality. Her revisionary fairy tales, for example, the work for which she is best known, re-shape, with subtle shifts of emphasis, our reception of familiar stories, making visible the often disguised sexual theme of the fairy tale. By way of illustration, in "The Bloody Chamber," her feminist revision of "Bluebeard," the last-minute rescue of the about-to-be-murdered bride by her mother turns a story about woman as victim into an empowering fable of mothers and
daughters. Carter's fairy tales reveal the unconscious stakes beneath familiar symbols and usually shift the relations of power within the tale. The novels, too, which I read in this chapter, strip away not only the veils of dream symbolism, but also the veiling symbols of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic narratives, simultaneously using them and revealing the gendered and sexed power relations in which they are enmeshed. Carter's fictions scrutinize the ways in which Freud and Lacan's theories are themselves congruent with the Law of the Father which naturalizes conventional heterosexuality.

*The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* and *The Passion of the New Eve*, the primary Carter texts which I will consider, re-read the Oedipus narrative in order to work through some "what if . . . ?" questions which conventional psychoanalytic readings of Oedipus elide. To investigate the scripting of heterosexuality it is necessary to ask some larger questions about the systems of signification that structure subjectivity. That is what this chapter attempts. The relationship of the individual psyche and the world are at the heart of Carter's engagement with what may be the most vexing question of theory today: the problem of subjectivity, signification, and the real. In my reading of Carter I argue that the threads of the three lead to desire as the energy which leaps the gap that separates the subject and the real, but which always falls short of making a connection. Carter's texts explore the complicated workings of desire—which in Carter is always sexual desire—at the level of the subjective unconscious as always containing and contained in

---

9 I shall attempt to be scrupulous in following the conventional use of quotation marks. When I am discussing the real as that which I acknowledge exists outside of me, but which remains indeterminate to me, I will omit quotation marks. When, however, I wish to indicate that which we have naturalized as real, but which, I will argue, is the product of our own desiring signification and which, further, is always open to contest, I will use "the real."
the Law of the Father. Desire generates meaning in Carter, and desire is, within the Freudian-Lacanian model, always masculine. Thus, the systems of meaning which we read as "real" are contained entirely within the Law of the Father. It is within this context that Carter enacts, and at the same time contests, the Freudian and Lacanian family psychodrama in which sexuality is constituted as a fundamental category of identity.

Lacan's most important contribution to Freudian psychoanalysis is his return to Freud's early work, particularly *The Interpretation of Dreams* with its emphasis on the unconscious, and, most significantly, Lacan's own introduction of linguistic theory into the problem of subjectivity. The "passion of the signifier now becomes a new dimension of the human condition," Lacan argues, "in that it is not only man who speaks, but that in man and through man it speaks" (Emphasis mine, except "it" which is Lacan's. *Ecrits* 284). This "passion of the signifier" which brings together the subject, desire, and the world, and which is constitutive of the human condition, is specified in Lacan's gendered language as a property which belongs to *man*. Although it could be argued that Lacan is certainly using "man" as gender-inclusive here, Carter's texts, which can be read as illustrative of Lacan's model of desire and signification, pursue his theory to its logical conclusion, demonstrating that it is, indeed, the male subject's desire which constitutes the "real."

For Lacan, sexuality is instituted through the signifying practices of the paternal economy. Sexuality, like any other thing we might inquire into, has no being, no ontology per se, except within the structure of the symbolic. While in Freud the

---

10 For a summary along with a feminist critique of Lacanian theory, see Juliet Mitchell's *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, Kaja Silverman's *The Subject of Semiotics, The Acoustic Mirror*, and "The Lacanian Phallus," and Jane Gallop's *The Daughter's Seduction* and *Thinking Through the Body.*
privileged term is the *penis*, within the symbolic the authorizing or transcendental 
signifier is the *phallus*. A brief summary of Lacan's model of sexual difference within 
the Law of the Phallus might be helpful here. "Being" the phallus and "having" the 
phallus denote divergent sexual positions—impossible positions, really—within 
language. It is woman's role to "be" the phallus, to be the "signifier" of the desire of 
the Other, and to appear as this signifier. In the Lacanian model woman is the object, 
the Other of a (heterosexualized) masculine desire, and also represents or reflects that 
desire. While women signify the phallus through "being" its Other, its absence, its 
lack, that which guarantees its identity, men are said to "have" the phallus—and, 
somehow, at the same time, not really to "have" it. Although Lacan maintains a 
distinction between the phallus and the anatomical penis, they are never fully separable 
in his theory. As Jane Gallop puts it, "Phallus' cannot function as signifier in 
ignorance of 'penis'" (*Daughter's Seduction* 98). Importantly, the phallus becomes the 
signifier for the privileges and power which define male subjectivity within patriarchal 
culture and from which women are excluded. In other words, a penis is a necessary 
apprtenance for membership in the privileged club of the phallus.

There are two revealing moments in Lacan where, in his attempt to account for 
the relationship between the subject and the real, he inscribes arresting sexual images. 
The first, and most famous—particularly among feminists—is his description of the 
statue of St. Teresa: "you have only to go and look at the Bernini statue in Rome to 
understand immediately that she's coming, no doubt about it" (*Feminine Sexuality* 
147).\(^{11}\) The second, separated in time and context, and less well-known, is an almost

\(^{11}\) Jane Gallop cites Lacan's twentieth seminar, *Encore*, from which this oft-repeated 
passage comes, as a response to Freud's famous question, "What does woman want?" 
Her characterization of Lacan, "The Ladies' Man," as strolling among his adoring 
female audience as "the cock of the walk" and as "a phallo-centric...prick," 
successfully captures his status as "both resented by and attractive to women" (*The 
Daughter's Seduction* 34-37).
parenthetical remark in his difficult lecture on anamorphosis, a technique in painting involving distorted perspective, which originated in the Renaissance fascination with optics, a technique in which an image is distorted so that it can be viewed without distortion only from a specific angle or with a special instrument. After several illustrations of the use of anamorphosis in Renaissance painting, Lacan asks: "How is it that nobody has ever thought of connecting this with . . . the effect of an erection? Imagine a tattoo traced on the sexual organ ad hoc in the state of repose and assuming its, if I may say so, developed form in another state" (ellipsis, Lacan's; *The Four Fundamental Concepts* 87-88). After this off-hand disruption of his serious, quite dense lecture for what amounts to a mildly risqué joke, Lacan resumes his examination of the structure of anamorphosis without comment on the implications of his little phallic witticism. Taken together these two provocative images—St. Teresa coming and the erect penis displaying a distorted tattoo—can be read as representing the gendered subject positions which emerge in the Lacanian economy of desire. Two brief asides delivered, we can imagine, with a self-deprecating, yet sly humor, to enliven his lecture and persuade his students that the father has a sense of humor. But these intrusions of sex into a scholarly lecture act, at once, as a performance of the eruption of repressed desire into the conscious and as evocative tropes of feminine and masculine sexuality in Lacan. "How is it that nobody has ever thought . . . ?" Lacan asks. Is it perhaps that no one prior to Lacan has rooted the problem of subjectivity, sexuality, and signification so explicitly in the law of the phallus?

"No doubt about it," Lacan says of his reading of Bernini's St. Teresa. Unlike Freud who, at moments, acknowledged that he was baffled by the question of the "nature" of femininity, Lacan has women figured out. For Lacan woman is lack, and St. Teresa, if she is coming, has necessarily been visited by male presence. Gallop reports that, in the cover illustration of the seminar in which Lacan describes an
orgasmic St. Teresa, the ecstatic Teresa, in what appears to be a dialogue balloon, is crying "Encore," an appeal for a repeat of the phallic performance (*Daughter's Seduction* 35). Teresa of Avila, the subject of Bernini's piece, was ascetic, mystic, scholar, reformer, author of highly influential spiritual classics, and a woman who was elevated to "doctor of the church." Nevertheless, Lacan's profane reading of Bernini's sacred statue subsumes the entire hagiography of this powerful woman into a sexual climax. And, although Lacan flirts with something which would be "beyond the phallus" in his *Encore* seminar, he continues to assert throughout his work that desire is always masculine and is always contained within the phallus as transcendental signifier. In Lacan's version of St. Teresa's ecstasy, the Father has visited his daughter with his masculine desire, the male sculptor has represented the event, and the male psychoanalyst has interpreted it for us.\(^{12}\)

The second sexual image, that of the tattooed penis, although contained in a throw-away remark of Lacan's, can be used to figure the fundamental relationship between desire and the real in the masculine economy of signification which Lacan suggests, but never fully articulates. It is in this relationship, in which desire is born in the necessary gap between the real and the signifier, that Carter locates the origins of sexuality. At the moment of the entry into language, the subject is forever excluded from the real and is forever positioned as desiring signifier within a network of signification which determines its entire cultural existence. In my reading of Lacan's amusingly coy figure, "the tattoo traced on the sexual organ *ad hoc* in the state of repose" represents the undistorted, the real in the state of repose which is prior to,  

---

\(^{12}\) In her lifetime, too, Teresa was subject to male misrepresentation: her work as founder of the Carmelite Reform was grossly misrepresented in a religious controversy in 16th-century Spain, and she was alternately silenced and directed to speak at the whim of the Carmelite general, King Philip II of Spain, and Pope Gregory XIII.
outside of desire. This original drawing, this real, is, however, completely inaccessible to us, as desire and subjectivity are born of the same gap; coming into subjectivity is simultaneous with coming into desire. The real, therefore, is always mediated by desire. The tattooed erection, that which Lacan primly refers to as, "its, if I may say so, developed form in another state," i.e. the enlarged, but distorted image on the erect penis, represents that other order which desire arouses, signification, which, we must assume, is a distortion of the real. Nevertheless, it is all that we have access to, as my readings of Carter's fictions shall demonstrate.

These two figures of sexuality, the implications of which Lacan himself fails to pursue, will serve, in my readings of Carter, as tropes for the gendered subject positions within Lacan's economy of desire, which, as we shall see, initiates the economy of signification. Lacan's model of desire begins with the Freudian understanding of the unconscious as "situated at that point, where . . . there is always something wrong" (The Four Fundamental Concepts 22). "In the dream, in parapraxis, in the flash of wit—what is it that strikes one first?" Lacan asks. "It is the sense of impediment to be found in all of them" (The Four Fundamental Concepts 25). In Lacan's own "flashes of wit"—the St. Teresa and the tattooed penis—the sense of impediment is there in the disjunction between the style of the scholarly lecture and the little joke which "flashes" and then is silent. Sex surfaces, as though erupting from the unconscious, and then subsides almost uncommented on. Acknowledging that the unconscious is difficult to talk about, Lacan, nevertheless, attempts to describe it: the unconscious manifests itself in the gap, in discontinuity. "What occurs, what is produced in this gap, is presented as the discovery" (The Four Fundamental Concepts 25). What interests me in the work of Carter is that her texts attempt to represent the space, the abyss even, between "the discovery" and the "tuché," a term which Lacan borrows from Aristotle for "the encounter with the real" (The Four Fundamental
Concepts 53). The function of the tuché, of the real as encounter, came to the attention of psychoanalysis in its search for the real trauma as origin of the analytic experience.

What psychoanalysis discovered, Lacan maintains, is that the encounter is forever missed, is, in fact, essentially, the missed encounter (The Four Fundamental Concepts 54). The real, therefore, continually holds itself in abeyance. And the primary process (the mechanism of the unconscious) which, in Carter texts, gives birth to "the real," must be looked for at the site of the "something wrong," the "impediment," the "gap," the "discontinuity." Here we find ourselves (and Lacan quotes Freud) in "another locality, another space, another scene, the between perception and consciousness" (The Four Fundamental Concepts 56). This is the space of fantasy, and it is in this space that Carter sets in motion fantastic transactions between interior/exterior, private/public, unconscious/conscious, and dream/"reality." The slash—/—the bar that connects the sets of oppositions and that bars access to the real, represents desire which, I argue, structures "the real"—the necessary fiction which serves in place of the real itself—including, of course, and in particular, heterosexuality. "The real" then circulates as scripts—cultural and psychic—which structure our lives within the parameters of the Law of the Father. Thus some literal, if unknowable real, has yielded to a "real" which has its only evidence in the stories we tell about it.

Fantasy, in the popular imagination, is always opposed to "reality." But such a dichotomy ignores the function of the slash as connector in the oppositions above, as a diaphragm which separates, but permits communication between the terms. The object of psychoanalysis is that slash—bar or diaphragm—that border country between the unconscious and the conscious, between the subject and the world. When Freud speaks of "psychical reality," unconscious desires and the fantasies to which they give rise, we are in the territory of the slash, birthplace of fantasy. The desires and fantasies of this personal psychic world act with as much force in our lives as any material
circumstance, playing a constitutive role in the cultural production of "reality" (which, of course, itself plays a role in the production of personal desires and fantasies); this "reality," personal and cultural, is postulated against an always-receding horizon of the real. In commenting on the relationship between the hallucinatory quality of her stories and her intended social critique, Carter says, "there is a materiality to symbols; there's a materiality to imaginative life and imaginative experience that should be taken quite seriously" (Haffenden Interview 85). Beyond the "entertaining surface to the novels," everything is put there "to be read," Carter claims, "to be read the way allegory was intended to be read . . . as a system of signification" (86-87). Carter's stylized and extravagant fictions, situated in the landscape of the psyche, make use of fantasy to trace the movement of desire in the production of the "reality" of heterosexuality.

Laplanche and Pontalis, in their essay, "Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality," re-examine the elusive and shifting, but compelling, relationship between fantasy and sexuality in Freud, drawing some conclusions of their own. In Freud's theoretical model of desire, the origin of fantasy lies in the hallucinatory satisfaction of desire (SE 5, 598). As Laplanche and Pontalis recount it:

... in the absence of a real object, the infant reproduces the experience of the original satisfaction in a hallucinated form. In this view the most fundamental fantasies would be those which tend to recover the hallucinated objects linked with the very earliest experiences of the rise and the resolution of desire. (24)

13 In the debate about the origin of sexuality between social constructionists and biological determinists the notion that sexuality is merely constructed is occasionally offered as evidence that sexuality is a matter of personal choice and is easily changed. I would argue, on the other hand, that constructed sexuality imposes at least as many constraints on our behavior as anatomy.

14 My analysis of the etiology of heterosexuality is enriched by Laplanche and Pontalis' skillful reading of the Freudian theory of the origin of desire.
In the original hallucination of satisfaction, Freud claims here to have discovered the origin of desire. Because these hallucinations or fantasies occur at the "mythical moment of disjunction" between the pacification of need (the infant's real experience) and the fulfillment of desire (its hallucinatory revival), the moment which happens, also, not incidentally, to be the "mythical moment" of accession to subjectivity, fantasies represent a privileged site of investigation into the origins of sexuality (24).

Fantasy, or phantasy, represents two distinct, but related, mental processes in Freud, the content of unconscious mental processes and the content of conscious imaginings (5, 574 and 7, 165-66). Nevertheless, the two processes are not without communication. Not only is there a homology between the different levels of fantasy, there is actual movement between them, as in this account of Freud's:

Unconscious fantasies have either been unconscious all along, or—as is more often the case—they were once conscious fantasies, daydreams, and have since been purposely forgotten and have become unconscious through "repression." (SE 9, 161)

Literary fantasy is an attempt to imagine a way back to unconscious fantasies, to invite the return of the repressed, as well as to represent what was excluded in the Freudian account. Carter's texts read the culture's conscious fantasies for their latent (unconscious) content and attempt (necessarily) to represent these unconscious fantasies at the level of the conscious. The goal of this two-step process of decoding and re-encoding is to preserve a trace of the unconscious fantasy and to make visible the process by which unacceptable desires are repressed. Hallucinatory revival, arising out of "impediment," of disjunction, is the stuff of Carter's fiction. Desire and fantasy

15 Although psychoanalysis since Freud has often attempted to distinguish conscious fantasies from unconscious fantasies by the graphological device of using "ph" for unconscious fantasies and "f" for conscious, Freud himself made no such distinction; thus, I will follow Laplanche and Pontalis and use "fantasy" for both unconscious and conscious fantasies.
are closely related in Freud, as in the term *Wunschphantasie* (wish-fantasy) (Laplanche and Pontalis 23); so, too, are desire and sexuality, and fantasy and sexuality, as will become apparent in the readings of Carter's texts. For this reason close attention to a culture's fantasies can reveal much about that culture's construction of heterosexuality.

The signifying practices of the unconscious, according to Freud, operate always in response to a primitive interpretation of the pleasure principle. The unconscious responds to need with a hallucinatory revival or fantasy upon which it depends for gratification. Kaja Silverman provides a lucid summary of the relationship in Freud between conscious and unconscious desires:

> . . . the unconscious is established simultaneously with the desires it houses—desires which are on the one hand culturally promoted, and on the other linguistically blocked. The desires which most classically inaugurate the Western unconscious are of course those that comprise the Oedipus complex.

> Because these originary desires are permanently blocked [the subject does not have access to its originary pre-subjective state of fullness of being], they are not capable of any real gratification; instead, they initiate a series of displacements which continue throughout the entire existence of the subject and structure that subject's psychic reality. All consciously held desires derive through a long chain of displacements, from those that organize the unconscious. (*Semiotics* 77)

In order to begin to look for the origin of consciously held sexual desires, then, Silverman argues, it is necessary to trace the path of the "long chain of displacements" that lead back to repressed unconscious desires, notably those of the Oedipus complex (*Semiotics* 77). "Censorship" works to exclude from consciousness those culturally generated but prohibited desires that reside in the unconscious. "Dream-work" moves these desires from censorship to signification by finding representations acceptable to the censor which can stand in for unacceptable desires (*SE* 5, 573-74). Carter's narrative strategy—essentially an impossible, but fruitful strategy—is to move backwards from the censored representations to the unconscious material which generates them, establishing the connection between them.
The Law of the Father and the Pretender to the Throne

For Lacan the formation of the unconscious and the birth of desire are inextricably linked, in one momentous event, to the inauguration of meaning and the entry into the symbolic. With entry into the Oedipus complex, the subject is alienated from the real (including its own being), discovers itself to be distinct from others, is inducted into a system of signification based on difference, and takes up a cultural position based on gender difference. Men and women are positioned differently in this system of signification which structures both the meaning and the practice of heterosexuality. Lacan characterizes the Oedipus complex as a linguistic transaction in which the incest taboo is articulated by means of linguistic categories like "mother" and "father," categories which organize both the individual subject and the larger symbolic field under the paternal signifier the "Name of the Father." This signifying act, Silverman maintains, which arbitrarily and absolutely assigns a Father's name to a child, thereby institutes the reign of patriarchal law (Semiotics 176-183). The duality of the sexes, what Judith Butler terms "the fall into twoness," is the effect of the Law of the Father (not a prior condition) which establishes the masculine subject who thenceforth postures as a self-grounding, desiring signifier within language and, at the same time, establishes woman as the reflection and reassurance of that illusory autonomy (Gender Trouble 45-55).

The Law of the Father, although theorized by Lacan at the level of the symbolic in which the "Father" is never identical to any real father, nevertheless, has material consequences in the lives of real men and women. Real men, within patriarchal culture, are pretenders to the legitimacy of the Father, thereby gaining power—power to signify, to represent themselves and to represent women. As will become clear in an analysis of the novels, Carter repeatedly exposes the masculine status as pretender in her fictions. In Wise Children, her last novel, questions of paternity and legitimacy are
among the central concerns. Nora and Dora Chance, twin sisters, have made their living "on the boards" in the somewhat disreputable British music halls (analogous to vaudeville). An elderly Dora (the narrator), having spent her life searching for an identity which she locates in a positive identification and relationship with her real father, says, "... our father was a pillar of the legit. theatre and we girls are illegitimate in every way—not only born out of wedlock, but we went on the halls, didn't we!" (11). The legitimacy of the father and the illegitimacy of his daughters is assumed throughout the text by all the central characters, particularly by the "father" in question—Melchior, by his twin brother—Peregrine (Nora and Dora's beloved "uncle"), and by the daughters themselves. Dora comments on the "names" of the twin brothers she calls "our fathers": "What names, eh? What delusions of grandeur went into the naming of them?" (16). Although she claims to have been without irony at a young age, the irony of the older and wiser narrator is apparent in this irreverent aspersion cast on the Names of the Fathers.

The legitimacy and the identity even of the father, continually asserted by the text, is, at the same time, undercut. Melchior (supposedly the biological father of the twin girls) and Peregrine (who assumes the role of nurturing father, the one who actually participates in the girls' lives) share the role of father in the novel. The function of father is to represent both what Lacan calls the "primordial law" and the threat of incest which would transgress that law, i.e., the prohibition against the boy's sleeping with his mother (Ecrits 282). Only, in Wise Children, Carter extends the prohibition to fathers and daughters, and tests its effects. The twins, in love with their father Melchior from afar, claim that merely hearing his voice, "that magisterial baritone
ecstasising" from the legitimate stage sets them "a-flutter."\(^{16}\) When Dora allows that Melchior's voice turns her into the dog on the record label and that she responds just as alertly and wistfully as the dog to "His Master's Voice," Nora reassures her, "You've only got the one father" (127). This absolute quality of fatherhood is precisely what is at stake, however, in the text. When Dora and Peregrine finally breach the incest barrier and have sex, Dora is suddenly seized with panic: "'Ere, Perry... you're not, by any chance, my father, are you?" (Carter's ellipsis, 222). Perry laughs and denies it, but the seeds of doubt are planted in the reader's mind. "It is a wise child that knows its own father," the saying goes. But, as Carter's texts make clear, the legitimacy of the father's claim is always suspect.

A music-hall joke appears in *Wise Children* which Carter first used to introduce a talk she gave in 1990 at the Dia symposium to consider the critical relationship between imaginative writing and political and social institutions. "'E's not your father!" the punchline reads in the novel (65). I will reproduce the entire text of the joke as Carter delivered it at the Dia symposium because it frames the argument I intend to make about Carter's novels as critiques of the Law of the Father. The joke goes like this:

There is this boy, you see, and he wants to marry the girl across the road. So he says to his father, "Dad, I fancy marrying that girl across the road." And his father looks very mournful and regretful and says, "Son, I have a confession to make. When I was a young lad I used to get around, and I am sorry to have to tell you this, but you can't marry her because she is really your sister." So, the boy becomes somewhat downcast, but happily he is able to recover. Now... the boy gets on a bus. And he comes back and says to his father, "Father, I want to get married to that girl who lives three streets away."

\(^{16}\) Carter's choice of the name Dora for her protagonist-narrator suggests, of course, Freud's famous case *Dora*, an analysis of the female hysteric. Lacan concludes that Freud was unable to see the obvious—"that the hysteric's desire is to sustain the desire of the father" (*Four Fundamentals* 38), a conclusion which Dora and Nora's adoration of their father supports. I will return to this notion of sustaining the desire of the father in my analysis of *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*. 
And his father looks glum and says, "Son, I've got something to tell you. When I was a lad we didn't have buses, but I had a bike, and to make a long story short, that girl's your sister." Now the boy, increasingly downcast, buys a railway ticket. He comes back from his excursion and says to his father, "I bet you've never been to Birmingham." And his father replies, "Oh yes I have." So, extremely disconsolate, the boy goes to his mother and says, "Looks like I'm never going to be able to get married, Mum." "Why is that?" she asks. "Well, it seems every girl I fancy turns out to be my sister." And his mother says, "You go ahead and marry whoever you want, lad. He's not your father." (Critical Fictions 143)

In this brief humorous story Carter contests the entire structure of law which the Name of the Father instates. And, furthermore, seizes the authority of the phallus, the power to name succession, for the mother. Patriarchal law, which is instituted by the absolute and unquestioned imposition of the Name of the Father, is off-handedly derided as a male conceit in this subversive little joke.

Freud, as noted earlier, claimed for the joke a privileged site for the return of the repressed. Carter, sharing Freud's opinion, seems to find a subversive potential in jokes, puns, pornography—any unauthorized discourse which manages to occasionally escape censorship, permitting the eruption into consciousness of otherwise unacceptable material. This moment of disjunction—the joke, the pun, the pornographic text—can, at times, threaten the very fabric of paternal law. Carter comments on this potential in her own joke:

He's not your father. It's a phrase that knocks down all the sacred cows—or, in this instance, bulls—of cultural history. Imagine, you could throw out everything with this phrase: Hamlet, Oedipus, the Brothers Karamozov, King Lear, Superman. It is the ultimate Freudian joke. And it illustrates wonderfully . . . that father is a social and legal fiction, that the term is only important as a social construction designed to facilitate the transmission of property . . . [and] the transmission of a whole set of ideas. (Critical Fictions 144-45)

In The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman and The Passion of the New Eve, Carter engages with the sacred cows—or, more properly, bulls—of literary and psychoanalytic history, acknowledging their status as sacred, only in order to reveal them as profane impostors. To the catalogue of Fathers whom Carter claims to be
undoing, I would add the Emperor. In Carter's texts, it is shown conclusively that the Emperor is, indeed, wearing no clothes. The phallus, which, according to Lacan, can play its role only when veiled, is unveiled in Carter's fictions, reducing the potency of the Father to impotence. Unveiled, naked, the phallus becomes merely a penis, the sometimes ridiculous pretender to the throne.

The Emperor may be naked; however, even at his most vulnerable, he brazenly attempts to cloak his nakedness in the law. In *Wise Children* the grandfather of Nora and Dora, like his son a "legitimate" actor, is worshipped by his son, Melchior, as he struts across the stage. Long after his father's death Melchior still treasures a "relic" from his performance as King Lear: what, offstage, reveals itself to be merely a "pasteboard crown," a "toy crown with the gold paint peeling off" (22-23). Melchior, despite the absurdity of the dilapidated toy, tenderly preserves his father's pasteboard crown as emblematic of his authority. Having himself succeeded to his father's status as "legitimate," Melchior keeps his daughters in the ambiguous position of unacknowledged, illegitimate, adoring subjects. Dora's increasingly clear-eyed view of her father leads her in the last pages of the novel to review Melchior's own performance as king, "his crown still on, though much askew by now": "Nora, don't you think our father looked two-dimensional, tonight?" Despite Nora's silencing look, Dora continues: "...like one of those great, big, papier-maché heads they have in the Notting Hill parade, larger than life, but not lifelike" (228-30). Carter's critique of the "legitimacy" of the phallocentric construction of sexuality works through revealing the discrepancy between the Law of the Father which structures "reality" and the often pathetic, less-than-lifelike individual man who wields power within the law.

Acknowledging that it is in the context of paternal law that heterosexuality is constituted, Carter's texts unerringly reveal the pretensions, the papier maché forms that sustain the unequal power relations of sexuality. Both masculine and feminine
positions are, even in Lacan's own terms, to be understood as "comedic failures" (Butler, Gender Trouble 46). The comedy of conventional heterosexuality as it is constituted under the Law of the Father is that neither men nor women can really have the phallus. The slippery relationship between the phallus and the penis, which has so occupied feminist theorists, is, I believe, an inevitable Lacanian ambiguity. 17 Fully implicated in and beneficiary of the phallocentrism he describes, Lacan is blind to the full implications of his frequent conflation of the phallus and the penis, and, at the same time, is stubbornly reluctant to fully concede the crucial tie between them. The phallus is not the penis; the father is not the Father. But the phallus also always refers to the penis, and, within conventional social and sexual power relations, the Law of the Father has been embodied in fathers. Gallop calls urgently for a masculinity that is not phallic; she sees as a remedy to phallocentrism men who are in their flesh, where "the erect penis, unlike the symbolic phallus, is not monolithic power, but desire, need for another body" (Thinking Through the Body 129). She, like Carter, insists on the penis, while acknowledging the power of the transcendent phallus as it has structured gender and desire. Within the Oedipal narrative, fathers have appeared "larger than life," and, at the same time, "not lifelike." Carter works this paradox, unveiling the penis beneath the pretentious phallus, while, at the same time, recognizing and critiquing the power of the phallus to structure our systems of signification. Doctor Hoffman and The New Eve, both parodic reinscriptions of phallic desire as powerful, yet, ultimately, as "comedic failure," engage with the Oedipal narrative as Carter simultaneously performs and critiques the workings of desire and identification within the Freudian-Lacanian model of heterosexuality.

17 See, for example, Butler, Gallop, de Lauretis, and Silverman. In addition, an entire issue of differences ("The Phallus Issue") was devoted to the question of the relationship of the phallus and the penis, of the symbolic and the material.
"I take my desire for reality":
*The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*

In *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* Carter creates a narrative of reason at war with "the ferocious images of desire," literalizing the Enragés' slogan (96). She pits Descartes against Freud, the cogito against a rewritten version: "I DESIRE THEREFORE I EXIST" (211). A dazzlingly literary quest novel which incorporates the sub-genres of science fiction, romance, gothic, and pornography, genres which have been influential in scripting heterosexuality, *Doctor Hoffman* complicates the Oedipus narrative while, at the same time, putting into question the nature of "the real." Carter's text makes the claim that normative heterosexuality is the effect of the signifying power of the phallus, that the "reality" of heterosexuality (and woman's position within it) is scripted by the Law of the Father and reproduced through unconscious psychic structures. The subject of the novel is the unconscious and its phantoms, specifically desire as presumptively masculine.

A look at the historical context of the book helps us to read its concerns: *Doctor Hoffman*, published in 1972, may be read, on one level, as a representation of the battle being waged in the '60s between a waning faith in reason and the optimistic view represented by Marcuse in *Eros and Civilization* that the "liberation of Eros" possible at this moment in history would lead to an "instinctual" social and political liberation (155). That "repression" was merely outmoded and that reason had been used as a tool of oppression, views that were influential in the May '68 student uprising, were key, too, in the theoretical work of the time, particularly that of the Marxists and feminists. The work of the French feminists, Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray, like that of Marcuse, reflects a

---

18 Other critics, too, have attempted to place this novel in a historical and philosophical context. David Punter sees *Doctor Hoffman* as a battle between Freud and Reich, and Ricarda Schmidt sees it as a refutation of Marcuse by appealing to Freud. I find it more useful to situate the war in the novel as a battle between an enlightenment trust in reason and a Marcusian trust in Eros.
distrust of rationality and of the masculine institutions and practices that the myth of reason has supported. Calling on women to turn away from rational discourse and to "write the body," these feminists urge a return to the "pre-symbolic," to a place before language and reason, before alienation, to a place of fullness and presence, a place of *jouissance* — a place they identify as feminine.\(^{19}\) It is within this intellectual climate that Carter (herself an intellectual) stages a war between desire and reason.

In a reading even more interesting than the historical, however, which locates the novel as a text of a particular moment, *Doctor Hoffman* engages with some fundamental metaphysical and psychological questions, questions which underlie any attempt to account for sexuality. Unlike most prior theorizing of subjectivity and signification, however, Carter situates these questions in the context of gendered power relations. The Law of the Father becomes, in Carter's hands, the Laws of Two Fathers, and the war which ensues is a battle between the forces of desire and the forces of reason for control over "reality." Although traditionally reason has been constructed as masculine and emotion as feminine, for Carter both registers are the domain of the masculine. Reason and passion, in fact, prove to be two sides of a Moebius strip, two extreme alternatives which turn and fold back on themselves, an infinite torsion from which there is no escape. Often thought to be oppositions, reason and passion, are found in Carter's text, to fold back over their own surfaces into a single system of oppression. A paradigm shift is the possible result of the war in the text, with passion replacing reason as the defining human experience; nevertheless, Fathers are fully in control in either case, no matter what the outcome.

\(^{19}\) "*Jouissance,*" literally "orgasm," is a term used by Lacan to refer to something which is beyond pleasure, something which is always in excess, which is beyond the phallus. The question of woman's relation to *jouissance* has occupied both Lacan and French feminists.
The rebel father is Dr. Hoffman who has achieved, with his eroto-generators (the desire machines of the text), "great cracks in the hitherto immutable surface of the time and space equation" (17). Hoffman is waging a "massive campaign against human reason" by flooding the land with mirages and hallucinations spun from a "kaleidoscope of desire" (13, 11). The line between public and private, between "in here" and "out there" has been breached, with people's dreams and memories insidiously invading each other's minds, with unspoken fantasies suddenly materializing in the streets. The "unreality atom" has produced a mass vertigo. Attempting to hold the line against Dr. Hoffman's unreason is the Minister of Determination whose responsibility is to defend his "thickly, obtusely masculine" city against the incursions of desire (15). In the war between Dr. Hoffman and the Minister, the realm of reason, however, is given short shrift by Carter; she lavishes her most exotic, richly imagined prose on the shifting, sensual landscape peopled by the phantoms of desire. Nevertheless, invention and the constitution of "reality" belongs solely to men in Doctor Hoffman, whether they are aligned with a rational or a libidinal economy.

Desiderio, the "hero" and narrator of the text, is a minor clerk in the government when the Minister of Determination calls on him to defend the land against desire. Chosen because his boredom and indifference initially provide him with an immunity to Dr. Hoffman's phantoms, Desiderio is, ultimately, torn between two Fathers, desired by both. Literally fatherless (his mother was an Indian prostitute working in the slums of the city), Desiderio inherits male privilege from his two spiritual fathers. The narrative, structured as a "picaresque adventure" which recounts the making of a hero and the defeat of the forces of desire, establishes itself within the Oedipal tradition by staging the quest for the father across

20 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's use of the term "desiring machines" will be discussed in the next chapter; their Anti-Oedipus, in which this phrase occurs, was translated into English in 1974, two years after the publication of Doctor Hoffman.
a landscape and toward an object both clearly coded as feminine (14). 21 In the course of Desiderio's many adventures, his mission becomes closely tied up with his pursuit of the elusive Albertina, the daughter of the renegade doctor. A seductive shape-shifter, Albertina assumes many guises as she inexorably leads her suitor to a confrontation with her father. As Oedipus, Desiderio will, of course, have to kill off the Fathers in order to accede to full subjectivity and become a Father himself. The plot is played out and Desiderio becomes a hero, a Father of the people. But all is ashes. Narrating the story fifty years after the defeat of desire, Desiderio confesses that he lives in a "drab, colourless world, as though I were living in a faded daguerreotype" (14). The death of desire has left the world a mere shadow of the vivid "reality" of Desiderio's youth.

In her investigation into the nature of the real, Carter, operating as a kind of "ontological freelance" (145), sidesteps the debate between the phenomenologists and the idealists by privileging desire as that which constitutes the subject as well as the "real" world. According to Descartes' formulation the subject apprehends himself as thought; in Carter's revision the subject apprehends himself as desire. The paradox that is desire in the text, its status as both origin and effect, is encoded in Desiderio's name. Desiderio himself translates his name as the passive form, "the desired one" (133), and he is, I argue, desired into being by his fathers; however, as Ricarda Schmidt notes, "Desiderio" is more accurately translated from the Italian as the active form, "wish, longing, desire" (57). The two translations suggest the tension in the text between Desiderio's role as the desired one of the Father and his function as active desire, as that which brings into being the entire world of the novel, i.e., between the desire to be the phallus (desired) and to have the phallus (desiring). "I DESIRE THEREFORE I EXIST" (211) implicitly becomes, in the course of the novel, "I

21 Freud, in the Interpretation of Dreams, identifies the male with the active agent in narrative, the female with the passive, arguing that in dreams the male organ is represented by persons and the female organ by a landscape (SE 5, 366).
desire, therefore everything exists." Ostensibly fighting for the forces of reason, Desiderio, nevertheless, invents Albertina, his beloved, as well as the entire book as a manifestation of his desire. As his journey unfolds, Desiderio accedes to subjectivity, thus moving from the position of object of desire to subject of desire.

For Carter, as for Lacan, meaning, or our entire experience of the "reality" of the world, is constructed within systems of signification. Doctor Hoffman is, essentially, a performance which makes visible the signifying work which constructs heterosexuality as an effect of desire, in an endless chain of signification in which the subject (in this case, Desiderio) is himself constituted in the very act of desiring. In "The signification of the phallus" Lacan reverses conventional assumptions about signification. He describes the effect of what he calls the "passion of the signifier," arguing that "the signifier has an active function in determining certain effects in which the signifiable appears as submitting to its mark, by becoming through that passion the signified" (Ecrits 284); i.e., the signifier is determinative of the signified, or, in the language of this project, the script produces "the real." This is precisely the action of Carter's text. I find Lacan's choice of the word "passion" in connection with the work of signification echoed in Carter's insistence on the sexual nature of the process by which desire generates "reality." The abstract nature of Lacan's discourse on the "passion of the signifier" is replaced in Carter, however, with a visceral image in which "passions set fire to a tree" (Doctor Hoffman 193). Repeatedly Desiderio observes a scene, often of violence and degradation, and reluctantly concludes that his role is less that of observer than creator, "for such was [my] desire [that] he should be and do so" (159). Although there is an "incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier" (Ecrits 154), this sliding movement, this glissement doesn't diminish the power of the signifier to produce material effects, notably both the idea and the practice of heterosexuality, which, in the Lacanian-Carter model, then acts as the signifying agent of further material effects.
"Look! I have liberated desire!" cries the doctor, as "deceitful images springing from that dark part of ourselves" run rampant through the streets (208, 206). Within the Lacanian argument the subject has no access to the real, and, consequently, lives only in the world of always alienated, always unsatisfied desire. The radical incommensurability between the symbolic and the world of real objects, is bridged, in Lacan's account and Carter's fiction, by desire. The argument is stated clearly in Doctor Hoffman:

For us, the world exists only as a medium in which we execute our desires. Physically, the world itself, the actual world—the real world, if you like—is formed of malleable clay; its metaphysical structure is just as malleable. (35)

Although a bit more concrete, this assertion by an Ambassador for the forces of desire could stand in place of Lacan's own argument about the relation between desire and the world. The gap of the unconscious, home to desire is, Lacan claims, "pre-ontological," "neither being, nor non-being, but the unrealized" (The Four Fundamentals 29-30). Doctor Hoffman is a thought-experiment in the realization of the unconscious, the coming-into-being of unconscious desires. The world represented in Carter's text is brought into being by "erotic-energy," is a materialization of those sexual desires which erupt from the unconscious (214). To put it another way, Carter presents a world in which the heterosexual encounter, harnessed by the Law of the Father, generates all of "reality." The heterosexual matrix, constructed by the Law of the Father, itself acts to structure the relations among individuals which comprise the world as we know it. Within the text, the doctor's desire machines, fueled by the perpetual coupling of male-female couples, generates the energy which sustains the hallucinations and mirages which constitute "reality." This constructed "reality" acts to obscure the fact of its own constructedness and poses as the real itself.

Kaja Silverman summarizes Lacan on the real as inaccessible, as missed encounter: "the signifier is the mark of the subject's radical alienation from the real—from its organic nature, from actual mothers or fathers, or from any phenomenal experience" (Semiotics 164). In Carter's text, this radical alienation from the real is ameliorated by desire, which
sets up a second order of "reality." The abyss between the subject and the material world, in other words, is spanned by the eruptions of desire into the logic of the symbolic, with the effect of substituting "reality," the necessary fiction which structures our lives, for an inaccessible reality.

In this "game of metaphysical chess" (*Doctor Hoffman* 14), the players—the Minister, Dr. Hoffman, and Desiderio—are all men.\(^{22}\) Desire is always masculine, Lacan asserts, but then fails to follow up the implications of his assertion. For, like Freud, Lacan is himself complicit in the Law of the Father which he purports to merely describe. His theories are, in fact, congruent with a system of power which naturalizes and privileges heterosexuality and masculinity and devalues both femininity and homosexuality. In *Doctor Hoffman* Carter pursues the logic of Lacan's claim about the genderized nature of desire, and finds that masculine desire, fundamentally narcissistic in the Lacanian model as well as in her text, generates, first, the desiring subject himself ("I DESIRE THEREFORE I EXIST"), and then the entire world. The tattooed penis, which serves in my argument as a metaphor for Lacan's claim that desire is always masculine, displays, if you recall, a picture which can be fully appreciated only in its erect state. Masculine desire aroused provides us with our distorted representations of the world, this image suggests, eliding the always-missed encounter with the real and foregrounding a signifier which stands in for the real, which becomes, in fact, "the real." Here desire and the symbolic meet in the figure of the erect penis which, despite repeated attempts at separation, is often conflated by Lacan with the phallus. In "The Signification of the Phallus," a text which does much to mystify the

\(^{22}\) Ironically, of course, Carter is herself a player in this game, is, in fact, the one who sets up this particular chess game. Her project is located, however, in a metaphysical tradition which is overwhelmingly masculine. The text achieves two things: it enacts masculine desire as generative of "reality," and, at the same time, contests masculine authority in Carter's act of assuming an authorial position within metaphysical discourse.
phallus, the function of the phallus, which is implicit in the figure of the tattooed penis in "Anamorphosis," is made explicit: "the phallus is the privileged signifier of that mark in which the role of the logos is joined with the advent of desire," Lacan writes (Ecrits 287). Although language effects a complete rupture with the phenomenal world, desire, in the figure of the phallus, sparks signifiers which take up residence in a closed system of "the real."

It is precisely this moment which is literally enacted in Doctor Hoffman. The real is unattainable, continually eludes perception; nevertheless, Desiderio's frenzied desire actually enables the world around him, establishing what will serve as "reality." On occasion, caught up in a violent moment, Desiderio himself suspects this to be the case. When forced to witness the brutal rape of Albertina by the centaurs, there flickers in his mind a "teasing image" which suggests "that I was somehow, all unknowing, the instigator of this horror. My pain and agitation increased beyond all measure" (180). Although horrifying to his conscious mind, the phantoms of Desiderio's unconscious desires are nonetheless released in the world with often violent material consequences. The literal manifestations of masculine desire, the walking phantoms of the text—the centaurs, the acrobats of desire, the Count—are replicated in the extra-textual world, Carter suggests, in the negotiations over control of meaning. The reality status and the meaning of sexuality are products of masculine desire, the text claims; the "nature" of sexuality as presumptively heterosexual and hierarchical is firmly established under the law of the father. What qualifies as "sex"—the unequal power relationships within the binary oppositions, hetero-/homo-sexual and male/female, paradigms of patriarchal culture—derives from and is continually shored up by the masculine trajectory of desire in which woman is merely the object of his quest. Entitlement to desire, and thus to the construction of meaning, of "reality" even, depends on membership within the paternal order with the promise of accession to the role of father. In Doctor Hoffman the text strips away the veils of ideology, e.g., the circulation of the seemingly innocent master narratives
such as reason or paternal love, which usually obscure the masculine construction of both the meaning and the practice of heterosexuality, leaving the stark outlines of desire at work.

The most literal embodiment of the masculine construction of heterosexuality is seen in Desiderio's first adventure, which takes him to a peep-show entitled "THE SEVEN WONDERS OF THE WORLD IN THREE LIFELIKE DIMENSIONS." The peep show confronts Desiderio immediately with representations of the three childhood traumas which Laplanche and Pontalis call the "fantasies of origins," which operate also as the reverse, the origins of fantasy: the primal scene, fantasies of castration, and fantasies of seduction (19). These original fantasies, particularly the discovery that the woman does not have a penis, inaugurate sexual difference and channel sexual desire onto the appropriate heterosexual objects. Situated as it is in the text, the peep-show operates as kind of traumatic way-station for Desiderio in his journey from indifferent spectator to desiring creator. In order to accede to the position of desiring subject, Desiderio must negotiate two incompatible tasks: maintain his belief in woman's lack and yet contain his own castration anxiety.

The fetishistic logic of the peep show demonstrates clearly what is at stake in Carter's narrative of sexual desire: the mechanisms by which identity is constructed as presumptively heterosexual are given literal, if parodic material representations. Woman as lack, necessary to ensure man's pleasure, as well as his self-representation, is nevertheless a threatening reminder of the possibility of castration; therefore, he must continually "disavow" the reality

---

23 In Nothing Sacred, a wide-ranging collection of radical essays, Carter says she was influenced by Japanese comics, which she discovered during her residency in Japan where she worked as a l. "hostess. Her comment on the adult comic strips could be said to describe her own peep show: "pictorial lexicons of the most ferocious imagery of desire, violence and terror, erupting amid gouts of gore, red-hot from the unconscious. However, it is respectfully-suited Mr. Average who buys them to flick through on his way home to peaceful tea, evening television and continuous, undisrupted, absolute propriety" (39).
that she has no penis. What is real and what is desired in its place—and the tension between the two, the subject of Carter's text—has a counterpart in Freud's theory of fetishism:

The fetish is a substitute for the woman's (the mother's) penis that the little boy once believed in and . . . does not want to give up. What happened, therefore, was that the boy refused to take cognizance of the fact of his having perceived that a woman does not possess a penis. No, that could not be true: for if a woman had been castrated, then his own possession of a penis was in danger. (SE 21, 152-153)

According to Freud's theory, the horror of castration, born with the discovery of woman's "lack," results in a disavowal on the part of the boy, with a concomitant creation of a substitute for the missing penis, the fetish. Freud considers the fetish a "token of triumph over the threat of castration and a protection against it," which "saves" the fetishist from becoming a homosexual by endowing women with a trait which makes them "tolerable" as objects of desire (154). The fetish, of course, takes many forms. As Sally Robinson suggests, Albertina Hoffman, in her malleable "ideational femaleness," is the primary fetish of the text.24 Fetishism as a solution to sexual difference, however, usually takes the form of a fixation on either an unrelated object, or, as is frequently the case, on a fragmented body part.

In the peep show Carter engages with fetishism at its most literal level, explicitly framing pornographic images of male and female genitalia in the peep show:

The legs of a woman, raised and open as if ready to admit a lover, formed a curvilinear triumphal arch. . . . The dark red and purple crenellations surrounding the vagina acted as a frame for a perfectly round hole through which the viewer glimpsed the moist, luxuriant landscape of the interior." (44)

However, inside this vagina, in the distance beyond the vistas of delight that Carter catalogues in exquisitely exotic images, beyond the varied sweet and impossible phantasms, broods a sinister castle reminiscent of Kafka (chilling, anti-erotic, and suggesting "as many torture chambers as the Chateau of Silling" [45]). This ambivalence of the fetish is integral

---

24 Robinson 108. See Robinson's Engendering the Subject for an analysis of the fetishism in Doctor Hoffman which links Freud's discourse on the fetish with the rhetoric of the woman as veiling/ unveiling in Derrida's Spurs (77-134).
to its function: the female genitals promise pleasure at the same time as they threaten castration. Here, as well as throughout the text, Carter uses many of the modes of pornographic representation, many of its codes and conventions, but to a different end—her narrative disrupts pleasure, reminding the reader of the other term in the oscillating fetish, castration. Another exhibit—"a candle in the shape of a penis of excessive size, with scrotum attached, in a state of pronounced tumescence"—is, at once, a shrine to the erect penis and, because it is detached, a threat of castration. The caption of this framed penis, which is described in lurid and clinical detail, reads "The Key to the City," a title that only a male reader of immense arrogance and obtuseness could fail to appreciate as an ironic comment, a mockery meant to reduce his "tumescence." This huge wax penis serves, for me, as a kind of parody of the transcendental authority of Lacan's tattooed penis/phallus, while, at the same time, it confirms the penis' cultural circulation as an entitlement to power.

Using frames and titles as a distancing technique which denies the pleasure her pornographic images might otherwise incite, Carter interrupts the unity of the diegesis for a reading of her own text. Each peep show exhibit is contained in an ancient, ornamented machine and each has its own provocative title, as well an ironic commentary. Desiderio puts his quarter in, peers into the ancient machines, examining each of the exhibits in turn. The act of looking through a hole to view simulated, distorted, fetishized genitals echoes Lacan's discussion of anamorphosis, the context for his remark on the tattooed penis. Attempting to explain the mapping of space which plays with perspective and distortion, Lacan mentions a convent that carried on its wall, "representing as if by chance St John at Patmos[,] a picture that had to be looked at through a hole, so that its distorting values could be appreciated to its full extent" (The Four Fundamentals 87). In a similar fashion, Carter's act of framing and labeling objects which are commonly fetishized sets a stage where the "distorting values [of the fetish] could be appreciated to its full extent." The peep show exhibits contain the obligatory fetishistic female body parts on display: "a bristling pubic
growth," three-foot eyes, "perfectly spherical" vanilla-ice-cream breasts, "the headless body of a mutilated woman," "a head—purporting, presumably, to have been taken from the victim of the preceding tableau" (44-45). In the peep show Desiderio discovers in the face of one of the fetish dolls the beautiful face which he will come to know as Albertina's. And he finds himself, too, caught in the peep show when he sees his own eyes reflected in the false eyes, "reflections [which] again reflected those reflections" in a "model of eternal regression" (45). This "model of eternal regression," a kind of "precession of the simulacra" à la Baudrillard, points to a fetishism which traps the scopophilic viewer in a desire which cannot distinguish between the real and that which is desired into being.

The fetishized primal scene lacks the expected traumatic quality, seeming instead inevitable and tired: in the final exhibit Desiderio sees, "as I expected, . . . a man and woman . . . conducting sexual congress on a black horschair couch" (46). The clinical ring of "sexual congress" finds a counterpart in the rhetoric of exhausted desire that makes up the remainder of the commentary on this exhibit labeled "PERPETUAL MOTION":

This coupling had a fated, inevitable quality. One could not picture a cataclysm sufficiently violent to rend the twined forms asunder and neither could one conceive of a past beginning for they were so firmly joined together it seemed they must have been formed in this way at the beginning of time and, locked parallel, would go on thus for ever to infinity. They were not so much erotic as pathetic, poor palmers of desire . . . . (46)

For Carter conventional heterosexuality has the quality of a perpetual motion machine: once set in motion, there isn't a cataclysm sufficient to interrupt it. Circumscribed by the Law of the Father, as desire is throughout the text, this heterosexual coupling seems fated, inevitable, natural, formed this way in the beginning. The desirelessness, the unerotic pathos of the coupling couple makes clear that, in their case, the sex act has been set in motion by the father's desire, not by their own. Carter seems to suggest, in these "poor palmers of desire" who go through the motions of desire for purposes not their own, that heterosexuality is, in some way, always an effect of power, an effect of the "desire" of
power for its own replication. By including the notion of a "cataclysm" which might "rend asunder" the intertwined couple, she introduces violence as a possible, albeit inconceivable interruption to the perpetual motion of heterosexuality. What is concealed by this hint of impending violence is the violence that designed—and keeps in motion—these exhibits which, as the text later reveals, have probable causal links to events in the world.

Desire, the Simulacrum, and the Real

The cause-and-effect relationship between the images, known as "samples," and "real" events is equivocal in the text, the link being unconscious desire. In a move which is again suggestive of Baudrillard, Carter blurs the line between representation and the real: which is the simulacrum, which is the real? And which comes first? "In order to achieve the maximal degree of verisimilitude, the overall effect was one of stunning artifice," the text paradoxically claims about the peep show exhibits. "A disturbing degree of life-likeness . . . uncannily added to the synthetic quality of the image" (44-45). Carter here explicitly evokes the uncanny, which she plays with throughout the text, although, as I will demonstrate, the novel, ultimately, is not experienced as uncanny. Ambiguity about the reality status of events, however, which is crucial to the experience of reading Doctor Hoffman, is central to Freud's theorizing of the uncanny. Linking the uncanny to both the inexplicable and to the return of the repressed, Freud claims:

an uncanny experience occurs either when infantile complexes which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed. (SE 17, 249)

We experience the uncanny, unheimlich, that which arouses "dread and horror," Freud claims, when there is a conjunction of the homely and long-familiar with the frightening and concealed. Although Freud himself does not describe it this way, his analysis seems to suggest that the uncanny is a collision between the usual and the impossible (at least to the adult, rational mind). Carter's The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman, with its
continual oscillation between reason and the reasonably impossible, has links to both Freud's paper on the uncanny and to E.T.A. Hoffmann's "The Sandman," the story which Freud uses as exemplary of the uncanny.

The most obvious connection between the texts, of course, is the coincidence of names. The parallels between the stories themselves, however, are so compelling as to suggest that Carter's choice of Doctor Hoffman's name is a deliberate evocation of the *Tales of Hoffmann*, and, in particular, of "The Sandman." Desiderio's relation to his two fathers, the Minister and his rebel father, Doctor Hoffman, echoes Nathanael's ambivalence toward his two fathers in "The Sandman," his real father and Copelius, the stand-in for the "dreaded father at whose hand castration is expected" (*SE* 17, 232). Albertina, that elusive woman-figure whose reality is always in question, recalls the mechanical doll, Olympia in "The Sandman," a doll whom Nathanael invests with all "womanly" qualities, and with whom he then falls in love (like Desiderio with Albertina). In both stories, the male protagonist projects onto a lifeless figure his desires for love and his expectations of femininity, although, in both cases, union with the beloved is thwarted by the father. Freud argues that, in "The Sandman," it is a return of the anxiety of the child's castration complex which evokes the uncanny, and which also precludes consummation of the love affairs. (*SE* 17, 233). "The psychological truth of the situation," Freud writes, is that "the young man, fixated upon his father by his castration complex, becomes incapable of loving a woman" (*SE* 17, 232). In both texts the father prevents the young man's attempts at love: in "The Sandman," in Nathanael's doomed love of both his fiancé, Klara, and of the mechanical doll, Olympia; in *Doctor Hoffman*, in Desiderio's continually frustrated attempts to be united with Albertina. In both the story and the novel, the threatening fathers must be killed.

In addition to the striking narrative parallels between *Doctor Hoffman* and "The Sandman," indubitably an uncanny story, there is additional reason to suppose that Carter's text would evoke feelings of the uncanny in the reader: *Doctor Hoffman* participates in all
the mechanisms of the uncanny as elaborated by Freud and as illustrated by E.T.A. Hoffmann's tale. First, there are doubts about whether an apparently animate object is, in fact, alive—most importantly, Albertina, but also the Count, the creatures in the House of Anonymity, and others. Second, the threat of castration lurks, not only in Desiderio's ambivalent relationship to his two fathers, but explicitly in a number of the adventures, e.g., the knife in his child-bride's doll in the tale of the River People. Third, in one of the most fascinating examples of the uncanny, Desiderio's relation to the entire universe of the text is one of an "omnipotence of thoughts," in which thoughts have material effects. Freud links this belief in the omnipotence of thoughts to an animistic conception of the universe, characterized by a belief in a world of spirits and in subjective cause and effect. This magical universe, common to "primitive men," with a residual trace in all of us, according to Freud, represents a recurrence of what was once frightening, but which our rational selves have put away. When this repressed belief recurs (as it does in Doctor Hoffman), the effect is uncanny (SE 17, 240-41). In Doctor Hoffman this animistic universe springs, in at least one possible reading, directly from Desiderio's desire, suggesting a parallel omnipotence of desires, a term which expresses the implied wish-component of Freud's "omnipotence of thoughts."

The indecidability about whether or not some object is alive, the return of the castration complex, and, the omnipotence of thoughts and desires are all allied with a fourth instance of the uncanny which is found in Carter's text—an effacement of the distinction between imagination and reality (SE 17, 244). Neil Hertz argues, in "Freud and the Sandman" that this erasure of the border between imagination and reality is an even more important source of the uncanny in "The Sandman" than the castration complex which Freud insists on. It is the uncertainty that is created in the reader in the opening pages of the story, he argues, "the uncertainty whether he is being taken into a real world or a fantastic one of Hoffmann's own creation," that is sustained throughout the text and that evokes such a
strong sense of the uncanny (302). It is this equivocal status of "the real," as well as its certain/probable/possible origin in Desiderio's own desires that finally marks Carter's text as fulfilling all the conditions of the uncanny, thereby, "betraying us," as Freud puts it, "to the superstitiousness which we have ostensibly surmounted" (*SE* 17, 250). And yet I will argue that the effect of the text is not uncanny.

Carter's narrative techniques, however, further support a classification of *Doctor Hoffman* as uncanny. The diction, the sequence of the narrative, the position of the narrator, and the status of the text itself each reinforce the perception of "reality" as suspect, as somehow askew. The sense of excess in Carter's choice of diction alerts the reader that s/he is in the presence of the unfamiliar, the exotic, while, at the same time, the narrator continues to claim that he is a man without imagination. The conflation of the narrator and protagonist further unsettles the reader as to the objectivity or subjectivity of the account. And finally, the narrative structure, which frames the adventure story as a memoir, and which argues that the status of the text is "history," thus, claims a greater degree of authenticity for the narrative. This authenticity, this express claim to be a historical document, however, contrasts with an obviously fantastical story. It is precisely this element of undecidability which should place *Doctor Hoffman* squarely in the ranks of the uncanny. As Hertz argues, in his analysis of "The Sandman," reality in the story

has been slightly dislocated, for it seems to be neither exterior and "daemonic" (in the sense that Nathanael imagines himself to be "the horrible plaything of dark powers") nor exactly inner and psychological (in the sense that Klara intends when she reassures Nathanael that "if there is a dark power...it must form inside us, form part of us, must be identical with ourselves"), but something else again. (307)

Hertz continues his investigation of the status of reality in "The Sandman" as an exploration of the question, "Is the tale psychological or daemonic?" (309). Although this question may also be posed productively to Carter's text, what interests me in Hertz' paper is the "something else again," which he doesn't elaborate.
In *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* the reader is poised between two explanations of the fantastical, sometimes frightening, sometimes pornographic images: daemonic or psychological? Are the images of women, in particular, often bizarre and degraded, visitations of some dark power external to Desiderio (i.e., Dr. Hoffman) or are they, rather, projections of his own repressed desire? The latter is exemplified by Klara's unequivocal advice to Nathanael: "it is we who engender within ourselves the spirit which by some remarkable delusion we imagine to speak in that outer form. It is the phantom of our own self" ("The Sandman" :11). Although I argue, ultimately, for the latter interpretation, that the women in the text, as well as all the images and events, are manifestations of Desiderio's desire, it is the suspension between the daemonic and the psychological which makes reading *Doctor Hoffman* a compelling experience. Nevertheless, it is "something else again" that makes Carter's novel a postmodern text which, finally, disallows the experience of the uncanny—in contrast to a romantic story which relies, for the pleasure of its reading experience, on the uncanny. The "something else again" which holds the particular pleasure of Carter's text is the parallel operation of the reader's position as maker-of-meaning and Desiderio's position within the story as maker-of-meaning. Freud argues that literature is a fertile province for the uncanny because the writer "can keep us in the dark for a long time about the precise nature of the presuppositions on which the world he writes about is based" (*SE* 17, 251). Carter, however, despite her equivocations about the status of "reality" in the text, does not take advantage of this potential of fiction to keep the reader in suspended uncertainty. Carter's equivocations are explicit, rather than, like Hoffmann's, a matter of sleight-of-hand: she positions the reader with the writer as privy to the ontological and epistemological problems in the text. The reader, who is invited by the text to see the apparatuses of enunciation behind the magic, is not merely the passive unsuspecting consumer of an uncanny reality, but is an active *producer* of the uncertainty in the text. The position of the reader in the text is critical to understanding the text's claims about the nature
of "reality." The reader's operations on the text parallel Desiderio's own in the production of "reality." Because the reader experiences, not the uncanny, but rather, the shaping of the reality of the text by her or his own desire, s/he understands and shares the claim the text makes that "woman" and "sex" are the manifestations of Desiderio's desire. The "real," according to Carter's text, is a function of desire.

In the peep show Carter both participates in and subverts Freud's understanding of repetition-compulsion as associated with the repressed and as fundamental to the uncanny, here too, producing the reader as involved in the work of meaning-making. Neil Hertz, in a discussion of the repetition-compulsion, writes of the effect of a mise en abîme as an illusion of infinite regress in which a work is duplicated in miniature within a larger work, setting up "an apparently unending metonymic series" (311). Within Carter's text, she constructs the peep show as a miniaturized version of the fetishizing structure of the larger text, and within the peep show itself, as noted earlier, she sets up "a model of eternal regression" (45). The effect of Carter's model of the peep show, which plays with the repetition-compulsion, nevertheless undermines any movement toward the uncanny by framing and labeling the exhibits, making Carter's narrative strategies visible to the reader. The reader is invited, by the mechanism of the peep show, to participate actively by making connections between the exhibits and episodes in the larger story, resonances which continue to echo throughout the reading experience. Because Carter constructs the peep show, as well as the entire text (within the narrative frame), as "actualized desire," in Doctor Hoffman, in contrast to "The Sandman," "woman" and "sex" are as real as the desire which manufactures them, are, in fact, "emanations of a single desire" (11, 14). The sexual scripts which are represented in Doctor Hoffman, often exotic and perverse, represent the logic of Desiderio's unconscious.

Susanne Kappeler's designation of the peep show as a "woman-zoo" is particularly apt in relationship to Carter's text (74). In The Sadeian Woman, Carter argues that the sexual act is a metaphor for what people do to one another; "but," she astutely observes,
"the present business of the pornographer is to suppress the metaphor as much as he can and leave us with a handful of empty words" (17). Carter, on the other hand, using the conventional iconography of the pornographer, expresses the metaphor and exposes the other term. Carter's analysis of Sade in *The Sadeian Woman* has a performative parallel in *Doctor Hoffman*, particularly in the episode in which Desiderio and the Count visit the House of Anonymity (with its Spenserian, as well as Sadeian, "good boy," as well as "bad boy" allusions). The description of the girls in their locked cages (quite literally a "woman-zoo"), "sinister, abominable, inverted mutations, part clockwork, part vegetable and part brute" (132), is conventional pornographic imagery carried to its extreme point of mechanistic horror. In the House of Anonymity Desiderio is introduced by his traveling companion, the Count, to sexual desire which dehumanizes the objects of desire, reducing them to "sexual appliances" (132). The sadistic desires of the Count, Desiderio's double, it must be noted, have turned women into brutish objects in a process illuminated by Lacan's theory of the *objet petit a*, which I see as analogous to Freud's theory of the fetish.

According to Lacan, the woman represents, in the phallocentric dialectic, the absolute Other (*Feminine Sexuality* 94). Nevertheless, there is an abyss between the self and the Other which can never be bridged. "There is no sexual relation," Lacan repeats (143, 170). Because woman is defined as an absolute category, reduced to being only the fantasmatic place which guarantees identity for the man, she ceases to exist as herself, and is replaced as Object of desire by the *objet petit a*. The man "only ever relates as a partner to the *objet petit a*," i.e., to a privileged object. He can reach the Other, his real sexual partner, only through the mediation of the *objet petit a* (151). Lacan sees courtly love as an example of this unconscious strategy—the elevation of the woman into an object of veneration which substitutes her absence or inaccessibility for male lack. He writes:

*It is an altogether refined way of making up for the absence of sexual relation by pretending that it is we who put an obstacle to it... courtly love is the only way of coming off elegantly from the absence of sexual relation."* (141)
Courtly love is, thus, an institution which substitutes Woman-as-object for a woman as a real sexual partner, in an elegant move which disguises a lack of relation.

As an inelegant counterpart to courtly love, I would offer the Sadeian catalogue of sexual tortures and murders which provides the pre-text for the House of Anonymity. In a psychic process similar to that of courtly love, the denigration and objectification of woman testify, too, to the absence of a sexual relation. "The woman" does not exist, Lacan maintains (144). "Why think twice about it?" he asks; because she is constituted only in relation to man, "—of her essence, she is not all" (144). This negation of woman on which masculine identity depends has consequences in the dehumanizing desires which are realized in the House of Anonymity:

Each [woman in a cage] was circumscribed as a figure in rhetoric and you could not imagine that they had names, for they had been reduced by the rigorous discipline of their vocation to the undifferentiated essence of the idea of the female. This ideational femaleness took amazingly different shapes though its nature was not that of Woman. All without exception passed beyond or did not enter the realm of simple humanity.

Here, as in Lacan, the question of the "essence" of woman is at stake. Lacan's statement that, in her essence, she is "not all" is paralleled in Carter's text by the women as nameless figures of rhetoric, undifferentiated. As projections of Desiderio's desire, these beast-vegetable-woman objects function as substitutes, as objets petits a, which stand in for the absent woman in the sexual relation, although, as substitutes for Albertina, these objets fail to sustain their status. Desiderio's relationship with Albertina, his elusive beloved, is, however, in every instance, mediated by a fetish or by an objet petit a. Near the end of the episode in the "woman-zoo" brothel, a brothel in which Albertina assumes another of her many guises, this time as the Madam, Desiderio finally recognizes her, and it seems as though their love will at last be consummated. However, as they move toward the bed, a hail of machine-gun fire interrupts, and, as Desiderio carries Albertina to safety, "she began to melt like a woman of snow. As I was holding her," he laments, "she grew less and less.
She dissolved" (137). The Other remains inaccessible; desire is always frustrated, is never satisfied, and, although it constructs elaborate "realities" as substitute objects, desire remains a yearning for what is lost.

Desire is always "impossible" in Lacan's terms, not least because it both presupposes a subject and, at the same time, constitutes that subject. "Who is speaking?" Lacan asks in his discussion of subjectivity and signification (Ecrits 299). Who is desiring? we might ask. Although the text itself may be said to emanate from the desiring subject, the subject himself comes into being in the moment of, in the act of desiring: "I desire therefore I exist." But what does this paradox of desire mean? Desire somehow poses itself before the desiring subject, that is to say, brings the desiring subject into being. It can only be that desire comes to us from all the desiring crowd that precedes us; i.e., the subject's most private desire comes to him already the desire of the Other. In the case of Desiderio, he is desired into subjectivity by the Fathers: called into being by his first father, the Minister, as a crossword-playing, bored government functionary; and by his second, Dr. Hoffman, as a passionate, sexual adventurer. The Oedipal narrative suggests to me that it is paternal fantasies which interpellate the child into subjectivity, actualizing the son's desires as replicas of the father's own unconscious desires. Lacan argues: "the father, the Name-of-the-father, sustains the structure of desire with the structure of the law..." (The Four Fundamentals 34). Carter's text presents a world in which desire precedes being, desire creates being. Nevertheless, the desire that constitutes the world of the text is fully contained within the Laws of the Two Fathers; the son accedes to the father's desire and becomes himself an agent of desire.

The figure of Albertina, as elusive object of desire, is crucial to the transmission of paternal desire. It is the doctor's daughter who finally lures Desiderio away from his first father, the Minister. In Luce Irigaray's analysis of women as commodities, she maintains that in "women's role as fetish-objects, ... in exchanges, they are the manifestation and the circulation of a power of the Phallus, establishing relationships of men with each other"
(This Sex 183). Because woman is both sign and value, her position is that of the greatest of all possessions. She is, on the one hand, an object of personal sexual desire, and, on the other, as the object of the desire of others, the means of binding others into alliances.25 In this dual role of object of desire and object of exchange between the doctor and Desidero, Albertina acts as a lure, as a promise, to draw Desiderio into relations with the doctor. Indeed, when Desiderio at last arrives in the doctor's castle, he discovers that he is to be rewarded with union with Albertina. More important, however, Albertina functions as the mutual object of desire for the circulation of desire between doctor-father and Desiderio-son. Lacan, as I noted in my reading of Wise Children, maintains that the hysteric's desire is "to sustain the desire of the father" (The Four Fundamentals 38). If, as I have argued, Desiderio is desired into subjectivity by the father, Desiderio's desire, like the hysteric's, is, above all, to sustain the desire of the father. The desire for Albertina, the decoy which leads him to the father, is, ultimately, therefore, a desire for the father's desire which is instigated by rivalry. What is ostensibly a heterosexual script is revealed to be an occasion—and a cover—for a homosexual script.

René Girard's remarkable study of the dialectic of triangular desire is useful in a consideration of the origin of Desiderio's desire. Girard argues that the hero is motivated by a desire to be a certain person and to act in a certain way through his desire to imitate a chosen model—a mediator. This process of mediated desire as triangular has, of course, three components: desiring subject/mediator/desired object. Girard's argument turns upon the "privileged role of the mediator in the genesis of desire"; i.e., the subject "borrows" desire from the mediator (23, 34). The object has value only to the extent that it is valued by

---

25 Irigaray's feminist analysis of woman in the masculine economy of exchange is, of course, a critique of Lévi-Strauss' theory of the incest taboo as the origin of culture. It is from the contradictory position of women as object of both personal desire and the desire of others that Lévi-Strauss derives his linking of the incest taboo—and, consequently, the rule of exogamy—with the social value of male bonding.
the mediator-rival. And as the subject and the mediator draw closer an intense rivalry occurs, resulting in a fascination, an obsession even, with the rival which overtakes and obscures feelings for the object. Although Girard's theory suggests the desirability of the rival, he fails to follow up his own argument. I would argue that the rival overtakes the object of desire and comes to be the object of desire. As the two rivals approach each other, their desire becomes more and more intense, circulating, as Girard himself says, "like the electric current in a battery which is being charged" (99). This "charged" language suggests sexual desire, not for the object, but for the rival, an interpretation supported by a reading of Doctor Hoffman. Each of the two, Desiderio and the doctor, rival mediators for each other's desire, now, in fact, occupy all three positions in the triangle, subject/mediator/object. Woman's place in the triangle has been erased. Albertina, when she and Desiderio arrive at her father's headquarters, ceases to be the seductress, and becomes instead "Generalissimo Hoffman." From this moment on, if it was not sufficiently clear before, we see that Albertina, although an emanation of Desiderio's desire, is, above all, a pawn of her father's desire, the bait which drew Desiderio to his encounter with the doctor. In the doctor's castle at last, faced with the "crisp antiseptic soldier" Albertina has become, Desiderio muses, "I felt an inexplicable indifference towards her" (193). Woman, original object of the triangular desire, is now not even object, but merely the occasion of masculine desire. The situation that Girard calls "double mediation," is, in fact, double desiring subjectivity.

---

26 Girard's groundbreaking study of triangular desire, Deceit, Desire & the Novel, is marred, I would argue, by his failure to recognize both the potentialities and the limits of his theory. Although his identification of double mediation (the tendency of the mediator to "copy the copy of his own desire," resulting in the superimposition of two identical isosceles triangles) opens up the possibility for a social and ideological critique of desire, Girard stays steadfastly within his model of individual desire. Although Girard's theory has important implications for a feminist study of desire, he himself ignored gender as a category of analysis in his model of triangular desire. It is no mere accident that woman occupies the position of object in Girard's examples, desired by two male subjects.
The Oedipal narrative, which has been lurking beneath the quest novel, surfaces in the final pages in Desiderio's encounter with the doctor, the father of desire. Girard's triangular desire, overlaid on the Oedipal triangle, results in a complex amalgam of the desire to have and the desire to be. In the triangle of Oedipal desire, Albertina (always the pliable shape-shifter, the fetish, the "ideational female") stands in for the missing mother, desired by both husband and son. Desiderio's desire to sustain the desire of his father is augmented by the fact that, throughout the text, Albertina is cast in the role, not only of the object of Desiderio's desire, but as his double, his female aspect, what we might call, following Proust's lead, his lost complement. The name "Albertina" (itself a feminine version of a masculine name) recalls Marcel's beloved, Albertine, in the second volume of Remembrance of Things Past, Within a Budding Grove. Marcel reflects that it is no accident that he has chosen Albertine as his beloved, for, in her, he finds his opposite and his complement, "an image inversely projected" (343). Marcel's recognition of Albertine as his missing half is echoed in Desiderio's insight that Albertina is his Platonic double. When he dresses in the clothes laid out for him in the castle, he looks at himself in the mirror and realizes, "I was Albertina in the male aspect. That is why I know I was beautiful when I was a young man. Because I know I looked like Albertina" (199). Desiderio, thus comes to occupy both the masculine and the feminine position in relation to the doctor. The father's desire for his daughter and Desiderio's desire for Albertina is displaced by the erotic charge of desire that brings the two rivals together. Equal to the desire to have the father's desire, however, is the Desiderio's desire to be the father. In order to be a father himself, he must, of course, as the young Oedipus, kill his father.

---

27 Wives and mothers are conspicuously missing in Doctor Hoffman. Desiderio's prostitute mother has disappeared from his life and the doctor's wife is dead. Albertina substitutes for both.
The depth of Desiderio's disillusionment with the doctor when he finally meets him is a measure of the desire with which he approached his father's house:

My disillusionment was profound. I was not in the domain of the marvelous at all. I had gone far beyond that and at last I had reached the powerhouse of the marvelous, where all its clanking, dull, stage machinery was kept. (201)

His disappointment with his father is in direct proportion to his expectations. The father of desire, the origin of the unreality atom, the source of the exotic marvels encountered on the journey, surely he should be a worthy opponent. Nevertheless, "the man who made dreams come true" is an impostor: a "grey man in the monocle," "a hypocrite," "a totalitarian of the unconscious" (199, 203, 207). Like the fathers in Wise Children, Desiderio's father is a pretender. Most unforgivable. Desiderio discovers, the father of desire "seemed to me to be a man without desires" (211). The unveiling of the father's phallus reveals only a limp prick. Desiderio has reached the Oz of the imagination and found, behind the screen, not a wizard at all, but just a little man pretending to greatness. "Was I condemned to perpetual disillusionment? Were all the potential masters the world held for me to be revealed as nothing but monsters or charlatans or wraiths?" he wonders (213). And yet this little man, this charlatan, is dangerous. The wizard, puny little man that he was, kept Oz in thrall. The impostor, despite his status as impostor, nevertheless wields the Law of the Father; Dr. Hoffman, the father of desire, without desire himself, nevertheless controls what counts as "reality." The father's limp prick is not the phallus; real men are impostors. But, as Carter's text, suggests, they occupy real positions of power, and it is that material power which contains heterosexual desire within the symbolic Law of the Father. Heterosexuality, in Irigaray's terms, is just an "alibi for the smooth workings of man's relations with himself, of relations among men" (This Sex 172). Heterosexuality, in the person of Albertina, that woman-fetish who served as lure for Desiderio's quest, is clearly the "alibi" for the relationship of desire between the doctor and Desiderio.
Like Oedipus, Desiderio kills his father, and with him the woman who served as object for their triangular desire; like Oedipus, too, he accedes to The Name of the Father. Also like Oedipus, he spends the remaining years of his life in regret and disillusionment. Acclaimed as a hero by the people, Desiderio greets his role with indifference: "The shrug is my gesture. The sneer is my expression" (221). Having lost the object of his desire, having killed desire itself, he is condemned to live without desire in a gray, predictable world. The great battle for control of "reality" which was waged between two fathers is over, and the world of reason has re-asserted itself. The performative weight of the paternal law, however, whether encoded as reason or desire, continues to script heterosexuality and continues to position Woman as fetishized icon within the heterosexual script—as object to man's subject. Desiderio's is a hollow victory, however; masculine pretensions have been unveiled, and there is nothing to replace them. Man (in the person of Desiderio) is, at the end of the novel, author of the heterosexual script, that is of the text itself, of Doctor Hoffman as a memoir which encodes normative "heterosexuality" as the sexual relation; woman, after the "victory," is absent, a void in the text. The father of desire has been defeated; Desiderio's reign is one of regret; nevertheless, the Law of the Father is secure.

The question occurs, however: what if Desiderio's fleeting acknowledgment of his identification with Albertina, his mirror-recognition that he is Albertina's male double, were sustained and gave rise to a complex entanglement of identification and desire? Would a fully acknowledged identification with Albertina enable a feminine subjectivity and a feminine desire? Put another way, what effect would the merging of the desire to have the woman and the desire to be the woman have on the process by which masculine desire constructs the "reality" of heterosexuality? In The Passion of the New Eve, a strikingly original and provocative novel, Carter entertains these questions in her continuing critique of contemporary male-female sexual relations. In the final portion of this chapter 1 will consider
how the heterosexual script shifts when masculine *desire for* the woman acknowledges, as a component of that desire, *identification with* the woman.

**Boy Becomes Girl: The Passion of the New Eve**

If *Doctor Hoffman* is illustrative of heterosexuality as a male-scripted performative, *The New Eve* represents the possibility of heterosexuality as female performance. In the world of Desiderio, the Minister of Determination, and Dr. Hoffman, fathers operate to contain desire within the Law of the Father, to perpetuate the normative heterosexual script, and to maintain the phallus as transcendental signifier. In *The New Eve*, however, mothers threaten the status quo, subvert the heterosexual script, and, quite literally, topple the phallus. A "stone cock monument" which is "broken off clean in the middle," introduced early in the text, threatens/promises (depending on the bias of the observer) a challenge to phallocentric law in a novel in which castration anxiety will be literally enacted (47). Woman, absent at the end of *Doctor Hoffman*, makes her way back into the text in Carter's subsequent novel in the person of Mother and in her army of Women. For Carter, father and mother are cultural positions, instituted and maintained by a system of unequal power, and in *Eve* those cultural positions are contested. The battle between fathers for control of "reality" has become a full-fledged apocalyptic war of the Women against oppression. Structured, like *Doctor Hoffman*, as a quest novel, *The New Eve* can be read as the violent unraveling of the symbolic order and a return, both utopian and dystopian, both grave and parodic, to the pre-symbolic, to the imaginary, to a place before sexual difference asserts itself. Although the plot is predicated on current structures of sexual difference, in the sexual relations of the text gender is repeatedly blurred, doubled, reversed, upended. The text asks the question: what if Oedipus were a woman? How would the terms of the heterosexual relation change?
In Carter's radical re-telling of the Oedipus story the conventional boy-gets-girl plot is re-written as boy becomes girl.\textsuperscript{28} The Oedipus narrative as a literary structure involves the movement of an active male subject, searching for his identity, toward a passive female object (the princess in folklore and fairy tale); this literary Oedipal structure is overlaid in \textit{The New Eve} with the Oedipus complex as psychoanalytic structure which inaugurates, at the same time, sexual difference, sexual relations, the Law of the Father, and language.\textsuperscript{29} In both literature and psychoanalysis, despite their different focuses, the Oedipus narrative is the site where heterosexuality is constituted and replicated, the site where heterosexuality is scripted as "natural," and the site where masculinity is privileged and the paternal law is naturalized. Carter's explicit use of the convention of the Oedipus narrative contests all of the uses to which it has traditionally been put. In Carter's text, rather than merely finding the woman waiting at the end of his journey, the male protagonist, Evelyn, becomes the woman, Eve, at the end of his journey. Or rather, to be more precise, he becomes Eve shortly into his journey and continues his adventures as a woman. Thus, Evelyn's search for his identity, with woman the prize at the end of the journey, becomes Eve's quest for her identity as active, desiring female subject.

\textsuperscript{28} The Oedipus narrative, as literary (and filmic) device, is best summarized by de Lauretis in \textit{Alice Doesn't}: "the boy has been promised, by the social contract he has entered into at his Oedipal phase, that he will find woman waiting at the end of his journey... And so her story, like any other story, is a question of his desire" (emphasis, de Lauretis', 133). In Carter's text his desire becomes her desire, and the journey, ultimately, belongs to the woman.

\textsuperscript{29} For Freud, the inventor of the Oedipus complex, this phase marked the origin of sexual difference through the trauma of the castration complex; Lacan, however, as noted earlier, conceptualizes the Oedipus complex as a linguistic transaction which inaugurates subjectivity, language (the distinction between categories like "mother" and "father"), and the "Name of the Father."
In my reading of *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, I postulated that desire and identification, which in the Freudian-Lacanian model are separate psychic processes, are, actually, deeply enmeshed. The scripts by which women and men are positioned within the heterosexual matrix are written out of this entanglement of desire and identification, an entanglement which is always repressed. Evelyn/Eve muses on the connection between male desire and the secret male yearning to be the dream woman: "...a woman is indeed beautiful only in so far as she incarnates most completely the secret aspirations of man...." (129). In my analysis of *The New Eve*, I argue that identification with the object of desire is a crucial component of desire itself, and, further, that an acknowledgment of a cross-gendered identification within heterosexuality would lighten the strictures of the heterosexual script as oppressive performative, opening up possibilities for variations of performance.

The quite complicated story of Evelyn's rebirth as Eve is told as a first-person narration from the position of posteriority. Narrated, like *Doctor Hoffman*, in the past tense, the memoir contains insights and interpretations which would have been unavailable to the protagonist-narrator at the time of the events. Nevertheless, unlike *Doctor Hoffman* which begins and ends in a tone of bleak finality and despair, *Eve* opens with despair and ends in undecidability, a sense of the unfinished, with hints of possibilities still to come. The open-endedness and ambiguity at the end of the novel are important in a consideration of the trajectory of the text's major concerns: the construction of woman as projection of male desire, her position within the power relations of heterosexuality, the fixity or fluidity of the scripts which place her there, and the viability of a female desiring subject.

In brief outline, the plot of *The New Eve* is organized around the journey of the young Englishman, Evelyn, who describes himself as "a carrier of the germ of a universal pandemic of despair" to an America in the throes of civil war (37). The map
of Evelyn's American quest takes him first to an apocalyptic New York City which is under siege by gangs of Women and "blacks." He impregnates the black nightclub dancer, Leilah, during sadistic sex games which include binding and beating, rationalizing his brutality by blaming her misfortune: "she seemed to me a born victim" (28). When her pregnancy quenches his desire for her, he insists on what turns out to be a botched abortion, leaves her near death, and flees New York, heading west into the vast desert in search of "that most elusive of all chimeras, myself" (38). But this conventional literary theme, the young man's search for himself, takes an unexpected twist in the desert, as he reflects years later: "I did not know I was speeding towards the very enigmas I had left behind—the dark room, the mirror, the woman" (39). For in the desert Evelyn is captured by an army of Women attempting to re-create a matriarchal world out of sophisticated technology, and he is taken to their leader, Mother, who is both skilled surgeon and many-breasted goddess. In the womb-like city of the women Evelyn undergoes an involuntary sex-change: surgery and female hormones are combined with a program of "psycho-surgery" that includes a steady stream of Hollywood movies and reproductions of "every single Virgin and Child" ever painted, images designed to change his "ontological status" (72, 71). In this womb-city Evelyn is reborn as Eve.

An involuntary transsexual who self-consciously names him/herself "the Tiresias of Southern California," Eve now experiences life as both a woman and a man (71). She becomes a prisoner of the sadistic Zero, the mad poet who is a debased version of the myth of the heroic male artist, self-absorbed, lonely, a god of sorts. In Zero's harem, which represents heterosexuality at its most brutally oppressive, Eve learns a lesson in the construction of woman as less than human: although victims of the most brutal abuse, Zero's wives worship him, believing that without his attention they will die. They are slaves who need no outside surveillance or control because the
dehumanizing rules that circumscribe their lives have been internalized, and the women are now self-policing. As Zero's captive, Eve unwillingly joins his mission to find, rape, and kill the object of Zero's obsessive hatred, Tristessa, the Hollywood screen idol who was the object of Evelyn's obsessive love as a youth. Tristessa, an important plot device as well as a central character, serves as both a governing metaphor and plot goal in the text. Her construction as fetishized female image and feminine ideal, I argue, is a crucial example of desire and identification as mutually entangled. Eve and Tristessa manage to escape from the evil Zero into the desert where they have a brief, but passionate love affair which confounds conventional representations of gender and sexuality; their play with sexual stereotypes is cut short, however, when Tristessa is killed in a skirmish of the civil war. Eventually Eve's journey takes her to the west coast where she finds herself pregnant with Tristessa's child (a result of one of the plot surprises that the text's gender/sex play produces). Mother has retired into a cave/womb, which Eve must navigate: the cave symbolism is increasingly concrete as the walls of the cave become red and slimy, contracting and pulling her inwards. Eve's cave journey takes her back into both her own unconscious and into the beginning and end of time. Expelled finally by the womb/cave, she realizes that she herself represents a new beginning of time and "will soon produce a tribute to evolution" (186). That her baby "will have two fathers and two mothers" in the persons of Eve and Tristessa, an enigma of crossed gender and sexuality, of conflated desire and identification, will provide the impetus for my argument that Carter's text represents heterosexuality as confounding performance (my emphasis, 187). In The New Eve, subjects, who clearly identify with their object cathexis, actively perform sexuality within the structuring models of available scripts, and, in the process, re-invent those scripts for future performances.
This mythic tale, which offers a vision of new possibilities available within the heterosexual relation, is, by no accident, set in America. Melded to the Oedipus myth in *The New Eve* is, of course, the Eden myth. Oedipus and Adam are explicitly conflated, in fact, in the following passage which suggests that the old myths, sacred and profane, are failures: "Old Adam's happiness is necessarily dysfunctional. All Old Adam wants to do is, to kill his father and sleep with his mother" (16). The notion of America as a New World, a new beginning, a divinely granted second chance, is a common thread in the American literary tradition, as R.W.B. Lewis argued in his influential book, *The American Adam*. According to Lewis' account, the New Adam (an idea central to American literature from the Puritans through Whitman, Hawthorne, Melville, and James) was a figure of heroic innocence and vast potential poised at the start of a new history. In the apocalyptic American landscape of Carter's text, this unfallen American Adam has clearly become a postlapsarian figure. According to the text's ironic, rather tongue-in-cheek feminist account, Adam-Oedipus is in trouble:

Oedipus wanted to live backwards. He had a sensible desire to murder his father, who dragged him from the womb in complicity with historicity. His father wanted to send little Oedipus forward on a phallic trajectory (onwards and upwards)....

But Oedipus botched the job. In complicity with phallocentricity, he concludes his trajectory a blind old man, wandering by the seashore in a search for reconciliation.

But Mother won't botch the job. (53)

Indeed, later in the novel, when the new Eve is being suckled at Mother's breasts, in a pre-symbolic moment of primary identification with the Mother—before alienation and separation—she finds "a great peace" and the "sense of reconciliation" that Oedipus is searching for in the above passage (75). For the maternal zone in the text represents plenty and nourishment, and the phallic zone is coded as pain and deprivation: "Little

---

30 As Adam, of course, with God as his only parent, Evelyn would have no mother; thus, we are to understand here that Adam's narrative has merged with Oedipus'.
Oedipus had lived in a land of milk and kindness before his father taught him how to stab with his phallus* (75). Evelyn/Oedipus/Old Adam has traveled from the Old World to the New (which is also old, it seems) where a new New Beginning is desperately needed. In Carter's hands the New American Adam becomes the New Eve, a woman who retains, along with her newly fashioned feminine consciousness, a masculine consciousness, i.e. a double psychic identity; she/he is "Eve and Adam both, on a mission to repopulate this entire, devastated continent" (165). And this time around in Eden, Eve is, in herself, knowledge, the fruit of the tree that God forbade her in the first Garden of Eden: "I, in my sumptuous flesh, was in myself the fruit of the tree of knowledge ..." (146). Her knowledge of good and evil and of both masculinity and femininity contains the promise of a reconciliation between the sexes in a new heterosexuality.

Apocryphal versions of the Eden story include the wonderful story of Lilith, Adam's first wife. According to Jewish legend, Lilith and Adam quarreled immediately because Lilith, claiming she was Adam's equal, refused to lie beneath him. After her escape from Eden, God's angels found her consorting with demons (Ostriker 99). Lilith's curse, to be the seducer of men and the mother of a race of demons, is recalled in Leilah's speech to Eve late in the novel when they meet in different circumstances, and she reveals that "Lilith is my name" and tells him the story of the first Lilith (174). Eve recalls how Evelyn's desire constructed the woman he knew as the beautiful and promiscuous Leilah in New York:

Leilah, Lilith... — what's become of the slut of Harlem, my girl of bile and ebony! She can never have objectively existed, all the time mostly the projection of the lusts and greed and self-loathing of a young man called Evelyn, who does not exist, either. (175)

Lyricism meets psychoanalysis in the rhetoric here, as the echo of past desire gives way to a new understanding for Evelyn-Eve of the role his male lust and self-hatred played
in the fabrication of "the slut of Harlem." Eve's recognition that Leilah had been the perfect woman, giving off only reflected light, becoming precisely the thing that Evelyn had wanted of her implies an acknowledgment of Evelyn's earlier envy of and identification with Leilah when, night after night in New York, she stood in front of the mirror and constructed herself "by a conscious effort" as "a night-blooming flower" (34, 28). Caught too in the mirror, along with Leilah, is the watching figure of Evelyn who lies on the bed "like a pasha, smoking, watching, in her cracked mirror" (28). Intent on the darkly luminous image of the woman he calls his "Lily-in-the-mirror," he suddenly realizes that the cracked mirror which "jaggedly reciprocated her bisected reflection" also includes "that of my watching self" (28, 30). The mirror—in what is a marvel of precise diction—"jaggedly reciprocated" both Leilah's and Evelyn's bisected reflections, offering a double doubled image. This image of the mirror which doubles, a mirror usually cracked or about to shatter, always reflecting the distorted image of something more than is seen at first glance, is a recurrent motif in the text. Here the mirror reveals Evelyn caught in the act of "the determining male gaze" as theorized by Laura Mulvey in her seminal work of feminist film criticism, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (62).

**Blurred Desire and Identification: The Desire to Have. . . / to Be. . .**

Mulvey argues that woman is inscribed in film as image, as the support of male desire, and as the object of the gaze; woman's "to-be-looked-at-ness," in fact, defines Hollywood cinema. The man in film controls the gaze, the world, and the narrative. Scopophilia, or erotic pleasure in looking is, thus, split along gender lines: active-male, passive-female. More important for my study, however, is Mulvey's assertion that viewers identify with filmic characters in gender-specific ways: the female viewer identifies with the passive female character who is the object of the gaze, and the male
viewer identifies with the active male character. Almost a decade later de Lauretis, in an
analysis of Mulvey's two positions in film, argues that no one can see themselves
merely as an inert object; women, thus, must double-identify, must have a split
identification with both the static female image and the active male subject (Alice
Doesn't 141-143). This double identification is theorized as peculiarly female,
however; men single-identify with the male hero. Do men never enjoy a double
identification while watching a movie? we might ask. To-be-looked-at-ness, the desire
to be desired, has a definite erotic appeal. In other words, to be the object of desire,
although always, according to film theory, coded feminine, can be, for men and
women alike, quite seductive. This cross-gendered identification, I am arguing, is
precisely what happens in the narrative of The New Eve. Well before his rebirth as
a woman, in disregard of the rigid boundary of gender identification ostensibly fixed
for men, Evelyn engages in acts of identification with women, an identification which,
the text suggests, is perhaps the most common and most commonly repressed
component of heterosexual desire. In the above scene, for example, Evelyn's
obsessive gaze, night after night, into the mirror in which Leilah transforms herself into
an object of desire—and the double reflection of the two faces, his and hers—strongly
hints at his identification with the gorgeous female image in the mirror. Evelyn, a

31 De Lauretis' work on double or split identification in women viewers owes a debt
also to Mulvey's later work, "Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative
Cinema," as well as Mary Anne Doane's "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the
Female Spectator."

32 Precedent exists for split identification and cross-gendered identification of women
with men—in film theory and in the cultural status of the tomboy and the male-
identified career woman. The notion of a woman identifying with, even wanting to
be, a man has a long history and is not, for the most part, culturally abhorrent. The
reverse, however, which Carter sets up in The New Eve, is widely considered socially
deviant. A man who wants to be/identifies with a woman is, according to cultural
codes, perverse. Perversity, of course, is Carter's stock-in-trade.
"pasha" wreathed in "mauve exhalations" from the joint he is smoking, even has the aid of a hallucinogen to repress his conscious objections to identifying with a woman.

Echoing Desiderio's identification with Albertina, Evelyn reflects, "She was the nearest thing to myself I had ever met" (37). Evelyn's brutality to Leilah, seen in light of his identification with her, must then be seen as an act of either self-hatred or of resistance to the culturally unacceptable identification.

The mirror is a recurring image in the text, connecting desire and identification through the ambivalent wish to have and to be the ego ideal of the mirrored reflection. Carter's text suggests that there is a link between desire and identification, psychic processes theorized separately by both Freud and Lacan, and that the link is found in the concept of the "ideal," a category crucial to both desire and identification. The mirror stage, Lacan's theory of the origin of subjectivity as identification with a mis-recognized ideal, casts some light on Evelyn's identification with the idealized women of the text. Lacan's mirror stage, a developmental model, depends on a variation of the scopophilia theorized by film studies. The pleasure in looking, the specularity of the event depends on the idealized image which is, in both film and the mirror stage, the object of the gaze. According to Lacan, somewhere between the ages of six and eighteen months the subject arrives at an apprehension of both itself and the other and, even more important, itself as other. This discovery is often triggered by the child seeing its own reflection in the mirror, a reflection which seems to enjoy a coherence which the child lacks; it is an ideal image—and the child's self-recognition is, really, a joyous mis-recognition. The child-subject perceives its mirrored reflection only as a fictional other whose exemplary qualities it does not share:

This jubilant assumption of his specular image by the child at the infans stage, still sunk in his motor incapacity and nursing dependence, would seem to exhibit in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the I is precipitated in a primordial form, before it is objectified in the dialectic of
identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject.\textsuperscript{33} (\textit{Ecrits} 2)

This form which the child perceives in the mirror Lacan calls the "Ideal I." Because the mirror image cannot be assimilated, yet the child defines itself only in relation to it, the child yearns to \textit{be} the image he sees in the mirror. Analogously, Evelyn becomes involved in a "dialectic of identification" with Leilah as an Ego-Ideal—an image of coherence and beauty which he himself lacks. Evelyn's desire for Leilah, compounded of his desire to \textit{have} her and his desire to \textit{be} her, is paralleled and superseded by Evelyn/Eve's love affair with Tristessa in which identification and desire are inextricably entangled. As I noted in the triangulated desire between Desiderio and Dr. Hoffman, which became the desire of the son to be his father, desire between male rivals includes a strong element of identification. In \textit{Eve} the identification between men becomes the identification of the man with the woman, an identification born out of the mobility of desire. In my analysis of Evelyn/Eve's relationship with Tristessa I propose an unorthodox juxtapositioning of Freud and Lacan's models of desire and their models of identification, one which suggests that these two processes—desire and identification—are both present, in complicated relationship, in the construction of heterosexuality. In my reading of Carter's representations of sexuality as an entanglement of desire \textit{and} identification, I not only contest Freud's and Lacan's models which presume an either/or, but find the seeds for such an entanglement in their own theories.

\textsuperscript{33} That Lacan reserves subjectivity and entrance into the symbolic as a male domain has been a subject of frequent feminist critique. In the most famous example of his masculine bias, he claims that the infant is initially a "hommelette," a little man and also a broken egg spreading without hindrance in all directions. The little man of Lacan's mirror stage, however, is an adult man-become-woman in my analysis.
Tristessa, fetishized by Hollywood as the object of desire during her years as screen idol, represents, ironically as we shall see, the ideal woman in the text. Carter candidly says of her movie-star character, "I created this person in order to say some quite specific things about the cultural production of femininity" (Haffenden Interview 86). Indeed, a belief that women identify with an idealized, fetishized female character in film inspires Mother to use Tristessa's films to inculcate femininity into the newly-created Eve. After Evelyn's sex-change operation, in order to facilitate his "change in ontological status," Eve is shown all of Tristessa's movies, in the belief that his/her identification with Tristessa's idealized heroines, who exhibit "every kitsch excess of the mode of femininity," would complete his/her accession to ideal womanhood (71). That the word "ideal" is not innocent, but rather carries heavy psychological and political baggage will become evident in the pages which follow. A plot surprise, shocking both characters and reader, is that Tristessa, the symbol of heightened femininity, the femme fatale of the cinema, is a man. Eve immediately understands how this could be: "That was why he had been the perfect man's woman! He had made himself the shrine of his own desires, had made of himself the only woman he could have loved" (128-29). Tristessa, and the ideal woman she represents, has "no ontological status, only an iconographic one" (129). For the ideal woman, as we saw earlier in Desiderio's projection of Albertina, and now in Tristessa's construction of herself, is constituted as male desire. What I would like to argue here is that Tristessa represents the concretization of the condition of desire which is comprised of equal parts of the wish to have and the wish to be. Desire spills over into identification in the subject's apprehension/construction of the ideal. Tristessa is the material embodiment of a psychic process which constructs and projects onto the other an ideal, and which, simultaneously, attempts to incorporate that ideal other into the self, tries to become, in a manner of speaking, the object of desire. Tristessa, as a literalization of this desire-
identification, fabricates herself out of his own desire—identifying so urgently with the female object of his desire that he becomes her.

"Paradoxical, deviant, erratic, eccentric, even scandalous"—that is desire for Lacan (Ecrits 286). Alienated from need by the fact of language, desire is "impossible" for Lacan, is by its very nature always unfulfilled. That is, desire is always directed toward ideal objects which, necessarily, remain always beyond the subject’s reach. Born out of the founding structure of lack, desire functions, in Lacan’s own argument, as "manque-à-etre, a 'want-to-be,'" a want-to-be which is forever unsatisfied, and which, thus, remains desire (The Four Fundamentals 29). Although, in his own work, Lacan doesn’t connect his theories of desire and of the mirror stage, Carter’s text establishes the link which is hinted at in Lacan’s casual, unelaborated remark about desire as "manque-à-etre." Carter’s reenactment of Lacan’s mirror stage makes clear, through Tristessa and Evelyn, that, in the moment of gazing at the image in the mirror, the individual, not-yet-subject, wants to have the other in order to be the unified self. In Carter’s fantasy both Tristessa and Evelyn gaze too long into the mirror (Leilah’s broken mirror, the movie screen, the face of the beloved) and the unsatisfiable desire to have that ideal other spills over into a "want-to-be." And Tristessa and Evelyn, because this is a fiction, and because they have an unconventional author, become, literally, the object of their own desires. Desire, which in the real world, is always tantalizingly unsatisfied, and which attempts an imaginative identification, in Carter’s hands, is literally satisfied in an act of total identification.

For Freud too, as we have seen, desire has an essentially unsatisfiable quality, as it is essentially an act of fantasy which aims to repeat an experience of past satisfaction. The close relationship between desire and fantasy in Freud suggests that, at the level of the unconscious, the subject always chooses as object of desire an ideal which lies beyond complete attainment. In this vein Freud postulates: "The first wishing seems to
have been a hallucinatory cathecting of the memory of satisfaction" (SE 5, 598). Put another way, for the infant the breast comes to represent the milk as a sign which signifies both the object (milk) and its absence. As an object of primal hallucination, i.e., as the first sign of both the object and its absence, the breast represents an ideal which the infant desires to incorporate into himself, to keep as a source of satisfaction. Impossible to fulfill, this ideal remains outside the infant as something which continues to signify desire. This oscillation between presence and absence in the infant's relationship with the breast as primary object of desire, is somewhat analogous to the oscillation of the fetish in the adult's repertoire of desire. Although arising out of a different need (castration anxiety), the fetish too, like the the early desire for the breast, represents an overvaluation of a part of the female body, a desire for an ideal which is, at the same time both more than and less than the object it represents. In the disavowal of woman's castration which fetishization represents, it seems that woman is imagined as what the man would be if he were a woman; i.e., there is an overinvestment in her sexuality.

Tristessa, of course, is the fetish extraordinaire. The indecidablity of the fetish is exemplified in Tristessa's oscillation between male/female, the oscillation between having/not having the phallus, and, above all, the oscillation between Evelyn/Eve's desire for her/him and identification with her/him. Both Tristessa and Eve, in fact, are fetishized in the text, and are implicated (in Tristessa's case, voluntarily, and in Eve's case, involuntarily) in elaborate masquerades. Fetishism was first linked with female masquerade, clearly a useful apposition here, by Joan Riviere in 1929 in "Womanliness as Masquerade." Riviere argued that a woman may engage in a masquerade of femininity—an obsessively exaggerated coyness and coquettishness—in order to hide her masculinity complex and her competitiveness with men. A woman who wears this "mask of femininity" thereby escapes the reprisals which she fears from father-figures
as a response to her intellectual performance (37-39). Lacan subsequently reformulated this link between male fetishism and female masquerade as the woman's attempt, through masquerade, to become the phallus:

Paradoxical as this formulation may seem, I am saying that it is in order to be the phallus, that is to say, the signifier of the desire of the Other, that a woman will reject an essential part of her femininity, namely, all her attributes in the masquerade. It is for that which she is not that she wishes to be desired as well as loved. But she finds the signifier of her own desire in the body of him to whom she addresses her demand for love. Perhaps it should not be forgotten that the organ that assumes this signifying function takes on the value of a fetish. (Ecrits 289-90)

The theory of female masquerade, of women posing as women, putting on an identity not their own, suggests, of course, the mutability and constructedness of gender which is a basic assumption of my analysis of heterosexuality. However, in contrast with the theorizing of psychoanalysis about female masquerade, about woman attempting to be(come) the phallus, for Carter, it is the heterosexual man who adopts the exaggerated trappings of femininity in order to become that which he desires. In the case of Tristessa, a man engaged in female masquerade, he finds the signifier of his own desire in the body of a woman, desiring and identifying with that body, becoming the male version of Lacan's female masquerade: "It is for that which [he] is not that [he] wishes to be desired as well as loved" (Ecrits 290).

At the center of the novel is a scene of horrific power which both exploits and confounds Riviere's and Lacan's theories of masquerade. A cross-dress wedding choreographed by the evil Zero, a "double drag" between Eve dressed as the groom and Tristessa dressed as the bride, is reflected in an infinite series of reflections in an endless series of mirrors (132). Capturing the specularity and the scopophilia of both Lacan's mirror stage and the staging of a film scene, this mirrored wedding scene is performed for "an entire audience composed of [endless reflections of] Zero" (132). This "masquerade," which is, of course, much more than simple drag, recalls Carter's
analysis in *The Sadeian Woman* of the four cross-dress weddings in Sade's *Juliette*.³⁴ Noirceuil, in a passage Carter quotes from *Juliette*, engages Juliette in his sadistic wedding game:

You, dressed as a woman, must marry a woman dressed as a man at the same ceremony where I, dressed as a woman, become the wife of a man. Next, dressed as a man, you will marry another woman wearing female attire at the same time that I go to the altar to be united in holy wedlock with a catamite disguised as a girl. (*Juliette*, in *The Sadeian Woman* 98)

Although both Sade's wedding and Carter's wedding are "charade[s] of sexual anarchy" (99), the fact that Eve and Tristessa's mock-wedding is the beginning of a passionate love relationship is in stark contrast to the Sadeian weddings which are followed by the murder of the innocent child-participants. Eve and Tristessa's wedding, though coerced, initiates a slippery male-female sexual relation which imagines a relative mutability of gender and sexuality within the parameters of a new construction of heterosexuality.

Carter's use of masquerade, evident in the complex cross-dress wedding between Eve and Tristessa (as well as in the entire text), does not represent an attempt on the part of the woman to be (come) the phallus; on the contrary, masquerade in *Eve* revels in the absence of the penis. The very lack, which, according to Freud and Lacan, defines woman and which she attempts to compensate for, is, in Carter's hands, the quality of most excruciating desirability. Tristessa tells Eve of his yearning to become a woman: "I was seduced by the notion of a woman's being, which is negativity. Passivity, the absence of being. To be everything and nothing. To be a pane the sun shines through" (137). In Tristessa's desire for/identification with woman, the penis

³⁴ Carol Siegel, too, notes the co-incidence of the cross-dress wedding in *Eve* and in Carter's analysis in *The Sadeian Woman* of Sade's cross-dress weddings. Siegel sees these two scenes of sexual dissembling as examples of masochism in Carter. I, however, am more interested in the wedding as it contributes to Carter's construction of the complex relationship between desire and cross-gendered identification.
(not woman’s lack of a penis) is a mark of shame. When s/he is stripped naked by Zero, who is preparing to rape her, "out of the vestigial garment sprang the rude, red-purple insignia of maleness, the secret core of Tristessa’s sorrow, the source of her enigma, of her shame" (128). The phallus/penis, cultural signifier of privilege, of arrogance even, becomes, in Carter’s text, a source of shame. It is a fountain of unremitting sorrow for Tristessa, a continual reminder that her female masquerade is at odds with her anatomy. It is also the secret source of the pain which she transforms into the radiant suffering of a sexualized movie star.

Female identity, as it is represented by both Tristessa and Eve in the text, is constituted from ideal physical beauty and violent suffering. The powerful sexual appeal of Tristessa in her movie roles—as well as in her off-screen persona which is fabricated as an extension of the suffering heroine—stems from men’s love-hate relationship with women whom they, at once, desire and envy. This love-hate relationship, the text hypothesizes, results in the eroticization of woman’s suffering. Upon discovering that the "real" Tristessa, whom she thinks of as "Our Lady of the Sorrows," is a man, Eve ponders, "How much he must have both loved and hated women, to let Tristessa be so beautiful and make her suffer so!" (71, 122, 144). Eve could make the same claim about his own relationship to the screen image of Tristessa: how much he loved and hated her! how much her suffering aroused him! The novel opens in a movie theater on Evelyn’s last night in London before he sets out for America; appropriately he has taken a girl whose name he forgets to see the woman "billed as the most beautiful woman in the world," the woman who had been the idol of his youth. Tristessa, enjoying a "camp renaissance at midnight movie festivals," had been the queen of "magic and passionate sorrow," Evelyn reminisces (8, 6). Her speciality had been suffering, and he had worshiped her in her roles as tragic heroine: as Madeline Usher, Desdemona, the dying nurse to the lepers, and, above all, as the
heart-breaking Catherine Earnshaw. The worship that Evelyn feels continually gives way to identification, which he consistently disavows. This disavowal of his identification with Tristessa informs the following scene in which Evelyn, who has been moved by Tristessa's suffering, uses a woman for oral sex to reaffirm his masculinity. Remembering his youthful worship of Tristessa, he recalls "the twitch in my budding groin the spectacle of Tristessa's suffering always aroused in me" (8). The remembered twitch in a youthful groin suddenly becomes, years later, an orgasm in a late-night London movie house, compliments, too, of the erotic spectacle of Tristessa's suffering: when the (unknown, unnamed) girl who is with him perceives how Tristessa's "crucifixion by brain fever" moves him, she gets to her knees in the dark on the dirty floor "and suck[s] me off" (9). Woman's pain, the text suggests, is eroticized as man's pleasure. This ploy of disavowed identification threatens to expose the ground on which Evelyn's gender and sexuality are founded—the exclusion of the feminine which is, after all, inside male identity as it crucial repudiation. It is this already-present femininity that permits Evelyn's tranformation into Eve.

What seems a lifetime later Eve wakes up from her surgery in the heart of the American desert and takes a first look in the mirror:

Let the punishment fit the crime, whatever it had been. [Pleasure in Tristessa's suffering? the reader wonders.] They had turned me into the Playboy centerfold. 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. (75)

The "twitch" of sexual arousal surfaces again in the text, this time as a twitch in the "missing limb": Eve is, here, both the beautiful suffering woman (punished by castration) and, simultaneously, the appreciative, aroused man. Although "punishment" is the condition of her birth as woman, Eve must still have lessons in suffering in order to acquire a proper feminine psyche. Constructed by Mother as a perfect woman, she realizes that she is still a "tabula rosa" and is yet to *become a
woman" (83, emphasis mine). Eve's prelapsarian innocence is lost, however, in her "savage apprenticeship" as the slave/wife to the repulsive Zero (107). Her lessons in Zero's harem, where he makes his wives eat pig's food, beats them, and smears them with excrement, are designed to make Eve understand woman's place as sub-human.

In the most dehumanizing move, Zero forbids the women speech, requiring that they communicate only in a kind of animal gibberish, a rule, Eve notes, that the women interpret as a perpetual whispering within the harem and out of Zero's earshot. Most astonishing to Eve is the fact that his wives, believing he is a god, adore him and are convinced that sexual intercourse with him guarantees their continued health and life.

After three months with the sadistic Zero, Eve muses, "I had become almost the thing I was. The mediation of Zero had turned me into a woman" (107-08). Zero himself is a pathetic version of his hero, Nietzsche, whose philosophy of woman he embodies in concrete, brutal form. But, as Ricarda Schmidt has noted, Carter subverts Nietzsche's dichotomy of the weak and strong by portraying Zero as physically handicapped and mentally deranged (63). Nevertheless, Zero continues to brutalize his wives until Eve and Tristessa manage to escape him and he is killed.

If Zero personifies the Law of the Father at its most bestial and tyrannical, his spectacular death is a defeat for paternal law. Carter constructs a climactic scene of rape, savage mockery, and destruction in Tristessa's glass palace, a scene which concludes with both the death of Zero and the unlikely birth of tenderness and passion between Eve and Tristessa. Tristessa's gorgeous glass house in the middle of the desert, erected to house the embalmed corpse which the living Tristessa had become, becomes instead the vehicle of her rebirth and the coffin of the evil Zero: "in its catastrophe, Tristessa's palace triumphed over its desecrators" (140). The house, in a marvel of engineering, spins faster and faster on its axis, tossing into the air like clay pigeons Zero's wives, and finally collapses into the "stagnant waters" of the lake,
sucking Zero down with it. This vivid scene, reminiscent of the fall of the House of Usher, anchors all the allusions to the story/movie throughout the text; however, Tristessa forgoes the tragic role of Madeline Usher, which she had created on screen, and escapes with Eve as her house is sucked into the tarn. The collapse here of the Law of the Father, as represented by both the evil poet, Zero, and by the House of Usher, fulfills the early prophetic symbolism of the broken cock monument.

It would seem, moreover, that, with Zero dead and the House of Usher safely at the bottom of the tarn, the Law of the Father has been overthrown. And this is certainly the direction in which the text is moving. Sexuality as performative, as prescribed, it appears, will yield to sexuality as performance. Tristessa, the old figure of undecidable gender, and Eve, the new creation with split identifications and desires, explore together an unnameable sexuality in which "turn and turn about, now docile, now virile," power continually shifts and masculine and feminine are performed without regard to anatomy. Eve and Tristessa, "the sole oasis in this desert," are seemingly free, in their solitary love, to re-create sexuality. With fluid identities and blurred gender and sexuality—masculine or feminine? hetero- or homo-sexual? the categories no longer apply—they can begin anew to perform, as if for the first time, the pleasures of sexuality. The text suggests that the lovers have evaded the Law of the Father, have escaped the symbolic: "Flesh is a function of enchantment. It uncreates the world." "Speech evades language," the text insists, hinting at the possibility of a return to the pre-symbolic where sexuality may be re-invented (148). However, overthrowing the weight of heterosexuality as performative is not so easily accomplished, the text reminds itself: "alone, quite alone" in the desert, Eve and Tristessa's love-making yet carries echoes of scripts out of the past. The symbolic is not so easily escaped. The narrator Eve tells us, from a point-of-view somewhere in the future, that she and Tristessa, ostensibly alone,
peopled this immemorial loneliness with all we had been, or might be, or had dreamed of being, or had thought we were—every modulation of the selves we now projected upon each other’s flesh, selves—aspects of being, ideas—that seemed, during our embraces, to be the very essence of our selves. . . . (148)

That our "very essence" is not essential, but is rather constructed of bits of scripts is made explicit: "I had lost my body; now it was defined solely by his, yet even then I saw fragments of old movies playing like summer lightning on the lucid planes of his face . . ." (148-49). Our sexual performances, no matter how private, carry echoes of past performances by others which are learned as cultural and psychic scripts, scripts which ensure the transmission of a normative heterosexuality. The authority of these scripts, however, derives from their continued repetition within the constraints of the Law of the Father. When that Law is contested, when the repetition of the script contains a small deviation, a new dynamic is set up in which heterosexuality is the product of the interplay between the performative and the performance. This interplay will be the subject of my next chapter: the attempt of the heterosexual performance to wrest authority from the performative which governs it.

In The Passion of the New Eve, Carter’s tactic for undermining the heterosexual script is to subvert the most basic narrative strategy, that of the reader’s identification with a sympathetic protagonist. The reader of The New Eve identifies early in the text with Evelyn, the active male hero. Evelyn, however, identifies with a woman, with the object of his desire, an identification usually repressed, but which is carried to its psycho-logical conclusion here. Man, identifying with woman in Eve, actually becomes woman. The female reader is, thus, freed from her conventional cross-gendered identification with a male hero. The male reader, who was initially identified with a male protagonist, now, through a sleight-of-hand, finds himself identifying with a woman, an uncommon experience. And so, Carter initiates in the reader the same performance of switched gender-identification which she has
constructed for her characters. At the same time, unstable gender has interrupted the male reader's erotic pleasure in fetishizing Tristessa, the glamorous woman in the text, who, to the reader's confusion, turns out to be a man. The disruption of the reader's expectations and the destabilization of his position as constructed by the text have implications which extend beyond the text. Because, within the text, the positions available to the reader, positions of desire and identification, overlap and merge, the reader has been induced to experience a performance of sexuality which contests the performative heterosexual script which is written and transmitted within the Law of the Father. The bold re-imagining of gender and sexuality within the text, thus, has an extra-textual corollary in the re-constructed act of reading which the text requires of the reader.

The reader actively participates, therefore, in Carter's re-scripting of heterosexuality, which includes the possibility of a female performance of desire. The attempt to produce a new desiring female subject meets with only limited success, however. In The New Eve, female desire, constrained still within masculine constructions, is problematic; female performance, both Eve's and Tristessa's, is unable to spring free from the performative which governs it. Man becomes woman, but the woman he becomes is a projection of his own desire; he identifies with the woman he constructs. Even Carter's new Eve, although she represents the hope of salvaging a culture which Adam has botched, is constructed out of the furtive desires of the young man Evelyn and sadistic pleasures of the mad poet Zero. Nevertheless, whereas Lacan fixes desire as always masculine, The New Eve uses Lacan's own category of the "ideal," central to his theories of both desire and identification, to hypothesize a direction for theorizing female desire. By a kind of reverse discourse, the new woman of the text, although constructed within traditional terms, seizes the very terms of sexual difference which have been the source of her oppression—
male/female, masculine/feminine, heterosexual/homosexual—in order to subvert, while making use of, the normalizing scripts which conscript her into conventional heterosexuality.

The psychic sexual scripts of psychoanalysis, along with the cultural scripts embedded in institutions and social practices, are revealed as fictions which work to replicate the status quo through the power of the family. Carter’s texts denaturalize and problematize the familial scripts produced by paternal law in order to construct an opening for woman’s desire. In a world beyond Carter’s texts, toward which *The New Eve* points, St. Teresa will no longer await the pleasure of the Father for her orgasm; she will actively solicit her own pleasure. In the meantime, however, within the confines of Carter’s text, the reality of a female desire which is not constructed according to masculine specifications is merely hinted at, hoped for in some future on which the text opens. Nevertheless, desire, which is mobilized finally as desire for the Other, not for the fetish, not for an *objet petit a*, but for the Other, undergoes a re-articulation in *The New Eve*. Desire exceeds the scripts, enabling a partial disruption of the terms of conventional heterosexuality.

Carter’s deconstruction of the oppositions of gender and sexuality and her investigation into the role of identification and desire in the construction of the heterosexual script is not meant to suggest androgyny as an ideal. Rather, Carter’s texts point to a plural gender and a plural sexuality, a plurality which would undermine the Law of the Father which depends on a hierarchical system of 2s, a system which operates to keep both men and women securely in their place within a fixed system of presumptive heterosexuality. We are heirs to "an implacable destiny which immures everything for life in the figure 2." Derrida claims in an interview on the "choreography" of gender ("Choreographies" 79). He asks, however: if we can dream of the innumerable, does not the dream itself prove the possibility of its existence?
Carter's texts dream of innumerable sexual performances, freed from the implacability of the "figure 2." performances, Carter would argue, which are already being played out in unconscious fantasies, fantasies both incited and repressed by a sexist, heterosexist culture. *Doctor Hoffman* and *The New Eve* do the dream work of bringing unconscious desires which exceed the figure 2 into the register of the conscious where, after the initial shock of recognition subsides, these somehow familiar desires can be examined for possible use in an expanded repertoire of sexual meanings and behaviors which would resist containment within the current power regime. Carter's fiction works through and against the sexism and heterosexism of the Freudian-Lacanian models of desire and identification, suggesting that a self-conscious performance of old performative scripts has the potential to alter what counts as "sex." Although her characters are not free of the constraints of the conventional heterosexual script, Carter's readers are left to imagine new performances of gender and sexuality which would begin to re-configure what only appears to be a fixed heterosexuality.
Chapter 4
Kathy Acker and the Act of Plagiarism:
Subverting the Heterosexual Script

—what do you want out of me? she said
—undulating beneath her I cried - lust!
—what do you want out of me, I asked her.
—language, she said, language.

Patti Smith

In Kathy Acker's fiction, reinventing heterosexuality is a matter of survival. The identity, the life even, of her female narrators is on the line. The pain of Acker's narrators, together with their implacable determination to survive, fuels a textual urgency which, for me, is unmatched by any other contemporary writer. Acker's texts stand as witness to a belief that language makes a difference, and that language wielded by a woman writer may be a powerful agent for change. Her experimental novels are attempts to use the "frightfulness and the sweetness of language" (My Mother: Demonology (265) to both perform and critique the "frightfulness and the sweetness" of sex, which, together with language, seems to hold the best hope of human connection. Language and sex are inseparable in Acker, and, together, are that which staves off death. Before considering Kathy Acker's radical response to what she sees as the deadening effect of the heterosexual script, however, I will bring together the various threads of my argument thus far.

Attempting to articulate a theory of heterosexuality as "scripted" in the interplay between psychic structures and social structures, I have argued in the previous chapters that "heterosexuality" is fundamentally a regulatory ideal which, in the interests of its

---

1 Babel 54.
own self-replication, operates as a performative script, an utterance which not only says something, but which does something. This script, simultaneously produced and directed by various institutions and discourses, has as its goal the preservation of current systems of power. The questions which guide this project are: how does the heterosexual script which is circulated as a cultural script get internalized by individuals so as to produce them as sexual subjects? And where, within this process of conscription, is the possibility of agency? In other words, can a subject consciously resist the heterosexual norms by which it is itself produced? I have argued that Weldon's and Carter's fictions are exemplary of the skirmishes between the heterosexual script as controlling performative and individual performances of that script which fail to fully comply with its prescriptions and proscriptions. Fay Weldon, I argued in chapter two, critiques the cultural scripts of eros and domesticity which solicit women into both gendered and sexed positions within a conflated hetero-feminine script. Angela Carter intervenes into the discourse on heterosexuality, chapter three claims, not at the site of the social, as Weldon does, but at the locus of the individual psyche. Carter's texts suggest that cultural scripts are internalized as psychic scripts within the Oedipal psychodrama, in a process which produces "woman" to the specifications of masculine desire. But for Carter, the Oedipus which structures the heterosexual script is disrupted by a recognition that the psychological processes of identification and desire, organized as seemingly mutually exclusive by the Oedipus complex are, in actuality, inextricably entangled across gender and sexuality. Both Carter's and Weldon's provocative novels expose the dominant heterosexual scripts as scripts and imagine a performance of sexual scripts which destabilizes the heterosexual performative. Nevertheless, despite their attempts to install female desire within the heterosexual script, the constraints of received scripts—from the romance novel to
psychoanalytic narratives—overwhelm attempts to construct a female subjectivity and a feminine desire.

In this chapter, in order to continue my pursuit of the problem of agency, I analyze the signifying system itself in an attempt to understand the process by which female subjects are solicited into the heterosexual script. Arguing that questions of meaning and subjectivity, such as that of sexuality, must, at some point, be conceptualized as a semiotic problem, I interrogate the process by which external signs become internal signs that regulate beliefs, attitudes, and actions. In order to demonstrate how the semiotic process works in producing subjects as congruent with a dominant ideology, I further elaborate the play of the performative and the performance, reworking the concept of the performative. When the performative is understood as having its authority in reiterative practices, a space is opened up for the unauthorized reiteration of authority which acts to displace the authoritative performative. I read Kathy Acker's aggressive plagiarism, which may be seen as unauthorized iterations of received scripts, as strategic resistance to the Oedipus narrative. In Acker's savage prose, the Desiring Machines, which in Carter's Doctor Hoffman were harnessed for use solely in the interests of the Law of the Father, reappear as weapons against a corrupt patriarchy:

EVERY POSITION OF DESIRE, NO MATTER HOW SMALL, IS CAPABLE OF PUTTING TO QUESTION THE ESTABLISHED ORDER OF A SOCIETY; NOT THAT DESIRE IS ASOCIAL; ON THE CONTRARY. BUT IT IS EXPLOSIVE; THERE IS NO DESIRING-MACHINE CAPABLE OF BEING ASSEMBLED WITHOUT DEMOLISHING ENTIRE SOCIAL SECTIONS. (Blood and Guts in High School 125)\(^2\)

For Acker, "every text is a text of desire" (My Mother: Demonology 40), and it is her intention to write texts—assemble desiring machines—which explode received scripts,

\(^2\) This chapter makes connections between Acker and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, to whose Anti-Oedipus this passage is an obvious reference.
leaving in their place only fragments of desire. Acker's explosive texts mobilize an active reader who, invited to live with ambiguity and fragmented desire, participates in Acker's interruption of the heterosexual script.

Although Acker's anger may be the first thing one notices on encountering one of her raw texts, it is the pain of the text and of the reading experience that lingers, and it is Acker's uncanny ability to register pain in language that holds the key to what I regard as the most radical confrontation with the heterosexual script among contemporary writers. "Maybe it's necessary to feel pain," the narrator Abhor in Empire of the Senseless says. "They say that if you feel pain you're not dying" (69).

Death is the enemy in Acker's texts, not only physical death, but the deadening of feeling which a sexist, materialist, capitalist society demands. The two major preoccupations of her entire body of writing are survival in a world which is inimical to women (as well as to anything that is free and alive) and the possibility/impossibility of human connection. Both survival and connection, for Acker, are deeply rooted in language: "It's against you, Death, ... it's against you, Death, that I'm writing ..." (Empire of the Senseless 160). The problem of meaning, of communication with another person in a culture where meanings are ready-made, scripted, but, nevertheless, inadequate to a shared emotional life, is central in all of Acker's fiction and non-fiction. How to break out of the solipsism that is the condition of late twentieth-century culture? In an interview with Tony Dunn, Acker says, "If what

---

3 When Acker reads from her novels onstage at a rock concert between bands, Leslie Dick maintains, the limitations of the novel are being challenged in a new way ("Feminism, Writing, Postmodernism" 208). With, as Dick notes, "her feet grounded in youth subculture, rock 'n' roll, and her head full of books, serious books," Acker is uniquely situated among contemporary writers concerned about questions of meaning and communication. Considerations of access and audience must take into account Acker's position at the intersection of the visual arts, the literary arts, and the youth culture of clubs, concerts, and fanzines.
language can mean is the first major problem today, the second one is the l/other relationship" (17). In the novels, Acker shows the power of sexist, heterosexist scripts to reduce the l/other relationship to a relationship of oppressor to oppressed, in which neither is free to live or to love.

The will to connect, which survives somehow despite the obstacles set up by oppressive familial and political structures, finds expression, for Acker, in language and in sex. In her work, Boyd Tonkin notes, writing itself is "an act of profane rebellion: . . . graffiti scrawled over the face of a corrupt order" (30). And sex, in which pleasure and pain refuse to be contained within a normalizing script, is, I would add, another "act of profane rebellion." "Sex's going to get you into trouble," a fortune-teller in Empire of the Senseless predicts (118). But getting into trouble is the only way of troubling seemingly untouched scripts. Abhor, the female narrator and the recipient of the warning about sex, understands the danger of sex within an oppressive regime; nevertheless, she decides that the body, as that which is written as well as read, is the most urgent site of resistance. Like other Acker narrators, she defies what appears in the text to be a self-evident truth about heterosexuality: that it is an either/or choice—either sexual slavery or celibacy. About to be raped (a rape scene with a decidedly different tone from the conventional bodice ripper it parodies), she chooses "a raped body over a mutilated or dead one," and reflects:

I didn't know what to do about the useless and, more than useless, virulent and destructive disease named heterosexual love. I've never known. . . . It seemed to me that the body, the material, must matter. My body must matter to me. If my body mattered to me, and what else was any text: I could not choose to be celibate. (64)

Throughout Empire Abhor continues to resist being defined and confined by a world composed of "men's bloody fantasies," and to stake out a territory of her own desire (210). The most striking thing about Acker's work is, that, although she has been called nihilistic and pessimistic, and would certainly, herself, disclaim optimism, her
vulnerable and suffering female characters continue to pursue the risky quest for human connection. While desperately searching for their own identity and autonomy, Abhor and the others never give up their other search, the quest which makes them so vulnerable—the quest for love.

As an epigraph to this dissertation I chose a passage from Acker's *Don Quixote* which expresses Acker's strenuously held belief that language has material effects, that it actually changes material conditions:

Traditionally, the human world has been divided into men and women. Women're the cause of human suffering... Men have tried to get rid of their suffering by altering this: first, by changing women; second, when this didn't work because women are stubborn creatures, by simply lying, by saying that women live only for men's love. An alteration of language, rather than of material, usually changes material conditions. (*Don Quixote* 27)

The power of language to produce "reality" has been used by men to erase women's stubborn insistence on the coming-into-being and the survival of their own identities and to script women as living only for men's love. Because this script writes "love" as the totality of a woman's existence, the quest for both identity and love, for a woman, is perilous. How can a woman resist the totalizing effect of the heterosexual script which positions her in the Oedipal triangle as living for love, as finding compensation for her "lack" only in husband and child? Acker dares to believe that language is a tool of resistance which women may use to alter gendered and sexed power relations.

Refusing the easy (but impossible) way out chosen by separatists who find the only solution to oppression in a total rejection of male-female relationships, Acker understands that sexuality and power are connected, she accepts the intensities and the messiness of sex, and she looks to language to resist the oppressive heterosexual script.

---

4 See, for example, Ellen G. Friedman's "Now Eat Your Mind," page 44.
Similarly, in the introduction to *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler muses on her critics' patronizing accusations that the "facts of life" were lost on her, that she fails to notice that bodies are mere facts, biological inevitabilities. She ventriloquiizes their criticism of her claim that even bodies are somehow constructed: "perhaps I really thought that words alone had the power to craft bodies from their own linguistic substance? Couldn't someone simply take me aside?" (x). That is, of course, precisely what she thinks, that words have the power to craft bodies, and *Bodies*, the text, is a response to those critics who think that "someone" should tell her otherwise, that bodies are prediscursive. Acker's novels are enactments of Butler's theory that bodies are produced, given meaning, and *experienced* through language. Sex, in which the body is most urgently demanding, is, paradoxically, but not surprisingly, a site of the most strenuous regulation of women through language. Nevertheless, language also represents women's best hope to escape the coercive heterosexual script. Laure, the narrator of Acker's *My Mother: Demonology*, says, "The only way to raise the person from death is via the cunt. . . . The only way is to annihilate all that's been written. That can only be done through writing" (122-23). The urgent repetition of "the only way" (to raise the person from death) has as its implied subject complement, first sex, and then writing, linking them syntactically and semantically. Writing represents a flight from death; it works through the cunt to life, and must, in its bid for life, abandon prudence, moderation, and decorum. Such writing is not "nice," and, in its efforts to annihilate received scripts and to raise writer and reader from the dead, it frequently offends the sensibilities of its readers.

Unable to wake from her nightmare unless she "die[s] or suicide[s]," a broken and howling Laure turns suffering into strategy:

It's necessary to cut life into bits, for neither the butcher store nor the bed of a woman who's giving birth is as bloody as this.
Absurdity, blessed insolence that saves, and connivance are found in these cuts, the cuts into "veracity." *(My Mother: Demonology* 267)

Acker herself possesses an abundance of the "blessed insolence that saves," and she uses this insolence to re-produce, in her texts, the bloody bits of life, conniving to show, through her cuts into "veracity" (i.e., the truth claims of patriarchal discourses), the bloody pain and the bloody pleasure of a woman's experience of the heterosexual script. Although she rejects the term "experimental" as marginalizing, Acker's insolent—and experimental—prose, which both relies on and thoroughly defamiliarizes the literary tradition, has made her as many critical enemies as it has admirers.\(^5\) The bad girl of the contemporary literary scene, the darling of the avant garde, and an enigma for even experienced readers and critics, Acker displays technical virtuosity and emotional excess, but always strategically deployed, never merely expressive. By her own description, she is a conceptualist. Influenced by the visual conceptual artists, Acker claims that most writers are concerned only with the "perfect word in the perfect line." For her, however, it is necessary to think about why she writes the way she writes. "Form," she argues, "is determined not by arbitrary rules, but by intention. And intentionality is all. That's what I mean by this emphasis on conceptualism" (Lotringer 3). Her novels are erudite, comic, painful, obscene, fragmented, raw, disorienting. She talks dirty and she talks theory. She is Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's exemplary schizo artist who "deliberately scrambles all the codes," bewildering her reader with her abrupt shifts from revered canonical works to bathroom graffiti (15). At once literary and defiantly anti-literary, Acker's texts are self-
consciously played out on the grounds of current discursive debates, particularly those involving feminism and poststructuralism.

Acker's relationship with feminism is complex. Although she claims, "I don't consciously write as a feminist." she sees society as "deeply sexist" and is clearly writing from a radically feminist position (Friedman Interview 13). It seems, at times, in reading Acker, that men are, in fact, responsible for all the evil in the world; however, a closer look reveals that she situates personal oppression within political systems of evil: sexism, heterosexism, racism, and classism—and all of these "-ism"s within a materialist, corrupt capitalism. In other words, undoing situations of personal violence and oppression requires resistance to institutions of power, from the family to the multi-national corporation. In this more sophisticated view, individuals are either complicit with systemic evil or resistant, often both, vacillating between complicity and resistance. Men, as well as women, find themselves trapped in systems of evil, although it is clear that, as a group, men occupy more privileged positions within such systems. Because Acker's mode of resistance includes crude and obscene language, unabashed depictions of sado-masochism, and graphic scenes of the rape and abuse of women, she has been accused of misogyny.6 Acker responds to feminist criticism of her portrayal of female victimization and masochism by insisting on the non-utopian quality of her feminism:

If you're arguing that society is sexist, why do you want to argue that everything is happy? And why do you want to insist on having these strong, wonderful, terrific women? [Laughs.] That implies there's no reason to have this struggle. That's cuckoo. (McCaffery Interview 96)

The feminist critique of Acker's portrayal of women who find pleasure as well as pain in their victimization ignores the fact that the oppressed are always damaged by their

---

6 For example, Roy Hoffman, in his review of Blood and Guts in High School, calls Acker's work "abusive" to women.
oppression and that, almost inevitably, they become complicit in it. This more complex understanding of the relationship between women and their sexual victimization is key to understanding Acker's texts. Despite feminist accusations of misogyny, there are, however, an increasing number of feminist critics who appreciate Acker's unorthodox writing.7

Acker's relation with poststructuralism is less conflicted than her relationship with feminism. Working along parallel lines with the poststructuralists from the beginning, interested in problems of power, language, and subjectivity, Acker found that Foucault and especially Deleuze and Guattari gave her a theory for what she was doing. She tells Larry McCaffery:

I met Sylvère Lotringer. That was about 1976. Sylvère introduced me to the work of Felix Guattari, Gilles Deleuze, and (somewhat) Foucault. . . . it was only then that I began to find a language for what I was doing. (89)

Although she has read Derrida, Baudrillard, and other French poststructuralists, Acker is particularly drawn to Deleuze and Guattari and Julia Kristeva and their ideas about fragmentation and the relation of sexuality to language and politics, influences which this chapter will explore further.8 Acker finds the term "postmodern" a useful description of her work, but asserts that she had no idea what the term meant when she began her "postmodern" writing: "I knew I wanted to plagiarize, but I didn't have a clear theoretical justification for what I was doing or why." She also knew that she


8 See also the Friedman Interview (16) and the Lotringer Interview (10) for Acker's acknowledgment of the influence of Deleuze and Guattari and Foucault.
I wanted to "dis-integrate" the "I" that it seemed everyone else was trying to integrate (McCaffery Interview 88). Later, she notes, after Don Quixote, the constructedness and fragmentation of the subject became an assumption of her writing, rather than a preoccupation.

The "language" that the postmodern theorists have provided for her makes its way into her fictions as textual interpretations or self-readings of her own texts. Their influence is explicitly acknowledged in an autobiographical moment in Don Quixote, a moment reminiscent of an academic conference panel. Don Quixote and her friends are discussing the theory which informs their filmmaking:

"Do you think there's something fishy in the semiotic theories, especially in Deleuze's and Guattari's?" "There's a gap now. You have to realize that semiotics hit England before it hit America. We got Lacan and Althusser, rather than later semioticians... Derrida... Foucault..." "Foucault isn't really a semiotician. He was always on the outside. Who, then, are you reading now?" "I have a theory that we're at the end of a generation. Semiotics's no longer applicable. At the moment there's nothing." "I remember in New York when semiotics came only it was Sylvère who brought it over. What it really did was give me a language with which I could speak about my work. Before that I had no way of discussing what I did, of course I did it, and my friends who were doing similar work we had no way of talking to each other. A critical way of talking about my work allowed me to go one step further in my work." (55, ellipses, Acker's)

I reproduced this passage in its entirety because, although far more abstract and theoretical than her often visceral dramatic narrative, it reveals the way the Acker's autobiography and fictions cross over. Here we have a passage from a fictional text which we can lay alongside autobiographical statements from non-fictional contexts, such as those about her theoretical influences: in both the McCaffery interview and the fictional text, Sylvère gave the speaker a language with which to speak about her work. The relationship between the actual words of the interview and the words of the fiction is made even more notable because of the conversational style of the fictional discussion of poststructuralism. The run-on sentence mimics the kind of breathless disregard for syntax that lively (and live, as opposed to textual) discussions of ideas
among friends often generate. The use of unusual contractions, evident in this passage, marks Acker's fiction stylistically throughout the novels. Contractions, like "Who, then, 're you reading now?" and "Semiotics's no longer applicable," fill the texts, both in dialogue and in the narrative voice. These casual grammatical elisions invite the almost inevitable, although risky, elisions between the narrative voice and the authorial voice, an elision which explicitly surfaces just often enough to unsettle the conventional separation between author and narrator (e.g., punning on the names "Kathy" and "Acker" and, in some cases, actually naming the narrator "Kathy" or "Cathy"). This elision of author/narrator, which shifts among characters within a single text, narrows the space between novel and personal essay, a tactic that suits Acker's purposes of both showing and telling. This technique allows her to link the dramatic level—the personal cost of scripts—to the analytical level—the systemic injustice perpetuated through the heterosexual script.

Acker's novels all contain a core autobiographical narrative with recurrent themes: incest, mother's suicide, work in a live sex show, immersion in the avant-garde art world—all details of Acker's life. In an example of such autobiographical infusions into the fiction, Villebranche, one of a series of dog companions who accompany Don Quixote on her journey, meditates on whether "a dog's life can have meaning" (112). The autobiographical authorial voice, although not explicit here, lurks just beneath the canine voice, for a moment replacing Don Quixote as the primary vehicle for the author's voice:

Look at particulars. If you're American, always look at particulars. These are the particulars of my life: When I was a puppy, I lived among rich dogs because my family was haute bourgeoisie; I was a special mutt in dog society because I was trained to think that way. I lived in the outskirts of, in the lowest part of, society because I worked in a sex show; then I believed that I deserved to be shot on, that if I didn't pull myself up by non-existent bootstraps out of the muck I would die, and that I had to be very tough. I was a member of a certain group—the art world—whose members, believing that they're simultaneously society's outcasts and its myths, blow up their individual
psychologies into general truths. Do these three canine identities have anything to do with each other? What meaning can such a life or voyage possibly have? (112)

Acker's biography, beginning some time after the traumatic childhood, is reproduced here, subject to an ironic distancing by giving the life-story to a dog. The three canine identities—haute bourgeois mutt, sex-show worker, and member of the art world—parallel Acker's own disparate experiences. Nevertheless, although the fiction is frequently painful, ironic distance is maintained here, as it is with every narrator, whether dog, robot, or human being. The self-deprecating humor of Villebranche's depiction of the art world's embrace of its supposed outlaw status which exists alongside its own self-glorification is typical of Acker's ironic appreciation of her own ambiguous position in culture, a position which involves a tension between her status as privileged artist and her status as outsider. The references in the passage above to America and the statement that "We" in England got Lacan and Althusser before the Americans are autobiographical reminders that Acker wrote Don Quixote while living in England for almost a decade, an absence which makes the focus on American politics in her texts even sharper.  

Acker clearly relishes her role as literary outlaw (although she has gained enough respectability that people are writing dissertations about her). Linda Singer's trope of the "bandita" whom she describes as "playing with the remains of dead men, ruthless[ly] pillaging, taking what's needed and leaving the rest," a trope deployed for another purpose, nevertheless characterizes brilliantly Acker's transgressive recycling of male literary texts (23). Tracing her literary lineage to what she calls "the other tradition, 'the non-acceptable literary tradition," ("A Few Notes" 31), Acker cites de Sade, Rimbaud, the surrealists and dadaists, Artaud, Genet, Bataille, Miller,  

9 Back in the United States, Acker is now living in San Francisco.
Burroughs (her most important literary influence), and Patti Smith. The affinity she has for these "non-acceptable" writers is, she says, that they all share "a perspective that is deeply sexual, a perspective which insists upon the connections between power and sexuality" (one of the reasons, of course, why they are all "unacceptable") (31). Crucially too, they all share a view that excess enables one to see a reality which is usually veiled. Going "over the limit," according to Acker, provides access to areas of the mind unavailable to reason (McCaffery Interview 93). Acker's deeply sexual perspective and her reliance on excess, on going over the limit as a tool for seeing, take Acker—and her reader—to places rarely visited in literature, places crucial for a reconceptualization of heterosexuality.

The presence of Patti Smith, poet, songwriter, and singer, in the list of Acker's literary identifications, is a reminder of Acker's close connection to the punk movement, a connection which illuminates some of her literary strategies. "Punk was very important to me," she recalls (McCaffery Interview 94). She shared many of the impulses of the punk movement, the anger, alienation, and deeply felt victimization, and found a home for awhile during the 1970s among other punk artists. Larry McCaffery, one of the most perceptive of Acker's critics, ranks the punk movement as arguably the most significant artistic movement of the 1970s. The vitality and energy of the punk phenomenon is evident in various ways, but its chief importance was its creation of a style perfectly suited to undermine the complacency of the dominant power groups that had marginalized its [middle-class] members' lives. (219)

---

10 McCaffery's interesting and unconventional essay, "The Artists of Hell: Kathy Acker and 'Punk' Aesthetics," written in the cut-up style of William Burroughs, is the only critical essay which I have seen which responds to Acker in a mode in keeping with her own unconventional texts. It is tempting, when commenting on Acker, to adopt her methods, for anything else threatens to domesticate her. I have, of course, made the choice to retain the scholarly style and to allow Acker's work to speak for itself through liberal quotation.
Acker's deliberate violence, rawness, and obscenity, together with her tactics of parody and confrontation, have much in common with the punk aesthetic. Shared too is a notion of art as a form of refusal, a refusal even of art itself. "Fuck art," Toulouse Lautrec tells Vincent Van Gogh in Acker's *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec* (176). And yet, there is the text. The punk ambivalence about the value of any action is betrayed, at least in Acker, by the existence of the text itself.

It is not easy to read Acker for reasons that the remainder of this chapter will explore. The power and passion of Acker's texts, in unusual combination with the self-conscious irony noted earlier and the fragmentation of narrative, may puzzle and frustrate a reader who is accustomed to reading conventional realist novels, which depend on rationality, on the laws of cause and effect, and on psychological plausibility. Even a familiarity with other postmodern novelists fails to prepare the reader for Acker. The crudity, the delirium, the drawings of penises and tattoos, the incoherences may offend a reader who reads for beauty and refinement of form.

"Beauty will be CONVULSIVE or will not be at all," Acker announces (*My Mother: Demonology* 211). The reading strategies necessary to appreciate Acker's convulsive—and beautiful—texts, quite different from those which govern the reading of traditional literary texts, must be learned in the reading. Acker herself provides instructions:

GET RID OF MEANING. YOUR MIND IS A NIGHTMARE THAT HAS BEEN EATING YOU: NOW EAT YOUR MIND. (*Empire of the Senseless* 38)

Reading Acker is, above all, an experience rather than a mere cognitive apprehension. Reading her with pleasure is a matter of letting go, of letting the text take over, of abandoning pre-conceptions. Meaning will re-emerge, but not through conventional means.
Even the experienced reader must be willing to suspend judgment, to be open to a performance which flouts literary convention. Reviewers, both admirers and detractors, have found Acker disorienting. Although some have called her "smart," "challenging," "formidably talented," "haunting," "very funny," and "brilliant," others have labeled her "unreadable," "puerile," "self-indulgent." Some have bemoaned her novels as a "dumping ground" for her musings and have wondered how "to separate the trash compactor from the trash." R.H.W. Dillard, in an appreciative review of *Empire of the Senseless,* captures the spirit of her novels. They are "as difficult and disordered as the mad world from which they spring," he writes. "... a rock 'n roll version of *The Critique of Pure Reason* by the Marquis de Sade as performed by the Three Stooges" (9). When Kant, de Sade, and the Three Stooges get together in one text, conventional scripts are bound to be undone, and so they are in Acker novels.

Acker herself acknowledges the difficulty of her texts. For example, late in the text of *My Mother: Demonology,* in one of her blatant authorial intrusions, Acker writes: "(I have suddenly realized the meaning of *My Mother: Demonology*)" (141). The frustrated reader thinks, "I wish I were so lucky." However, after arduous effort the reader may finally determine what the text is doing, may discover the relationship of the parts to the whole. Then, suddenly, she comes upon a passage that doesn't fit her schema; everything falls apart again. She realizes, finally, that the text is sovereign. She must allow it to work its effects on her without forcing it into boxes of her own construction. Reading Acker is an experience of permitting the text its inconsistencies.

---

11 The admiring reviewers cited are Kevin Ray, Brian Geary, an unnamed reviewer from *Publishers Weekly* and R.H.W. Dillard. The not-so-admiring reviewers are Stephen Schiff, Peter Bricklebank, Anne Haverty, and Tom LeClair. Kathleen Hulley, in a skilful analysis of Acker's methods, makes use of Tom LeClair's metaphor of the trash and the trash compactor to undermine his criticism and to make her case that the flood of obscene language is a deliberate artistic choice which expresses the return of the repressed.
its idiosyncrasies, its surprises. It is an experience of eating your mind. Only when
the reader relinquishes control, gives the text its head, does meaning begin to emerge.
Two paradoxes surface in this abandoned style of reading: one, this letting go takes the
greatest self-discipline, and, two, giving the text its head results, astonishingly, in a
writerly reading experience. Only when the text is permitted its full range of
disjunctions, its entire scale of intensities, can the individual reader begin to make
meaning with the text. Acker comments on this writerly quality of her texts: "narrative
isn't a problem any more. Even if you use a discontinuous story people will make
connections" (Dunn 17). In Acker's discontinuous stories, each character, each scene,
each image has a position and a use, but the fit is never comfortable nor predictable.
The laws that operate in Acker's texts are those of disunity, exclusion, absence,
contradiction, fragmentation, implausibility, noncommunication, guilt. And the reader
who wishes to experience the text must resist the impulse to totalize, to unify, to make
transcendent meaning from what is always partial and contradictory. If the reader can
resist foreclosure of meaning, however, there is possible a fluid synthesis which
includes, rather than denies, disjunction. This synthesis traverses the entire text,
attracting and holding in suspension the dissimilarities and differentiations of a multiple
text.

In this chapter, because of their similar personal, political, and metafictional
concerns and their similar fragmented and recursive structure, I read Acker's novels as
one continuous text; each novel, itself fragmented, is a fragment of the whole. I would
note, however, that, although I am considering the novels as continuous and as
various pieces of Acker's experiment with narrative form and with questions of
subjectivity and desire, Acker explores different techniques and metafictional ground
with each novel. The texts which I read most closely are those that I consider her four
most accomplished novels: Don Quixote, Empire of the Senseless, In Memoriam to
Identity, and My Mother: Demonology. Although I make reference to other texts from time to time, I read these four as a single text with nearly identical preoccupations—language, sex, power, violence, the quest for adulthood, the quest for love. The almost interchangeable narrators, who are, at moments, stand-ins for the author, embark on similar journeys. Here, in narrowing the space between author and narrators, I observe a distinction, of course, between Kathy Acker, the person who wrote and published the novels and "Kathy Acker," the author who is a character in her own novels, although this distinction is not as clearly maintained as in most texts. The obsessive repetition of the same autobiographical details in each novel is another compelling reason for considering them as one text, as well as for the qualified identification of the author (both as author-function-character and real person) with the "I" of the text. Caution must be exercised, however, in even a partial conflation of the author with her narrators, as Acker herself reminds us: "I place very direct autobiographical, just diary material, right next to fake diary material" (Lotringer Interview 7). When her friend Sylvère Lotringer says, "I know for a fact that you're totally different from what you write," Acker responds, "If you're not the I, but the I becomes you, then you have to offer it as some kind of performance. . . . When I'm writing I become the characters in the novel, but the characters in the novel aren't me" (20). This offering of her "I" as some kind of strategic performance is, I argue, one of Acker's principal tactics for contesting the performative force of the heterosexual script.

The novels follow a recursive pattern, most explicit in Don Quixote, the circularity of which is reminiscent of Finnegans Wake. The final section of the text, titled "The Last Adventure: Until This Book Will Begin Again," invites an immediate return to page one of the novel where the journey will start over (175). This circularity of the texts implies a quest which is never completed. The recursiveness marks the nature of the struggle in which the narrators are caught up, a struggle for identity, for
meaning, and for love in a world in which the hypocrisy of conventional "morality" guarantees the opposite. This summary of the texts' concerns which I have hazarded, however necessary, nevertheless, belies the fragmented quality of the writing, the disunities out of which this perception of meaning comes.

The text, in fact, makes many false promises, offers cogent summaries of its own action, inviting premature closure. Seduced by the text's apparent transparency, the reader risks stopping at a particular scene, pausing before a provocative passage and determining, "Here. Here is where Acker explains herself." Inevitably such a conclusion is partial and of limited use. Acker is continually spinning new stories, working across and over and under the narrative threads, fabricating webs of meaning that defy easy summary. Her penchant for pithy epigrams wars with the schizo-logic of their juxtaposition and their context. Nevertheless, selection and ordering are the work of the critic. So trapped in such a dilemma, this critic, having paused for a disclaimer, will continue to attempt to draw some tentative conclusions about Acker's work; it must be noted, however, that every meaning statement derived from an Acker text can be countered with a contradiction, and it is only in the play of these contradictions that one experiences Acker. As meaning is made in the disjunctions and contradictions, I will try to preserve the play of contradiction. That said, the remainder of the chapter will attempt to provide a theoretical framework in which to read Acker's engagement with the problem of heterosexuality.

The Performative as Citation

Acker's novels pose the question: how can we liberate heterosexuality from its conventional stifling and oppressive forms? For her, the answer is situated in language. The difficulty and the urgency of reinventing heterosexuality requires new forms: the classical aesthetic of the beautiful, thoroughly entangled with conventional
constructions of sexuality and gender, is inadequate to Acker's purposes. Thus, her unconventional prose. Her texts are experiments in inhabiting language in such a way as to strip it of its predictability, while retaining enough of the conventions to stay just within the borders of intelligibility. The most powerful attribute of her work is the ability to render subjective pain and pleasure, notoriously resistant to inscription in language, and, at the same time, to perform an analysis of the matrix of desire and power at the level of both the individual and the social. The link between private life and political life, one of the major concerns of the novels, rests on reducing the other to the status of object. Acker's confrontation with the heterosexual script, which she sees as tied to all the "-isms" of injustice, all the oppressive forms which rely on a colonization of the other, takes place on the level of the signifier.

Three strategies of resistance mark Acker's disruption of the heterosexual script. First, through an aggressive plagiarism, she challenges the notion of masculine property rights—texts and to women. Second, Acker vividly represents the abjection of women which is inherent in the very structure of the Oedipal triangle, by shifting the point of view from which the Oedipal narrative is told. Three, by deliberately establishing her fictional territory as the abject, and by cultivating an aesthetic of disgust to represent this abject, Acker brings into discourse that which is usually excluded as unintelligible. Using shock and offensiveness in depictions of sex and violence, she startles readers out of habits of lassitude and lasciviousness induced by conventional representations. With these tactics Acker resists being totally subsumed by a system of signification in which she is, she recognizes, implicated, but from whose meta-narratives she has been systematically excluded. Keenly aware that there is no "outside," she stages her resistance to the heterosexual script from within masculine narratives and meta-narratives, with the intention of representing the devalued or excluded term in those narratives.
Acker's texts present the anomaly of a deliberate effort to alienate readers accustomed to being seduced by narrative and of a conscious affront to conventional legal and ethical standards of ownership—which, Acker demonstrates, always operate in the interests of dominant power structures and to the exclusion of women. Turning the Oedipus inside out to reveal the oppression usually concealed by the ideology of the "holy family" and representing the realm of the abject are both efforts to make visible the place of the always-excluded: women's position within current systems of power, as voiceless and, in some instances, masochistic and addicted to their own pain. In a complicated and dangerous move, one which courts recuperation by a dominant ideology and which almost guarantees feminist ire, Acker attempts to represent women as damaged by the oppressive heterosexual script which constructs them. In order to work toward women's liberation, Acker's fictions maintain, we must understand women as they presently exist, trapped in a heterosexual script which both enslaves and offers pleasure. It is Acker's unwillingness to settle on an either/or of women's position within heterosexuality that I find representative of women's experience today in heterosexual culture. Committed to representing woman as the abject other on which male subjectivity relies, Acker is no less committed to representing woman as agent of her own desire. It is only through language, she maintains, that women can seize the scripts of their own oppression.

In Acker's texts, the female object speaks, the object who has been spoken into discourse, who has been scripted by an oppressive heterosexual script, and, in the very act of speaking, resists her construction as object in a man's story. And yet, the words she speaks are embedded in a phallocentric language, and every attempt at female

\[12\] Deleuze and Guattari use the typically Roman Catholic term, "holy family," in their analysis of the nuclear family (51).
subjectivity must be undertaken from within the realm of the abject to which masculine discourse has consigned "woman." "You can't get to a place, to a society, that isn't constructed according to the phallus," Acker tells Ellen Friedman (17). A story which she tells in *My Mother: Demonology* elaborates this:

In China, when a woman doesn't believe in God, she, like everyone else, validates her existence by believing in man. It all amounts to the same. The only way that she can escape this kind of structure (this society, this community, this language) is to make her own. But then she'd be outside society, or nonexistent. (80)

Here, in the first sentence, a woman is endowed with agency to decide her belief and to validate her existence. She is the grammatical subject. But the fact that the source of her belief and validation is necessarily God or man is reinforced in the second and third sentences which are reminders that there is no alternative belief or validation for her. To exist is to be inside patriarchal systems. Acker clearly shares Derrida's assertion that there is a "necessary dependency of all destructive discourses: they must inhabit the structures they demolish" (*Writing and Difference* 194). Derrida's contention that we are always implicated in the systems of thought or power which we contest is derived from the fact that the subject itself is produced as an effect of these systems. Because she knows that the alternative is nonexistence, Acker brazenly establishes her camp within the walls of masculine discourse, and from there wages war on her conscription into the normalizing heterosexual script.13 And it is, quite clearly, a war. Don Quixote's alter-ego, the dog Villebranche, explains to her the connection between stories and revolution: "All stories, being stories of revolt, are revolt" (146). Reversing

---

13 Acker's strategy challenges Audre Lorde's familiar contention that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (112). Acker would argue that you must use his tools, because those are the only tools around; you can, however, use them for purposes for which they were never intended. Any dream of a woman's language is just that: a dream. Acker, for whom dreams are always strategic, is, in her plagiarized fictions, inside the walls of masculine discourse, where she uses the master's own tools to dismantle his walls.
the conventional terms of power, and finding hope in the fact that "masochism is now rebellion," Acker deploys her texts as weapons in the war against sexism and heterosexism (158). The novels are linguistic bombs which explode conventional assumptions about female sexuality.

Each of Acker's narrative strategies—her unapologetic plagiarism, her revisionary Oedipus, and her use of the disgusting, the shocking, and the abject—functions in the text as a specific tool in her resistance to the performative weight of the heterosexual script. Her unconventional artistic performance (her assumption of the position of literary criminal) is deployed to abet her unconventional sexual performance (her assumption of the position of sexual criminal). Repeatedly the text assaults the reader's expectations and assumptions about both literature and sexuality. *My Mother: Demonology*, for example, which undermines narrative and moral conventions, is a haunting and disturbing narrative of sexual abuse and psychological torture, both self-inflicted and other-inflicted. But the text also represents the narrator Laure's journey of self-discovery, a quest which pits her need for solitude and independence against her passion for her lover, B. Her memories and fantasies of childhood merge with dreams and "real" events, in a narrative in which temporality and identity are plastic and yielding. Linking women's assumption of the position of speaking subject with their desire, Laure says, "Language must begin in desire" (224). Like Laure, all of Acker's narrators either refuse to speak their scripted lines (threatening their self-identity with collapse) or they speak them with a heightened and contradictory perservity. In *My Mother*, Laure dreams that, when she tells her boyfriend that she is leaving him, he rapes her:

"He fucked me for a long time in that hole. While he slammed into me I hated him; several minutes passed still fucking me no break; I suddenly notice that I'm feeling pleasure and then I want him to fuck me even more; I started to shake all over the place come come. As soon as I had felt pleasure, I had begun
to feel different emotions about him: I simultaneously like being fucked this way and hated being raped.
"I came for a long time." (169)

The contradictory emotions and sensory experiences, the struggle between hatred and pleasure in this dream scene, a disjunction which I will explore further, is a motif that runs through Acker's work.

Like Angela Carter, Acker relies on dreams, sexuality, fantasy, imagination, and art to explore that which is usually repressed, in order to get outside the Logos or the rule of reason. She writes:

Reason is always in the service of the political and economic masters. It is here that literature strikes, at this base, where the concepts and actings of order impose themselves. Literature is that which denounces and slashes apart the repressing machine at the level of the signified. (Empire 12)

This statement is, seemingly, in direct contradiction to Acker's claim, noted earlier, that "you can't get to a place, to a society, that isn't constructed according to the phallus" (Friedman Interview 17). These two opposing claims represent Acker's irresolution regarding the problem of whether or not there is a possibility of getting beyond the hegemony of the symbolic as a single order. The inside/outside tension is sustained throughout the fiction, as Acker simultaneously denies the possibility of and searches for a position outside masculine systems of thought. Resting uneasily in this tension, Acker clearly believes both that there is no other system of language to which women can escape and that dreams, sexuality, fantasy, and the abject are somehow beyond, but can be brought into, language. Acker's irresolution, which articulates a fundamental tension in postmodern feminist thought, results from her own analysis that "the problem . . . is that we have acknowledged the logical model of the exclusive either/or." "What is our world, logically, if this model no longer holds?" she asks. (*Models of Our Present* 63). Her novels, dreamlike and analytical, contradictory, passionate, and obscene, may be seen as attempts to answer this question.
What makes her texts unusual is that Acker doesn't, in the interests of propriety or narrative coherence, pretty up the unseemly or come to a point of reconciliation of conflicting emotions, but, rather, writes the raw contradiction that is at the heart of the sexual experience in her texts. Immediately following Laure's dream-rape scene, the speaker tells her mother her dream. Her mother responds "that there was no more choice: they had to kill Bush" (170). A seeming non-sequitur, but, as so frequently happens in Acker's work, meaning is in the disjunctions. As an analysis of the Oedipus complex will demonstrate, there is, for Acker, a crucial link between personal and political oppression; killing Bush has everything to do with the dream of rape. A close analysis of Acker's textual performances of sexuality, which reveals that they are, actually, variations on the performative heterosexual script, shows the possibilities and the limits of agency upon and within scripts. Even as the novels contest the script, they have meaning only in relation to it. In the scenes which I read, I assume Acker's dependency on the heterosexual script, her implication in its structures, even as I assert her moves to demolish it. But first, as an aid to analysis, another look at the performative.

I wish to propose an expanded understanding of the performative and performance which goes beyond the traditional conceptualization which guided my earlier analysis in chapter two. Theories of Derrida, Butler, and Charles Peirce are useful in examining how signifying systems work to produce subjects as compliant with a dominant ideology, and how Acker's texts resist this compliance. The conventional understanding of the category of the performative, drawn from speech act

---

14 President Bush, like Presidents Nixon, Carter, and Reagan, is a recurrent figure in Acker's texts; representing, as God does in other instances, the Father with a capital F. the President is seen, figuratively, as supreme patriarch, and, as such, is held accountable for the abuses of patriarchy.
theory as I have noted in earlier chapters, is that of an authoritative utterance which performs a particular action, exercising a binding power by virtue of the intentions of the speaker and the authority vested in him. In "Signature Event Context," an essay in which he engages with Anglo-American speech act theory, particularly as developed by J. L. Austin, Derrida offers instead a theory of the performative which depends on "citation" for its authority:

Could a performative utterance succeed if its formulation did not repeat a "coded" or iterable utterance, or in other words, if the formula I pronounce in order to open a meeting, launch a ship or a marriage were not identifiable as conforming with an iterable model, if it were not then identifiable in some way as a "citation"?... The first consequence of this will be the following: given that structure of iteration, the intention animating the utterance will never be through and through present to itself and to its content... Above all [there is] this essential absence of intending the actuality of the utterance.... (18)

In other words, the performative, far from being an intentional authoritative act of an originating will, gains its authority from its repeated citation. For example, the authority of the law is actually produced in its citation, its iteration by judges who simultaneously cite and generate the authority of that law.

Judith Butler's theorizing of the performative accords with Derrida's re-imagining it as "citationality." She too argues that the performative "derives its power from the citations that it compels" (Bodies That Matter 13). The question is one of "original authority" or "perpetual deferral," Butler argues. Sex, for example, is always reproduced as a reiteration of hegemonic norms; i.e., although the performative appears to produce its own referent, this production is actually a practice of resignification, "not a creation ex nihilo" (107-08). Although understanding the performative as reiterative practice seemingly loosens its compulsory force, we are faced with a dilemma. The paradox in this model is the impossibility of a choosing subject who is apart from the regulatory norms which s/he contests: "the subject who would resist such norms is itself enabled, if not produced by such norms," Butler
reminds us (15). Agency, if it is to be argued at all, must be argued as immanent to power, not as somehow outside of it. To summarize, Butler and Derrida's reformulation of performativity places the "origin" of the authority of the performative in its iterations; nevertheless, this in no way presupposes a voluntarist subject. The question which remains unresolved, for me, however, is where is the subject in this citational chain? and what degree of agency may we ascribe to her as she reiterates the performative?

This re-framing of the concept of performativity, crucial for my purposes, suggests that the heterosexual script, although it has the force of a performative, is, like every performative, actually a dynamic process in which the script which constitutes the subject is itself constituted by the subject's citation of it. Now every citation will not be identical with the one that preceded it, with the script which is being "cited." It is in this non-identicality of the script and its citation that we discover the inevitable mutability of the heterosexual script. Nevertheless, the question remains: can the distance between the heterosexual script and an individual citation of it be consciously exploited? My answer is a cautious "yes." Within very broad, but culturally specific limits of intelligibility, scripts can be consciously contested and their borders challenged. As I argued in my analysis of Fay Weldon's novels, there are always, in addition to and even within the heterosexual script, multiple scripts competing for the subject's conscription, and the competing claims of these scripts generate dis-ease, fragmentation, and non-compliance. This non-compliance is precisely what Acker is up to in her plagiarized performances of old sexual scripts. Her texts, citations themselves, act as wedges which widen the gap between the heterosexual script and its coercive force, unsettling conventional scripts and unsettling readers. It is my contention that Acker "cites" woman's abject position within the conventional heterosexual script in order to strip this abjection of its romantic luster and to probe it
for women's own responses of pleasure and pain. Citing the script in order to preempt its power and deprive it of the effect of its necessity, Acker resignifies woman's conventional position as lack and reworks her object status into political agency.

**Signs, Effects, Habits, and Scripts**

Having advanced the idea that Acker's textual performances reshape the heterosexual script which comes to her in a particular sexist, heterosexist form, I look to the work of the early semiotician, Charles Sanders Peirce, for a theory of how the subject actually internalizes cultural scripts, and, by extension, of how such an internalization might be interrupted.\(^{15}\) Peirce's unique emphasis on the *subject* in the process of signification makes his theory fruitful for analyzing how cultural meanings are reproduced in individual subjects.\(^{16}\) The aspect of Peirce's model of signification that is most important to my conceptualizing of heterosexuality is his theorizing of the subject: as crucial in signification, as implicated in a social world which is mediated by material encounters, as historical, and as structured through habits. Peirce, who was roughly contemporaneous with Freud, developed a theory of the interaction of the social and the psychic, his "outer" and "inner" worlds, in which he posits a chain of signifying events which results in the formation of a signifying *habit*. This

---

\(^{15}\) Peirce's work is available in the eight volumes of his *Collected Papers*, as well as in a vast body of unpublished manuscripts, some of which have been excerpted in Jørgen Dines Johansen's recent *Dialogic Semiosis: An Essay on Signs and Meaning*. I rely on material from both sources. References to *The Collected Papers* will be cited in the text by volume number and paragraph number.

\(^{16}\) Umberto Eco acknowledges a huge debt to Peirce in his work, particularly to Peirce's model of interpretants and unlimited semiosis (*The Role of the Reader* 193). Kaja Silverman asserts that, among theorists of signification, Peirce offers the most "satisfactory explanation of the role of the cognitive subject in the signifying process" (*Semiotics* 18). And Teresa de Lauretis targets Peirce's potential uses for feminism in *Alice Doesn't* (172-83) and *The Practice of Love* (298-303).
understanding of the process of signification connects Foucault's and Althusser's theories of social systems with Freud's and Lacan's views of the individual. Peirce's model of signs, interpretants, effects, and habits provides an account of how cultural sexuality—that is, the meanings, beliefs, practices, and power relations which are associated with sexuality in a given culture—is produced as personal sexuality in one individual subject. Because sexuality is, among other things, an instance of semiosis, Peirce's theory of signification, although he himself did not politicize it, is useful in attempting to theorize the formation of the individual sexual subject within ideology.

Peirce offers a dynamic triadic structure to represent the process of signification: object, sign, and interpretant. The object of a sign may be almost anything present in the outer world, and is defined by its positionality, its relation to the triad; i.e., the sign indicates its object, but the object also influences or determines the sign, and, ultimately, only when the interpreter interprets the sign, does the object come within the sphere of the triad. The sign, in Peirce, has both a narrow and a broad sense. In its narrow use, it is merely one element in the triad, that which has a representative function and which links the object and the interpretant; in its broad use, sign is used to designate the entire triadic relation between sign, object, and interpretant. Signs have greater or lesser complexity, and may be as simple as the single word "woman" or as complex as a whole work of fiction, such as Cervantes' *Don Quixote* or a Harlequin romance (Johansen 62-65). It is Peirce's concept of the interpretant, the "effect" of the

---

17 Peirce's triad is roughly equivalent to Ferdinand de Saussure's referent, signifier, and signified. There are, however, crucial differences in their theories. Peirce, as we will see, attributes to the interpretant a quality of endless commutability, which is totally alien to Saussure's system, but which has been important to recent semioticians. Furthermore, Saussure leaves untheorized the position of the subject in the signifyng process, an element which Peirce insists on. Kaja Silverman notes that, although Peirce began writing well before Saussure, his work has been assimilated much later (4).
sign on the subject, as well as his insistence on the *interpreter*, which I find most suggestive in conjunction with my theory of a cultural heterosexual script which is transmitted as a psychic heterosexual script. The sign initiates in the subject a series of interpretants or "significate effects," a term which de Lauretis "insists on" (and I agree) in her theorizing of the nexus of sign, object, and meaning, because it conveys an understanding of meaning as processual and open-ended (*Practices of Love* 300). In an important move, which anticipates later theories of signification, Peirce attributes to the interpretant an endless commutability, in which the interpretant itself becomes a sign which produces a new interpretant, which can, again, serve as a further sign.

Peirce's theory of meaning is helpful to a reading of Acker because it accounts for a piece missing in most theories of subjectivity and signification, a missing piece which helps to explain the move from heterosexual script to individual behavior: the *interpreter*. Although his theory of the logic of signs has been important in the development of poststructuralist language theory, Peirce's attention to the third term in a system of signification, the *addressee* of the sign, has been neglected by postmodern theorists. In what is perhaps his most lasting contribution, and which offers the most promise for future analysis, Peirce complicates the sign-interpretant (analogous to the signifier-signified) relationship, by emphasizing the subject's role in the signifying process:

A sign, or *representamen*, is something which stands to *somebody* for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses *somebody*, that is it creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of that first sign. (2.228. The italics are Peirce's, the underlining, mine.)

---

18 Both Derrida and Roland Barthes have been influenced by Peirce's theory of the endless commutability of the signifier, but have not shared his concern with the subject in the semiotic process. The role of the subject remains to be theorized.
Peirce's insistence on the "somebody" of signification removes discourse theory from the realm of the totally abstract, returning it to the real world of power relations in which "somebodies" are variously positioned by discourse, according to gender, race, class, sexuality, and various other identity predicates. Although Peirce himself failed to pursue the political implications of his theory of interpretants as signs which occur in a person (and which, this study argues, actually produce a person), his emphasis on the "somebody" invites an analysis which includes the politics of such identity predicates. Signification takes place in the context of ideology, I argue in this dissertation, and, within ideology, all subjects are not equal. The subject whom Peirce places at the center of signification is, this project demonstrates, embedded in a cultural system of meaning, specific to a particular time and place, and these cultural meanings, which circulate within the system, impress themselves on individual subjects, with various degrees of necessity and demand.

So how, I continue to ask, do women accept and internalize those signs, representations, and roles which circulate as cultural models of heterosexual femininity? Again Peirce offers a way to approach the question. The problem of meaning, he argues, is tied up with a series of mediations between the outer world and the inner.19 The inner world, Peirce maintains, exerts only a slight compulsion upon us, but the outer world is full of "irresistible compulsions for us" (5.474). Whereas this may be true for the pre-subjective infant, the inner world, too, I argue, exerts tremendous pressure on a subject whose conscious and unconscious (not a part of Peirce's model), are also full of "irresistible compulsions." In either case, however, whatever the source of the original "compulsion," analysis of the signifying process for an understanding of

---

19 See de Lauretis' *The Practice of Love* for a comparison of Peirce's and Freud's conceptualizations of the subject, particularly of Peirce's "inner" and "outer" worlds as analogous, but not identical, to the ego's internal and external worlds in Freud (299).
the work of the "compulsion," is useful. The space where Peirce's two worlds, inner and outer, meet is the space of the interpretant, which has "signify effects" of three kinds: emotional, energetic, and logical (5.475). The first signify effect of a sign is a feeling produced by it. This feeling, "the emotional interpretant," may be as simple as a feeling of recognition or as complex as an emotional response to a piece of music. If a sign produces further effect, it does so through the mediation of the emotional interpretant; such further effect, which always involves an effort, Peirce calls the "energetic interpretant." The effort may be a muscular effort, such as closing a window, or, more commonly, a mental effort. The third type of signify effect of a sign, an effect which follows and proceeds from the emotional and energetic effects, is the "logical interpretant." Peirce's designation for a thought or a mental sign. This logical interpretant will itself have a logical interpretant in a continuing series of signs and effects. This series of signify effects mediates between the outer world, with its objects, signs, and events, and the inner world in which the subject "makes" meaning. Although Peirce claims that the chain of effects occur in a particular order; it will be seen, as I put the model to work, that the sequence is far less predictable in action than it appears in theory. Furthermore, the "somebody" of signification, with his or her personal signifying history, is a variable in the signifying equation of effects.

Before using Peirce's model to analyze the production of meaning effects in a textual passage, however, I would like to look at his assertion that meaning and "practical consequences" are intimately connected:

In order to ascertain the meaning of an intellectual conception one should consider what practical consequences might conceivably result by necessity from the truth of that conception; and the sum of these consequences will constitute the entire meaning of the conception. (5.9)

Peirce claims, here and throughout his work, that the meaning of a conception is to be found in its practical consequences, "consequences either in the shape of conduct to be
recommended, or in that of experiences to be expected, if the conception be true" (5.2). This linking of an intellectual concept with effects, consequences, and expectations has profound implications for an understanding of meaning as something that has purpose, that has aims which go beyond a mere recognition of the sense of the sign (5.175). Purpose, a characteristic of signs, is defined by Peirce as "an operative desire," and, as such, it presupposes a system of norms and values (1.205).

If, as Peirce maintains, the idea of meaning implies purpose, the complete meaning of "sex," for example, resides in a set of recommended conducts or expected experiences, norms and values: the practical consequences of the concept "sex." So, extrapolating from Peirce's association of meaning and purpose, the sum total of the practical consequences of the concept of "sex"—a concept which represents all the scientific "facts," assertions, definitions, and representations that circulate surrounding sex in a given culture—may be said to represent the cultural purpose of "sex." This purpose, although distinct from, is allied with the purpose of a regime of power to reproduce itself. Aligning my terms with Peirce's, "cultural scripts" may be seen as sets of signs, circulating in a culture with the purpose of reproducing social meanings in a subject, as a "habit" or a "psychic script." The chief difference between Peirce's language of "signs" and "habits" and mine of "scripts," cultural and psychic, is ideology. Meaning is not produced, as, at times, it seems to be in Peirce, as a pure meeting between an unencumbered sign and an unencumbered subject. Rather, according to a politicized view, which Peirce's model does not include, but which it can accommodate, the signs we receive come already tagged with attitudes, biases, power relations, political interests. The term "cultural script," includes this political baggage; "scripts" store, not just bits of data, but data coded by ideology. In terms of this project, therefore, "sex" is produced as an ideologized conception in a given culture as a
cultural sexual script and reproduced as a series of significate effects in a subject, effects which lead to, as a final effect, a psychic script or habit.

A habit, of meaning and action, is the inevitable result of a chain of signs and effects, Peirce argues. As anyone who has tried to make or break one knows, habits are produced by repetition. The repetition of thoughts, an iteration of a particular chain of signifying effects, constructs what I term meaning-habits, and, consequently, new chains of signifying events should produce habit changes (5.400, 475). Commenting on the tenacity with which we cling to habit, however, "a second nature," Samuel Beckett says: "The creature of habit turns aside from the object that cannot be made to correspond with one or other of his intellectual prejudices..." (Proust 23). In other words, once established, habit organizes new perceptions and cognitions, vetoes ideas and beliefs that cannot be assimilated into habitual schema. Habits, I am arguing, are the subjective residue laid down by cultural scripts and, as the effects of multiple repetitions, are hard to break. The mechanism of their formation is the three-stage production of meaning which moves from "original" sign to emotional, energetic, and logical interpretant.

One sign (operating within a system of meaning, of course) produces meaning; the repetition of signs has the effect of producing an intellectual and behavioral habit, a meaning-habit. Peirce's model has great explanatory value for how cultural sexual scripts become internalized as psychic scripts which control meanings, habits, and actions. Although similar to Butler's metaphor for the accumulated effect of gender norms on the individual, the "sedimentation of gender norms," Peirce's theory of the production of meaning-habits looks at the mechanism of the transmission of norms in greater analytical detail. His analysis of the effects of signs provides a working ground for my analysis of how the heterosexual script conscripts female subjects, and, more specifically, how fictional texts both participate in and contest received sexual scripts.
Through the mediation of Acker's fictional texts, I propose to show how sexual meaning is produced at the border of the self's inner and outer worlds. A single sexual experience, which I will analyze as a signifying act, occurs, I argue, in the context of organizing psychic scripts which are the result of previous interactions between the inner world and the cultural scripts of the outer world. The self and the world negotiate meaning at this border through a series of significative effects. Acker's text may be read as illustrative of this negotiation between inner and outer worlds, and between cultural and prior psychic scripts which have been "written" in previous encounters, and which will be re-written in this encounter.

From "Significant Effect" to Psychic Script

Now let us look again at the dream scene in which Laure, the narrator of *My Mother: Demonology*, dreams that she is raped anally by her boyfriend:

"He fucked me for a long time in that hole. While he slammed into me I hated him; several minutes passed still fucking me no break; I suddenly notice that I'm feeling pleasure and then I want him to fuck me even more; I started to shake all over the place come come. As soon as I had felt pleasure, I had begun to feel different emotions about him: I simultaneously like being fucked this way and hated being raped.

"I came for a long time." (169)

The script running across the grain of this passage is that of heterosexual male pornography, and, in many ways, Laure's dream depends on a recognition of the elements of that pornographic script. The signs in Acker's text have meaning only because they are recognizable, are part of a chain of signification that includes their use in pornography. The pornographic cliché that, although a woman may resist rape, she really wants it and will enjoy it once it is underway is replicated here as Laure's hatred.

---

20 The narrator of the dream is actually "B," but at this point in the text B is an alter-ego for Laure; so for purposes of continuity, I will refer to the narrator of this passage as Laure.
gives way to increasing pleasure. The lines "I want him to fuck me even more; I started
to shake all over the place come come come" could be lifted directly from a story in a porn
magazine. The twice-repeated expressions of hatred, "I hated him" and "hated being
raped." however, could be from a feminist report for a rape crisis center. Acker
complicates both scripts, however, the feminist and the pornographic, refusing either
one the authority of its original version. The pornographic script is undermined by the
hatred, and the feminist script is weakened by the pleasure, thus, threatening to "break"
any simple sexual script which Laure may be performing. The disjunction of opposing
scripts suggests that the actual signifying experience is considerably more complex and
less predictable than Peirce's model: the signs, effects, habits, and scripts working to
produce meaning are multiple and are in conflict. The conflicting experiences of the
dreamer/narrator in this scene defy easy classification and are enough to make an
ideologue of any persuasion uneasy in attempting an interpretation.

A close analysis of the movement of response in the dream narrative, using
Peirce's "significative effects" to trace the process of meaning-making within the scene,
permits a glimpse of the signifying mechanism by which cultural scripts are internalized
and reformulated as psychic scripts. Although only a crude representation of what
semiotics, psychoanalysis, and neuro-biology all acknowledge is an almost infinitely
complex process, Peirce's model provides a kind of outline of the chain of signifying
experiences in which Laure participates. As Acker accords the same status to dreams as
to waking reality, and, as the dream is coded in language, I follow her and consider the
signifying process of the dream as though it were a "real" event. The experience,
viewed from within the story (and within the dream) as a sexual experience, of
necessity, assumes some kind of meaning and value for the narrator herself. This
meaning—which structures even the physical responses of pain and pleasure—is
constructed from and against the entire set of sexual scripts, cultural and psychic,
which are available to Laure. There are, in fact, two parallel processes of "reading" at work here, involving different sets of scripts. In addition to the sexual experience within the text to which Laure must assign some kind of meaning, there is also the extra-diegetic reading experience in which the reader makes sense out of an account of Laure's sexual experience. The reader, like Laure, brings to this experience a set of prior scripts, cultural and psychic, in the context of or against which meaning is produced. What is missing, of course, for the reader is the sexual experience itself.\textsuperscript{21}

For purposes of convenience, I conflate these two analogous experiences—Laure's sexual and the reader's textual. The direct analysis is of Laure's own meaning-making, and, by analogy, of the reader's meaning-making experience. Let's attempt, then, an analysis using Peirce's three significate effects: emotional, energetic, and logical. If we can trace the actual work of signification in its chain of effects, we will have traveled a long way on the road to theorizing how the heterosexual script is internalized by the individual subject.

First, of course, we must establish the nature of the sign which is at work in this chain of signification. Although the passage is a narrative of a physical act, forcible anal penetration of a woman by a man, even within the diegesis, the stakes of this act are, among other things, a matter of signification. Even the simple question "what is happening?" sets in motion all kinds of questions of meaning. The act itself then, understood as a problem of meaning, becomes a sign. This particular sign is a concrete example of Peirce's contention that the outer world is full of "irresistible

\textsuperscript{21} Larry McCaffery notes that, although Acker's work deals with sex a lot, it doesn't seem erotic to him. When he asked her if she is interested in turning her readers on, Acker responded: "You never know what might turn some people on, but mostly I can't see how people would get aroused by the sex I'm describing in my books. Certainly titillation isn't what I've been after . . . ." What she is after, she says, what amounts to almost an "obsession" is the link between sexuality and identity and sexuality and power (94-95).
compulsions" for us and a dramatic instance of the penetration of the inner world by the outer world. Radically neglected in Peirce, however, is the strenuous activity of Laure's inner world in making meaning and evaluating this penetration. According to Peirce's theory this sign is present to "somebody," Laure, and creates in her mind an equivalent, "or perhaps a more developed" sign or an interpretant. The effects of this "original" interpretant or sign is to initiate a series of "significate effects." The movement of signification, in Peirce's model, is in one direction only, from outer world to inner meaning effects. In Acker's text, the chain of effects is clearly visible, but they make sense only as interactions between the current sign-become-interpretant and prior scripts based on prior signifying experiences. The signifying process, as exemplified by this scene, is a two-way movement in which an active outer world and an active inner world negotiate meaning. The shift from a one-way model to a two-way opens a space for agency in the construction of meaning.

The first sentence in the selected passage is a statement of the act in words already emotionally charged and specific to a particular register of language with its own associative palette: "He fucked me for a long time in that hole." In this sentence the two worlds, outer and inner, meet in a moment in which the external act/sign becomes a more developed interpretant, one which now inheres in Laure. The act-in-itself, an external sign, has become, in this first sentence, a sign-for-Laure. In other words, Laure's thinking of a part of her body as "that hole" suggests that particular sexual scripts are immediately set in motion by the working of the external sign on the individual subject. (And, of course, the sign-for-the-reader is initiating a parallel set of scripts.) The physical sensations of fucking become more complicated for Laure in the second sentence. In what amounts to a textual re-construction of the temporality of the act and the act-as-sign, this second sentence contains four independent clauses, not
linked by conjunctions, but rather separated by semicolons, distinctly marking the
stages in both the dream-sex act and the production of meaning.\textsuperscript{22}

While he slammed into me I hated him; several minutes passed still fucking me
no break; I suddenly notice that I'm feeling pleasure and then I want him to fuck
me even more; I started to shake all over the place come come.

In this series of clauses, with its precisely registered series of responses, we may
divine Peirce's progression of interpretants.

In the first clause the significate effect is hatred, an emotional interpretant which
is a response to the original act-as-sign. At this point Laure's sensory experience is that
"he slammed into me," and is mediated by the feeling that "I hated him." The fact that
the experience, physical and signifying, takes place across time is emphasized in the
second clause, with its specific "several minutes still fucking me" and its "no break"
which follows without a syntactic break. Abruptly, however, there is a syntactic break,
a semicolon, and, in the third clause, "I suddenly notice . . .," the narrator shifts from
the present participle which expresses the "fucking" itself to the present tense for an
evaluation of her feelings. The use of the present tense lends an immediacy and
urgency to a second emotional interpretant, quite different from the hatred (expressed
in past tense) of the first clause. The "pleasure" of this clause is not merely emotional,
of course, but is also an energetic effect, muscular and mental. Sexual pleasure may, in

\textsuperscript{22} Conventional language about language continually creeps into and threatens any
test to contest a theory of language as expressive of some prior, unmediated
experience. Here, in my effort to explore the space where outer and inner experiences
come together, and where physical sensation and emotional-intellectual meaning
intersect in an act of mediation, my words betray my understanding of language as
constructive of meaning, of "reality" even, and I speak of re-constructing an event.
Although I would argue that an event really only fully exists in its naming, in its
production in language, there remains the "irresistible compulsion" of that outer world,
and it is that which Acker re-constructs in her text. The close analysis of this particular
passage from My Mother: Demonology, as well as this entire dissertation, is an attempt
to theorize how events of the outer world, in most cases already coded as social signs,
become internalized as pieces of complex codings which I have termed scripts.
fact, be one of the clearest examples of Peirce's energetic effect, an experience which includes both the muscular and the mental interpretants, as well as the residue of the earlier emotional interpretant. In this third of the four clauses Laure begins to transform her immediate significate effects, her emotional and energetic responses into a desire of her own, still in an urgent present tense: "and then I want him to fuck me even more." No longer merely the passive receiver of pleasure, Laure becomes an active participant who wants "him" to continue fucking her. In the fourth and last clause of this sentence, the energetic interpretant reaches its climax in orgasm: "I started to shake all over the place come come." Here the paratactic breathlessness and the lack of punctuation registers the onrush of orgasm as the energetic interpretant peaks. Each of the effects or interpretants, according to Peirce's theory, may produce a further effect in a series of successive effects of the original sign, especially when, as I argue, the interpretants from the external sign are interacting with the interpretants of the inner signs from the psychic script. Following from the emotional and energetic interpretants is the third stage in Peirce's signifying chain, the logical interpretant, a mental sign or a thought.

The sentence which follows the long series of clauses represents the moment in which the logical interpretant takes over from the energetic interpretant; the orgasm fades and gives way to a sign which is an interpretation of the previous signs or interpretants:

As soon as I had felt pleasure, I had begun to feel different emotions about him: I simultaneously like being fucked this way and hated being raped.

Here the logical interpretant, which can itself give way to a continuing chain of signs and effects, can be seen as far more complex than the already complicated emotional and energetic interpretants. In a matter of a few words, Laure's "pleasure," which represents emotional, muscular, and mental effects, yields to "different emotions," a
phrase which contains not only feelings, but cognitive apprehensions, interpretations, and judgments—all formulated, not entirely as a private experience, however, but within a context of ideology and cultural intelligibility. To be more exact, I am arguing that Laure's prior beliefs and expectations, her private sexual script which structures her current experience, has been formulated in response to the signs of a social heterosexual script. These beliefs and expectations provide a matrix of intelligibility, an organizing schema, in terms of which Laure makes meaning of this new experience, which, in turn, becomes part, for her, of a slightly altered heterosexual script. 

Processing her sexual experience, Laure comes to the conflicted conclusion that she liked the experience of anal intercourse, but hated the fact that she was taken by force. More complex than this brief outline of the signifying process suggests, there are, in fact, multiple signifying chains occurring here simultaneously and multiple levels of effects which intertwine without regard to proper sequence: the physical immediacy of "slammed into me," "fucking me no break," and "come come" contrast sharply with the interspersed cooler, evaluative register of "I . . . notice" and "I had begun to feel different emotions." In the conclusory summation of the experience, the last sentence, the word "rape" appears for the first time. In what is unquestionably a rape scene, the naming of it awaits the logical interpretant; it is only after the first stages of signification, the emotional and energetic, have been accomplished, that the intellectual synthetic process of interpreting, judging, and naming can occur. And this final stage, I argue, can be accomplished only in the context of prior scripts, in this case, all those sub-scripts which together make up the heterosexual script. The ambivalence of Laure's experience is coded as what Peirce might term an "intellectual conception" about her pleasure and displeasure, in which may be read the lines of multiple sexual sub-scripts.
Because Acker's resistance to dominant scripts is effected through the response of the reader, it is important to note that the process of meaning-making in Laure's dream is paralleled by the act of reading. The signifying event in the text, which begins in a physical act-become-sign and comes to rest (for the moment at least) in an intellectual conception, is analogous to the signifying process which occurs in the reader: an intellectual act-become-sign which also concludes (for the moment) in an intellectual conception. In both cases, no matter what the nature of the input from the outer world, the Peirce model of significate effects provides a tool for an analysis of the process of making private meaning from larger social acts and meanings. The logical interpretant, which is represented within the diegesis as Laure's ambivalent evaluation of her experience, is only a moment of stasis which gives way to one more effect. After her conflicted judgment of the experience, there is yet another emotional-energetic effect: "I came for a long time," a coming that seems to summon its intensity precisely from the contradictions and extreme effects catalogued in the first three sentences. This last emotional-energetic effect in the chain of effects leads, as noted earlier, to another logical interpretant, bridging dream world and real world in which the dreamer offers judgments and interpretations: the narrator tells her mother the dream. The dream/act and all of its effects, then, become part of a new version of the heterosexual script for Laure. By extension, my analysis here, this text, is the reader's final logical interpretant, which follows on my own experience of emotional, energetic, and logical effects initiated by the reading experience. The act of reading Acker becomes, for me, at this point, a fragment of a new heterosexual script.

This close reading of four sentences from My Mother: Demonology, using Peirce's theory of signification as a tool of analysis, has been an attempt to understand the movement of meaning from social sign (whether physical experience plus cultural codes or fictional text) to private emotional, intellectual, and behavioral effects, i.e.,
from cultural script to psychic script. As this reading of Acker through Peirce's theory of the production of meaning demonstrates, Peirce's most lasting contribution is his view that the subject is the effect of signs, rather than the originary producer of them. However, reading Peirce through Acker's fiction provides for Peirce's theory itself a crucial, complicating element: an understanding of the embeddedness of signification in ideology and in gendered and sexed systems of power. Politicizing Peirce, we may conclude, then, that the subject is the effect of signs which are coded by ideology to reflect and reproduce the dominant power regime.

The sum of all the emotional, energetic, and intellectual effects which result from all of Laure's sexual experiences, from familial interactions to movies and books to fucking, constitutes, for her, the meaning of "sex," and, even more important, constitutes Laure herself as a sexual subject. This summary meaning and this constructed sexual subject, arrived at through the repetition of signs, effects, further signs, and further effects has consequences for expectations and conduct, Peirce maintains (5.2) Meaning then, according to this model, inheres not merely in signs, but in individual subjects who accumulate a "sediment" of meanings, a psychic script, which has consequences for expectations and behavior. Put another way, cultural scripts, operating through signs and significate effects which deposit a sediment of meaning, produce subjects as gendered and sexed beings through the mechanism of habit. In other words, when called on for a mental, emotional, or even physical response, a subject, acting in accord with his or her habit, cites the authority of prior intellectual conceptions which were arrived at through the screen of still prior scripts.23

23 As noted in the discussion of script theory in chapter two, even sexual arousal depends on a perception of the event as sexual, on the ability to place the sexual stimulus in a sexual script; e.g., the same action performed by a doctor or by a sexual partner provokes different responses, because the script which encodes the action sets in motion different emotional, energetic, and logical interpretants, effects which produce behavior.
Following this reasoning, the repetition of signifying acts occurs within the context of the heterosexual script and leads to an intellectual and behavioral habit which regulates sexual attitudes and practices. Individual sexual habits are, thus, brought within the domain of cultural sanctions and taboos.

Peirce offers his theory in the interest of consensus. The goal he sees for signifying systems is conservative, a perfect communication of truth between utterer and addressee. Peirce's "truth," however, has been put under suspicion by feminist and postmodern theories; it has come to be understood as always partial and situated, and, as argued in the introduction, as always interested. Signifying systems, then, may be used not only to shore up conventional truth claims, but to contest those very claims, and individual meaning-events may be appropriated as sites of resistance to conventional meaning. Peirce's model may be used to analyze such acts of resistance, however, as well as acts of acquiescence to dominant scripts. For example, in Laure's rape dream, the conflicting claims (signs) of pornographic and feminist discourses, and of Laure's own experience of pleasure and of pain, plus other signs and effects too subtle to notice, set up a quite complex, multi-layered signifying event. It is possible, using Peirce's model, to analyze the event and obtain a rough picture of its component parts. But an understanding of the work of ideology and of the multiplicity and conflictedness of signs and habits complicates and enriches Peirce's theory. Resistance to and compliance with dominant meanings are mixed in the rape scene—but they always occur within an ideology which attempts to "manage" the signifying experience. The modified theory of signification that I propose, which accounts for the work of ideology and which posits the competition of signs and the interaction between cultural and psychic scripts, offers a wedge to open the signifying process to agency.
Acker's strategy is to interrupt the smooth workings of habit which serve the interests of the dominant power regime, to intervene in the chain of signification. In *The Black Tarantula*, for example, the narrator cites her aversion to habits instilled by family and institutions as the reason why she experiments with other identities: "I'm simply exploring other ways of dealing with events than ways my lousy habits—mainly installed by parents and institutions—have forced me to act" (86). Beginning with her earliest works, such as *The Black Tarantula*, Acker is attempting to wrench attitudes and beliefs out of the rut of habit; one of her acts of terrorism against conventional signifying effects and scripted habits is her use of shock. She says:

> Shock is definitely there in my books in the sense of trying to break through the reader's habits and perceptual blinders. But you can do that better by the breaking of taboos, or through transgressions—which both in form and in content run through my work endlessly. (McCaffery Interview 92)

Acker frequently shocks her reader with graphically depicted sex scenes, but the shock which the reader feels in reading Laure's dream scene is that the narrator's experience of pleasure occurs in the context of a rape. Enjoying a rape, although perhaps the stuff of pornographic fantasy, is unacceptable within the scripts which have produced the intellectual and emotional habits of most of Acker's readers. In a move far more interesting than her use of the obscene or the improper, Acker repeatedly shocks the moral sensibilities of her "enlightened" readers. According to "enlightened" contemporary scripts, as opposed to oppressive patriarchal scripts, women should not—and do not—enjoy forced sex; yet over and over again, Acker's narrators do just this. Acker's use of the transgressive, we must therefore conclude, is intended to interrupt not only the old habits of oppression, old scripts which her progressive reader might wish to undo, but to interrupt also new habits, new scripts which, Acker implies, carry their own weight of oppression. What separates Acker, however, from
misogynist pornographers is that she challenges the entire patriarchal system which maintains women in such conflicted and abject positions.

Acker's strategic interruption of the semiotic mediations that link scripts and subjects includes another technique of interference, which is shocking because it is a transgression of textual authority: authorial intrusion. In *Great Expectations*, for example, the authorial voice interrupts the narrative with her own panic and despair:

I'm going to tell you something. The author of the work you are now reading is a scared little shit. She's frightened, forget what her life's like, scared out of her wits, she doesn't believe what she believes so she follows anyone. A dog. She doesn't know a goddamn thing she's too scared to know what love is she has no idea what money is she runs away from anyone so anything she's writing is just un-knowledge. Plus she doesn't have the guts to entertain an audience .... What'm I going to do? Teach? (211)

In this passage Acker not only interrupts the diegesis (such as it is, with its mix of narrative and essay-like reflection), even more radically, she shatters the fiction of authorial authority. The author's persona, like the author's female protagonists, is depicted as abysmally abject. *This* author doesn't even pretend to knowledge and control. Not only does the author give up the indifferent pose, the finger-nail-paring presence of a Joycean narrator behind a fully self-sufficient, organic text, but she intrudes her personal problems—love? money?—into the "work of art." Not, of course, about Acker losing control, this passage is a quite deliberate strategy intended to debunk the "Great Man" theory of literature. Here even the author function is rendered dysfunctional. The conception of the artist as God, today merely a nostalgically remembered notion, receives its most devastating disclaimer in this portrait of the artist as sniveling, ignorant coward. Even this portrait, however, which begins to win its own focus, to achieve a kind of coherence by the end of the passage, is interrupted by the final question, clearly addressed to her academic audience: "What'm I going to do? Teach?" Leave 'em laughing, the disreputable "author" seems to believe. The cumulative effect of this passage is to thoroughly disable the already
disabling sexual script which the text has previously constructed. That is, the
remainder of the novella *Great Expectations*, prior and subsequent to this passage,
destabilizes received sexual scripts, replacing them with Acker's own unsettling sexual
script, which is itself then destabilized in this authorial intrusion. This chain of
destabilizing citations refuses the reader any resting place, interrupting the habitual
scripts from within which reader-subjects think, feel, and act.

As we have seen, Acker's texts set in motion ideas and feelings that are not
easily subsumed into conventional, or even unconventional, scripts. The particular
intersection of pain and pleasure, of desire and anger, of fear and defiance, in Acker,
refuses to be contained in received cultural codes. Conventional scripts appear, but
they are warped in such a way as to leave the reader breathless with recognition, yet at a
loss for words. Acker complicates the cultural and psychic field of sexuality to the
point where it is saturated with meanings, a saturation point that yields richly, if
uneasily. One of the sources of this rich yield is Acker's plagiarism, more mimetic
than mimesis, a technique in which she layers texts in such a way as to both cite the
authority of a revered canonical work and, at the same time, contest just such authority.

**Plagiarism: Citing and Contesting Authority**

Acker's plagiarism is perhaps the single thing for which she is best known.
Reading Acker's difficult fictions, most critics, it seems, are happy to find an entry into
the text, a handle on which to hang their review or their essay: as Rod Phillips notes,
we *know* Dickens or Genet or Faulkner when we see them, and "influences" are
something we are trained to talk about (173-74). Acker's plagiarism, however, is not
so much a question of claiming influences as of cannibalizing the literary tradition. The
author of books titled *Don Quixote* and *Great Expectations* is unlikely to be shy about
her overt use of plagiarism, and Acker isn't. "What I'm doing," she says, "is simply
taking text to be the same as the world, to be equal to non-text, and start representing text." When her interviewer, Lotringer adds, "You used it as 'material' . . . " Acker responds, "Right . . . " (13). For Acker, whose "pure plagiarism" stems from a fascination with "the simple fact of copying." (Friedman Interview 12), copying another person's work is a recognition that power is in the hands of those who control representation. Her act of stealing representations, thus, becomes a theft of power, or, at least a refusal to acknowledge power's authority over her. Martina Sciolino, in a wonderful metaphor, labels Acker a "kleptoparasite," a spider that "appropriates another's web and eats the prey entraped there"—prey which often, I would add, the original writer and reader had no idea were trapped in the narrative web (63). This is the merit of Acker's multi-plagiarized texts: the juxtapositioning of multiple texts (for it is seldom that she is appropriating only one) permits new meanings to emerge, with new significate effects—emotional, energetic, and intellectual. Refusing monovocality, Acker's experiments in intercutting texts, a tactic which interferes in the conventional production of meaning, resemble fictional performances of semiotic experiments. Enmeshed in the multi-dimensional webs which Acker, as kleptoparasite, weaves out of bits and pieces of other texts and further confounding questions of meaning are passages of untranslated Arabic and Farsi, graphically beautiful passages which are, of course, completely unintelligible to anyone not familiar with the languages (most of Acker's readers). These decorative, unintelligible lines further Acker's project of complicating and, at times, deliberately obfuscating meaning.

It is a critical commonplace that plagiarism, what Boyd Tonkin refers to as Acker's "print version of scratch video," or what I might call "sampling," is an important Acker technique (30).24 I wish to ask, however, how plagiarism functions

---

24 Virtually every critic discusses the plagiarism, many with interesting insights; nevertheless, none provides an analysis of how Acker's method both celebrates and
in the text and how it effects a subversion of the heterosexual script. Acker's plagiarism is deeply political, like that of photographer Sherrie Levine's reiteration of classical photographs (work which Acker admires). Both women's plagiarism, which is often a faithful replication of the "original" text without citation, contests the very foundations governing representation in the west: originality, the artistic genius, and male artistic supremacy. Ellen Friedman astutely notes that by situating their quest for ways to represent women's desire within male texts, both Acker and Levine clearly acknowledge the constraints under which a female artist proceeds (43-44). The female artist must operate within a tradition which reveres originality as its most sacrosanct myth, and yet which has steadfastly refused women a place in that tradition. Acker contrasts the elevation of originality in Western art with the practices of another culture, as she sees them:

Unlikely American and Western culture (generally), the Arabs (in their culture) have no (concept of) originality. That is, culture. They write new stories paint new pictures et cetera only by embellishing old stories pictures... They write by cutting chunks out of all-ready written texts and in other ways defacing traditions: changing important names into silly ones, making dirty jokes out of

explodes the text which she is replicating. Carol Siegal describes Acker's aggressive plagiarism as "pastiche" (9); although I concur with the postmodern positioning which this term suggests, I would disagree with its application here, citing the complete appropriation of and undermining of the prior texts as infinitely more complex than mere pastiche. I have more serious disagreements with Richard Walsh's claims about Acker's use of plagiarism, although, overall, his analysis of Acker's work is quite satisfying. Walsh argues that Acker has emptied the concept of plagiarism of "its pejorative connotations by the blatancy of its operation" (149). I would argue, rather, that Acker depends on and exploits the "pejorative connotations" of plagiarism to accomplish the task which she sets for her method: shock, affront, and a subsequent destabilizing of the heterosexual script which informs the text which she is cannibalizing. Walsh's second claim about the plagiarism is that it is "not polemical but expressive" (163). Here too I would strenuously disagree, arguing that Acker's subversive plagiarism eschews expressiveness in favor of strategic and polemical deployment of texts.

25 See the interview with Ellen Friedman for Acker's comments on Sherrie Levine's work.
matters that should be of the utmost importance to us such as nuclear warfare. 
(Don Quixote 25)

Whether or not this representation of Arab culture is accurate, particularly when one considers postcolonial writers, who are writing out of a fragmented "tradition," Acker sets up this opposition for her particular purpose of debunking "originality." Having established an affinity with Arabs elsewhere, Acker is clearly describing her own aesthetic here, as well as that of the Arabs, her own opposition to originality, "that is, culture." In Western culture, in which Arabs and women have both traditionally occupied a position of "other," the notion of originality is closely identified with patriarchal authority and male desire; nevertheless, Acker recognizes that it is only within the tradition of male literature that a woman can subvert it. Acknowledging this dependency, part two of Don Quixote begins with the words:

BEING DEAD, DON QUIXOTE COULD NO LONGER SPEAK. BEING BORN INTO AND PART OF A MALE WORLD, SHE HAD NO SPEECH OF HER OWN. ALL SHE COULD DO WAS READ MALE TEXTS WHICH WERENT HERS. (39)

Acker's parasitic readings of male texts, however, are powerful writerly experiences, and the host text itself (the prior text) will never be the same. For parody works in two directions: not only does the host text influence Acker's work, but Acker's parasitic text changes the host text, undermining male literary authority. Subsequent readings of the "original" text will find it startlingly changed.

Acker's plagiarizing fictions operate as literary criticism which subverts the heterosexual script as it has been encoded in the particular male text under scrutiny. Acker's citations of Cervantes, as noted in the Introduction, recall Irigaray's subversive reiterations of the texts of the fathers in Speculum of the Other Woman. Like Irigaray's ambiguous relations with Plato and Freud, which Jane Gallop characterizes as the seduction of the daughter by the father, Acker's relationship with the fathers is both
affectionate and rebellious. She pays tribute to the father and kills him at the same time: "In order to find out his identity and to be real, (for knowledge is the same as power), the child must murder his real father" (*Don Quixote* 147). In her plagiarized texts, such as *Don Quixote* for example, Acker lays claim to the father's knowledge which she hollows out, revealing structures of power which have been carefully covered over by cultural myths which define and position women, such as courtly love, romantic love, and nymphomania. In the quest for her own identity, however provisional and fragmented it may be, each Acker narrator must confront and appropriate her father's identity. The daughter not only usurps the father's identity when she murders him (or his text), however, but also usurps the son's identity and his "rightful" place as murderer of and heir to his father. For her father's and brother's inheritance is knowledge, and, as Acker narrators (who have read their Foucault) know, knowledge is power. Taking control of the scripts which constitute our knowledge, therefore, is a seizure of power.

In every plagiaristic text, of course, Acker taps into a signifying chain which evokes not only her many intentional literary and cultural allusions, but an entire literary and cultural history which is as varied as her readers. In *Don Quixote* alone a partial list of her explicit plagiarisms and allusions, some of which will be elaborated below, include Cervantes, Machiavelli, Christ, Bely, Lampedusa, Wedekind, Shaw, Deleuze and Guattari, Lacan, Althusser, Derrida, and Foucault. Also lurking in the text and available to the canny reader, are reverberations of other retellings of the Don Quixote story, from seventeenth-century English plays to the musical *The Man of La Mancha* to the brilliant Borges' short story, "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote," which plays

---

26 See *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, particularly chapters 3 and 5.
with some of the same questions of originality and citation, script and performance, that Acker is concerned with. Acknowledging that we always plagiarize other people's work, every time we speak, she muses:

"I now wonder where the idea or the ideology of creativity started. Shakespeare and company certainly stole from, copied each other's writings. Before them, the Greeks didn't bother making up any new stories. I suspect that the ideology of creativity started when the bourgeoisie ... made a capitalistic marketplace for books. Today a writer earns money or a living by selling copyright, ownership to words. We all do it, we writers, this scam, because we need to earn money, only most don't admit it's a scam. Nobody really owns nothing. Dead men don't fuck. ("A Few Notes" 33)

If no one creates anything, and it is only male egotism and a desire for profit that has installed the notion of literature as property, then texts are no more privileged than the world as sources, as "material." Acker repeatedly insists on her own lack of creativity, arguing that if her fictions are violent to women "and worse," she is the mere copyist of scripts which are already in circulation: "I make up nothing: I am a reader and I take notes on what I read" ("A Few Notes" 36). Acker's obvious erudition co-exists in an interesting liaison with her punk distrust of culture, her anarchist instinct to "rip off" the establishment. Her contempt for the uses of literature in twentieth-century culture is evident in Blood and Guts in High School, a text in which she "rips off" Genet, Erica Jong, and Hawthorne, among others. Comparing the seriousness with which ideas and writing were taken in Hawthorne's New England to present-day disinterest, she writes, "Right now I can speak as directly as I want 'cause no one gives a shit about writing and ideas, all anyone cares about is money" (66). Rod Phillips, in his analysis of Acker's "borrowings" from Hawthorne in Blood and Guts in High School correctly assesses her plagiarism as a "radical denial of literature as property" (176).

On at least one occasion, however, Acker's scorn for literature as personal property brought her into legal conflict with a contemporary writer who emphatically disagreed. Although she is savvy about the connections between capitalism and lofty
ideas like creativity and artistic genius and sexual politics, Acker, nevertheless, in real
life, managed to get caught in the trap of copyright law. She tells the story twice of her
brush with copyright law, coding it in an interview as a struggle between an upstart
young female writer (herself) and a smug, best-selling male writer, and dramatizing it
in fiction as a battle between a young sculptor and "another artist, a big fat pig . . . who
is old and rich and doesn't even make his own work because he's so old" (Lottinger
interview 12-13, *In Memoriam to Identity* 261). Because she is a "troublemaker," the
young artist, rather than merely being asked for the usual hundred dollars for breach of
copyright, is sued by "the fat pig's lawyers and dealers, who surrounded him to such
an extent that the fat man like a Hollywood movie star didn't exist" (*In Memoriam to
Identity* 261). This incident, in which Acker appropriates and subverts a best-seller
which she describes as "a sort of soft-core pornography," is given autobiographical
details in the interview with Lottinger: lifting four pages of Harold Robbins' best-seller
*The Pirate* and inserting it into the text of *Toulouse Lautrec*, Acker changed the
heroine's name to Jacqueline Onassis and titled the piece, "I want to Be Raped every
Night. Story of a Rich Woman." Arguing in the interview that the "joke" is quite
obvious and that she never represented the material as her own (the legal definition of
plagiarism), but told her publishers and interviewers about her source, Acker denies
being guilty of even the legal plagiarism which she blithely discards. Although she
was found guilty of plagiarism, she maintains her innocence, because, for her,
plagiarism is a literary theory and a literary method (Lottinger 12-13). The incident
serves as an illustration of the way Acker (mis)uses plagiarized texts to undermine the
conventional heterosexual script. Deliberately adopting the stance of what Richard
Walsh terms "the author-as-reader" (166), of one who is implicated in language, rather
than original author of it, Acker exposes the way in which we are all scripted by the
texts into which we are born. The Robbins text, it could be argued, already belonged
to Acker, as she was interpellated into subjectivity by it and others like it. Her femininity and her sexuality have been produced by a Robbins script, and her internalization of this production marks an "ownership" of the script more profound than any copyright can secure. Her explicit re-iteration of Robbins' text/script is, then, a self-conscious statement that she owns, or perhaps, more accurately, is owned by Robbins' script—and, at the same time, it is a self-conscious repudiation of such ownership. In her politically motivated appropriation of Robbins' text she changes the terms of the soft-core pornography just slightly, replaces the language of passion with the language of rape, and ups the stakes by using a famous name; in so doing, Acker foregrounds the violence, both representational and material, that is elided in conventional best-seller representations of male-female relations.\footnote{Acker's use and abuse of "soft-core" pornography is analogous to Fay Weldon's use and abuse of the romance novel.}

The violence that subjects, and especially female subjects, are subject to in their quest for identity is the focus of *In Memoriam to Identity*, a searing, angry text, filled with raw pain, especially for readers who know from interviews that (as in the novel) Acker's mother committed suicide, her father abandoned her, and her family rejected her (autobiographical obsessions that repeat in the novels). This extremely personal narrative is divided into four sections: "Rimbaud," "Airplane," "Capitol," and "Wild Palms." The four story lines, separate, but intertwined, borrow heavily from Rimbaud's biography and letters, Acker's own work in a sex show, including the stories that the other sex-show workers told her, and Faulkner's *Wild Palms*, *Sanctuary*, and *The Sound and the Fury*. Themes and characters come together and interact; for example, in part three, "Capitol," the first part of which is a re-enactment of *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner's Jason becomes Acker's Rimbaud, the protagonist
of part one, and Caddy becomes Capitol. In Memoriam, like The Sound and the Fury, explores the way memory, identity, and desire are linked in a drama which is played out against morality or convention, the obstacle to identity and the enemy of desire.

We will take a close look at a particularly intense and intensely moving section, the first pages of part one of "Capitol," "Girls Who Like to Fuck" (153-65). In this scene Quentin has just come home from Harvard, disillusioned, and his sister Capitol, who is Faulkner's Caddy, is fucking "every man is sight" in a desperate attempt to learn about herself. When Quentin attempts to tell Capitol about what he has learned at university, Capitol, impatient, wants to tell her brother about history: "I fuck," she says, summing up history (155). Capitol, like Caddy, represents both Quentin's lost ideal and his illicit desire, and, thus, her promiscuous sex is driving him mad. Their parents are alternately described as "dead" and as "a drunk" (daddy) and "a crip" (mom). In either case, they are of no help to either Capitol or Quentin in their quest for their identity. Quentin, being a man, has gone off to Harvard in search of knowledge ("I was taught to know, Capitol, know because known, known as in own"), and he comes back quoting Freud about women and masochism (158). Capitol, a woman and denied access to such avenues of knowledge (power), must search elsewhere for her identity:

Who am I? That's not quite the question which I keep asking myself over and over. What's my story? That's it. Not the stories they've been handing me. My story. (154)

In Capitol's musings we have the core of the identity question. She recognizes that her "self" is produced by stories, but rejects the stories/scripts which she has been handed by moralists who wish to subject her to controlling ideologies, stories which perhaps had meaning once, but have been reduced to "our fucking family respectability" (155). In an attempt to thwart Quentin's despair, Capitol says, "We're not nothing. We're our stories" (156). She yearns for her story. When Acker's narrative is looked at in light
of her own narrative technique, however, it becomes clear that others' stories must be the filter through which Capitol can live her own story. Like some recent feminists,28 Capitol, in an attempt to be free of the male stories which regulate and contain her sexual identity, puts her reliance in the body, believing it to be outside culture:

I fuck every man in sight. Men open me up or sex with them opens me up, so I learn something about myself. My story has something to do with opened-out flesh. (154)

Although she does learn more about herself, she learns too that the body itself is scripted, that sexuality is produced in culture.

Capitol finally realizes that "sleeping with a lot of men doesn't go far enough, far enough into me" (154). Because her sexual relations with men are already coded, they see her only as an object, or as she puts it, "they don't perceive me" (154). In an interesting moment, Quentin becomes both the subject, and as Capitol's other self, the object of male contempt: ". . . the guys who sleep with me and Quentin say, 'you've got whore blood in you'" (154). The primary construction, syntactically awkward, but semantically sound, is that of Quentin as part of a compound subject in which he is joined with the men Capitol has slept with in an act of verbal sexual abuse; nevertheless, the other half of the oscillating meaning, not to be elided, is precisely what Quentin fears: that Capitol's being a slut will somehow taint him, and that the "whore blood" which runs in her veins (a legacy of their mother) also runs in his. In this construction Quentin is part of the compound object of the preposition, and together with Capitol is the object of sexual scorn from "the guys" who have slept with Capitol and with him.

28 See, for example, Cixous' "The Laugh of the Medusa" and Irigaray's "This Sex Which Is Not One."
Capitol, who loves her brother Quentin and seemingly only him, discovers that they speak different languages. Psychically entangled, they are, nonetheless, worlds apart in their relation to knowledge, sexuality, desire, and power, as a result of their different gender positions in culture. As a prelude to a scene in which they finally do have sex, Quentin asks, with pain, "Do they have some hold over you... that you spread your legs for them?" (161). And then, succumbing to the Freudian scripts of female desire as either masochism or penis envy (baby as penis substitute), he adds, "Maybe you want to be hurt by them or, maybe cause you're a woman, you want to be pregnant" (161). Capitol realizes, "he didn't understand anything about women. No man did"—including Freud, the author implies (161). Acker replaces Freud's/Quentin's point-of-view with a woman's; caught between hatred and desire, and speaking from within the scripts which have produced her, confused by their demands, but refusing full compliance, Capitol says:

I had learned to pay no attention to what all men thought, but just to take what I wanted from them.
That wasn't exactly it. Something to do with hatred. That this was my brother confused me. (161)

Caddy, in Faulkner's text, of course, does not have the luxury of paying no attention to what men think, as the author of her existence is a man.

In some way, of course, men have spoken Acker's Capitol, too, into existence (both within and without the text), but, fortunately for her, her female author allows her her confusion when faced with the contradictions of masculine expectations. Capitol's confusion is represented as a groping for meaning amidst conflicting signifying effects, both emotional and intellectual. For example, in two passages quoted above, Capitol

29 Freud's theory of penis-envy states that, for women, "the wish for a penis is replaced by one for a baby." He adds, "Her happiness is great if later on this wish for a baby finds fulfilment in reality, and quite especially so if the baby is a little boy who brings the longed-for penis with him" (SE 22, 128).
asks a question or makes a statement and, then, immediately qualifies it: "That's not quite the question..."; "That wasn't exactly it" (154, 161). When Quentin repeatedly demands of her, "You hate those men (you fuck), don't you, Cap?" Capitol speaks her confusion in a Beckett-like contradiction, first conciliatory, and then groping for honesty:

Quentin, I hate them, that's why I do it with them. That's not why I do it with them. (Fuck.) I don't hate you I do it with you. (Afterwards I started to want and I'm not sure if I wanted to want.) (162-63)

At this point in the text she and Quentin do it. The non-specific pronoun, "it," assumes a pivotal importance here, representing literally, of course, sexual intercourse, but representing also, finally, that thing which Capitol has been seeking without knowing what it was she was seeking. She thought it was sex or knowledge or feeling ("sensations"), and, at last, in her encounter with Quentin, she understands, "That's what it is: not it, but wanting" (163). It's not sex, per se, that will free her, but desire. In the penultimate lines of this section, Capitol reflects, "something else had happened. Somewhere I was open" (165). The openness she has been seeking from her sexual encounters has finally blossomed in her in response to her experience of desire.

This expression of female desire as constructed within, but somehow exceeding the bounds of, masculine scripts provides a moment of optimism in what is essentially a pessimistic text. Not sure that she wants to want because she senses the risk that desire poses for a woman, the risk of being totally subsumed into a masculine-driven heterosexual script, Capitol nonetheless accepts the risk and, although there is a price, there is also a reward. The openness which she has sought from the opening lines of the section, the "opened-out flesh" that would teach her something about herself, has taught her desire—desire that Quentin and "the guys" would deny her. The success of In Memoriam to Identity, for me, is that Caddy's voice, missing in Faulkner's text where she is fabricated as the necessary female icon by/for three brothers, is heard in
Acker's text. Confused and only partially successful in her quest for an identity, Caddy/Capitol, nevertheless tells her own story of unsanctioned desire. In Capitol's story, a plagiarized citation or reiteration of Caddy's story, Acker challenges the habits of her readers, first, by doing violence to the notion of copyright. Second, Acker unsettles habitual readings of the heterosexual script by inscribing the feminine voice missing in a masculine script and by making clear the fixed positions available to women within normative sexuality (whore, masochist, or mother). And third, Acker represents the possibility of female desire.

The Oedipus: Micro- and Macro- Political Structure

If Acker's mis-readings of male texts may be construed as a deliberate usurpation of the authority of the father by the daughter, as my readings of the novels argue, then one of the fathers whose authority she most consistently challenges is Freud. In Acker's judgment, Freud fails to understand women and is, thus, throughout his work, confronted with "the riddle of . . . femininity" (SE 22, 113). Even more crucially, according to Acker, "Freud didn't understand the relations between sex and power" (In Memoriam to Identity 143). This, for Acker, whose interest in sex and power is "almost an obsession," is an unforgivable blindness (McCaffery Interview 95). As noted earlier, Deleuze and Guattari gave Acker a language in which to speak about her obsessive investigations into the link between sex and power, and their Anti-Oedipus, in particular, has given her a theory that enabled her to structure her inquiry. Her novels pursue the query that motivates Anti-Oedipus: does the Oedipus complex represent the necessary stages and outcomes that desire takes or

is it not more likely that Oedipus is a requirement or a consequence of social reproduction, insofar as this latter aims at domesticating a genealogical form and content that are in every way intractable? (Deleuze and Guattari 13)
As the reader who has read this far in this dissertation knows, my answer, which coincides with Acker's and Deleuze and Guattari's, is that the Oedipus is a historically and culturally specific script, the effect of which is to domesticate desire, which is always "intractable," for the purpose of bolstering the dominant power regime and reproducing the status quo. Acker, who clearly delineates the pathology of the Oedipus, like Carter, sees the Oedipus as an instrument for the oppression and silencing of women.

Deleuze and Guattari's broad project, in *Anti-Oedipus*, is to provide a political analysis of desire, and, at the same time, to offer a wildly unique conduct manual, what Foucault, in the Preface, calls a "book of ethics" and, after St. Francis de Sales, an *Introduction to the Non-Fascist Life* (xiii). Attempting to create a space for desire in thought and action, Deleuze and Guattari challenge every form of fascism that keeps people in thrall to power, keeps them in love with what dominates them. Acker is drawn to Deleuze and Guattari, I believe, primarily because of their analysis of this fascination with and attraction to power. Acker's own project, although it shares Deleuze and Guattari's concern with the politics of desire, has a more specific focus. For her, the issue is how women might free themselves from their conflicting—and debilitating—love of and hatred of domination. Acker's female protagonists are abused by fascist men and systems. In many cases, the women have become enslaved by the fascism which has produced them, craving, loving, hating, and rebelling against sexual domination. Acker and Deleuze and Guattari aim to overthrow the systems of fascist domination; however, Acker's particular goal, in her novels, is to show women's contemporary experience of their sexual oppression as a conflict between rage and pleasure, alienation and yearning. This unresolved conflict motivates Acker's heroines' dangerous quests for love.
For Deleuze and Guattari, in order to liberate sexuality it is necessary to liberate it from the mommy-daddy-me triangle. In *Don Quixote* and *Empire of the Senseless*, Acker both reiterates and challenges the Oedipal triangle, establishing connections between the politics of the family and the politics of capitalism. In *Empire of the Senseless* Abhor, the female narrator, says: "I crave someone loving me just as a junky craves junk" (51). All of Acker's narrators crave love, a craving which is acted out by most of them as voracious sexual activity, which has been coded by conventional moralism and by psychoanalysis as nymphomania. In the scene between Capitol and Quentin, Capitol says to him:

> The first time I was ever loved was when I was fucked. Loving has to be fucking. If it isn't, there's nothing. I fucking know it isn't. Mother and Father hate us. (*In Memoriam to Identity* 164)

Here Capitol establishes an equivalency between fucking and love, and then immediately undercuts her own equation when she adds "I fucking know it isn't." The repetition of "it isn't" and the syntactic movement of the word "fuck" in the sentence from verb (passive) to noun to profane modifier betrays her fear that fucking isn't love, and that there is, in fact, "nothing." What she is sure of is Mother and Father's hatred. Families are dysfunctional, at best, in Acker. Airplane, another narrator in *In Memoriam to Identity* realizes "the family was just a dream," and mourns, "I wanted my mommy and daddy to come and save me. But mommy was dead and daddy didn't save me, he'd never save me" (148-49). The family in Acker is marked by the missing mother (usually "suicided," in Acker's terms) and the rapist father. Harrowing as it is, however, the family survives to organize sexuality.

Seeking love and, at the same time, wishing to be free from the stifling and hierarchically organized heterosexual script, Acker's narrators find themselves in a struggle against what Deleuze and Guattari term "the Oedipal trap of repression" (339). The figurative roles that circumscribe the identities and behaviors of female subjects—
wife, slut, whore, mistress, mother, daughter—all are derived from the Oedipus triangle. "According to what rule?" Deleuze and Guattari ask. "The law of the great Phallus that no one possesses, the despot signifier prompting the most miserable struggle..." (351). The Oedipal narrative, is, of course, as noted in the last chapter, conventionally told from the male point of view. A shift in point of view to the feminine provides a radical reorientation, as men and women are situated so differently in relation to the power which structures the Oedipus, as well as to the Oedipal narrative itself. A reiteration of the Oedipus complex, performed as an act of female resistance, opens up the possibility of other organizations of sexuality; but again the question presents itself: how can Acker (or her character) re-write the Oedipus narrative when she is herself already written by it? Thoroughly conscious of this dilemma, Acker constructs female characters who have internalized the Oedipal script, who have been damaged by it, but who have some sense (derived from conflicts and contradictions within the script) that perhaps there is not "nothing" outside the script, that there is the possibility of "something," of some other organization of sexuality which would free women from their position as lack within the phallic order. This "sense" that there may be something other rests uneasily within the mommy-daddy-me triangle. Thus, the pain and the dislocation of the texts. Acker's narrators represent not so much a theoretical dissent as a fight for their lives.

Father-daughter relations, pivotal in Acker's work, go back to Freud's pre-fantasy model of the father-daughter relationship: in Acker fathers really do rape daughters. Freud's earliest theory of hysteria assumed actual incest, not a child's fantasy, as the original trauma which provoked the hysterical response. The horror of the later model which locates hysteria in the daughter's fantasy of a sexual encounter with the father is that, not only is the child raped, but the rape is followed by a show of male solidarity, in which the father and the psychoanalyst conspire to erase the actuality
of the rape and to construct the child's experience as a figment of her imagination, of her desire.30 Freud's later construction of incest as the fantasy of the daughter is an instance of that which Deleuze and Guattari contend is Freud's biggest problem: the assignment of guilt to the child for what is really a sin of the father (275). Acker's texts attempt to reverse this assignment.

In Don Quixote, a three-part quest novel, a female Don Quixote sallies forth in search of "the most insane ideal that any woman can think of. Which is to love" (9).31 Refusing to give up her quest for love, despite the overwhelming opposition of a world controlled by "two power-mongers," Machiavelli and Christ, and run by the "evil enchanters," Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger, and New York City Landlords, Don Quixote is more concerned with the problem of the unreconciliability of autonomy and love than with windmills.32 In a loosely structured procession of surreal images and hallucinations, Don Quixote illustrates the romantic madness that a quest for love in a sexist culture represents. The 66-year-old contemporary woman, who is the novel's narrator and heroine, is accompanied on her night journey into the realms of anarchy.

---

30 The evolution of Freud's thinking about the origin of hysteria may be read as an effort to exculpate men, himself included, from the guilt of child-abuse. In 1896 Freud unequivocally attributes the adult woman's hysterical symptoms to the repression of a childhood sexual trauma, the perpetrator most often being a father or a brother (SE 1, 242 and 3, 164-65). Just a year later, after reporting incestuous dreams in which he felt "overly affectionate" to his oldest daughter, Freud reverses himself, stating that seduction scenes are infantile wish fulfillments, fantasies rather than memories. He offers as one of the reasons for rejecting his incest theory his "surprise at the fact that in every case the father, not excluding my own, had to be blamed as a pervert" (SE 1, 206, 259).

31 See Douglas Shield Dix's excellent analysis of Don Quixote for a reading of the novel as a search for a "revolutionary method which does not fall into the traps of power" (a task which is doomed from the start, I would add).

32 The non-mimetic use of historical figures which Naomi Jacobs notes in Acker's work (50) is theorized as exemplary of postmodernity by Linda Hutcheon in A Poetics of Postmodernism.
despair, hope, death, and love by her Sancho Panza, a talking dog named St. Simeon. Although her search takes her through a complex world of misery and oppression, Don Quixote does acquire knowledge, and, wakes from the dream which is the text, at the end, to morning breaking.

Romantic love, the novel claims, the legacy of courtly love (memorialized and parodied in the original Don Quixote), is the mechanism by which women are conscripted today into the heterosexual script, i.e., the site where the Oedipus triangle is reproduced. One of the talking dogs whom she encounters, the Angel of Death, Thomas Hobbes, tells Don Quixote of his experience of the mommy-daddy-me triangle. Recalling his return to his family for respite from a "marketplace or world of total devaluation" where he failed to fit in, Thomas Hobbes paints a "Portrait of an American Family." Seeking solace in the refuge of his family, Hobbes says, "Daddy, I was wrong to leave here," and his mother replies, "You were perfectly right to come back here . . . The family is the only refuge any of us has. Daddy and I have been discussing this." Immediately, however, mother barks, "You've come back to prison of your own free accord," and daddy amends, "You're my property . . . From now on you will do whatever I woof you to do, and, more important, be whoever I woof you to be. This is a safe unit" (115). Don Quixote, like Hobbes, has escaped the "safety" of family and begins her quest for love with an abortion, a recurring metaphor in Acker's fiction for an escape from patriarchal oppression and for a refusal to play a role in the reproduction of the Oedipal triangle. Don Quixote stages her abortion as an opportunity to name herself (to give birth to herself rather than to a child), refusing to be named by a script in which she would henceforth be known by the name, "Mother." Because female sexuality left unscripted is far more dangerous to the dominant power regime which wishes to regulate it through reproduction, Don Quixote insists on retaining, using, and trading her sexuality. Attempting to re-write the figurative roles
for women which the Oedipus script constructs, Don Quixote can't stop loving, which
is forbidden, and, thus, she dies at the end of part one.

Part two, which, as noted above, begins "BEING DEAD, DON QUIXOTE
COULD NO LONGER SPEAK.... ALL SHE COULD DO WAS READ MALE
TEXTS WHICH WEREN'T HERS." re-reads works which, wittingly or un-, have
perpetuated the heterosexual-feminine script. In the most interesting, a revision of
Wedekind's *Earth Spirit* and *Pandora's Box* (the Lulu cycle). Acker plays with the
concepts of fatherhood (the Law of the Father and real fathers) and the construction of
woman as lack within the patriarchal law. A masterpiece of cross-quotation, the
Lulu section of Acker's *Don Quixote* is a play which is also a re-enactment of G.B.
Shaw's *Pygmalion*, Lerner and Lowe's *My Fair Lady*, and Shaw's *Don Juan in Hell*
from *Man and Superman*. In Acker's story of the dirty, uncultured flower girl, Lulu,
and the dignified professor Schön who takes her on as a project, Schön represents the
Law of the Father which constructs the female subject as lack, or the "nothing" that
supports male privilege, and which solicits her into the heterosexual script with
promises of love: "the streets will be filled with men who are shooting themselves for
you before I've done with you," Schön tells Lulu (78). The world of real fathers is
embodied in Schigold, Lulu's biological father, a poor, hapless man, vile, but, like
Lulu, oppressed. He attempts to sell Lulu to Schön, refusing to negotiate because Lulu
is his property, but Schigold is hopelessly inadequate in a struggle with the Law of the
Father. Lulu, merely by virtue of her "womanhood," already belongs to this law. In
his construction of Lulu as female subject who will take her place within masculine
culture, Schön uses two strategies: the promise of love and shame. In a passage

---

33 Lulu in Wedekind's "Lulu" cycle is destroyed in a conflict between sexuality and
bourgeois morality, a struggle which is replicated in *Don Quixote*, but with different
political and sexual overtones.
headed "The Creation." Lulu, representing herself as she has been represented by the Law of the Father, as lack, as nothing, says to Schön: "Daddy, you have given me everything. I don't have anything else but you because I don't know anything but you. If I lose you, I am not" (82). Acker represents here most starkly the Lacanian construction of woman as lack, as existing only in her relation to the masculine phallus. Still terrified of losing Schön's love without which "I am not," Lulu nevertheless summons some anger at the predicament Schön has contrived for her: ". . . if you do not love what you have made, . . . what you have made is polluted and an abortion. . . . I am polluted and an abortion" (82-83). In these lines, Lulu glimpses the awful paradox of masculine construction of woman as sex object which men then label "polluted and an abortion."

The reversal of cause and effect which this represents, the imputing to women the sin of the male creator, is elaborated in "Lulu in Hell," a scene which recalls Shaw's satirical, misogynistic treatment of male-female relations in *Don Juan in Hell.*34 "Marriage is the most licentious of human institutions," Don Juan says, a sentiment which many feminists have themselves espoused. However, what is elided in Don Juan's misogynist vilification of marriage, which he uses to shock the woman he is pursuing, is his earlier declaration that "a woman seeking a husband is the most unscrupulous of all the beasts of prey." Don Juan's model of marriage positions Woman as mere reproducer of the race. He argues that, although Woman, "whose sole function [is] her own impregnation," attempts to use Man merely for his contribution to that impregnation, he manages to escape her clutches, "too strong to be controlled by

---

34 No page numbers are included with my citations from *Don Juan in Hell,* as none are used in the edition which I am citing. I quote liberally from this literal script, because it exemplifies the metaphorical script which, I argue, conscripts women into circumscribed roles within a normalizing reproductive heterosexuality. It is within and against such a script that Acker constructs her own performances.
her bodily, and too imaginative and mentally vigorous to be content with mere self-reproduction." Man has created civilization, and is, therefore, wary of the attempts of Woman to drag him back down into the body. Dramatizing Nietzsche's theory of the Superman, Shaw argues that Woman's role is merely to give birth to the Superman. At the end of Shaw's scene in hell, Woman, in cooperation with masculine supremacy, is seen "[Crying to the universe] A father! a father for the Superman!" The father Woman is longing for at the end of Shaw's *Don Juan in Hell* becomes two fathers in Acker's "LULU In Hell": Schön and Schigold. When real father, Schigold, says to Lulu, "Hey. You're cute. I want to fuck you," father in law, Schön, says to her, "You see: you're a whore. . . . You're nothing" (88). Like Freud, Schön ascribes to the child the transgressive desires of the father and, in a complete breach of causality, he labels Lulu a "whore" because her father tells her he wants to fuck her. Repeatedly, in his attempt to break Lulu's resistance, Schön repeats that she is "nothing." Finally, after Schön shoots Schigold and threatens Lulu, she kills him and escapes to a society which is the inverse of Shaw's model of civilization, a culture where the women are artists or warriors and the men do more menial work. The Lulu section ends with the hope that she may be able to find others who share her need for both love and autonomy:

Now I must find others who are, like me, pirates journeying from place to place, who knowing only change and the true responsibilities that come from such knowing sing to and with each other.
Now I am going to travel.35 (97)

The final section of *Don Quixote* continues the journey away from incest and domination and toward self-definition and love.

The incest that constantly threatens daughters in Acker is founded, as noted in the last chapter, in the moment of its prohibition. Father, mother, brother, sister are

---

35 The pirate, free-wheeling outlaw capitalist, is a frequent metaphor in Acker for subjects who are free, a position extremely difficult for women to achieve.
roles which are constituted by the incest taboo. Incest, in other words, does not exist outside of the Oedipus, the order which simultaneously founds both its prohibition and its transgression. So what, one might ask, is the force of the prohibition? From where does it derive its power? Prohibition and taboo receive their force, as we see in Acker's texts, from the threat of ostracism, of death, and most fearfully, from the threat of the annihilation of the self—all figured as castration. Women, however, are already castrated, and thus the obsessive preoccupation with castration which motivates male subjectivity lacks effective force in women. What do women have to lose? Because sex is a position that the subject assumes under the threat of punishment, and because women are already punished (no penis and no power), the fear that motivates male compliance with the heterosexual script is reduced for women. Thus it is that the power of the norm is deployed more harshly for women and that women's compliance with the heterosexual script is demanded more imperatively through the normalizing institutions and discourses which produce and transmit the script. All of Acker's female narrators, like Don Quixote and Capitol, find themselves caught between a radical sense that they have nothing to lose and a conservative need to preserve their position within normal and normalizing culture.

The three great normalizing myths which contribute to the late twentieth-century construction of the heterosexual script are Christianity, psychoanalysis, and capitalism. Each of the writers who are the subject of this study engages with all three, but the focus of each is on one of them. Weldon's heroines face the demons of gentility and domesticity which, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have operated as a legacy of Christianity. Woman's desire threatens the warmed-over Christian values which masquerade as love and domesticity in late twentieth-century culture. The "holy-family" structure, mommy-daddy-me, which was in danger when Christianity started losing ground as a meta-narrative, gained new legitimacy as psychoanalysis' Oedipal
Psychoanalysis gathers up all the former beliefs of Christianity and re-invests them with an authority which they had lost. For Carter, the fictions of psychoanalysis are powerful narratives which must be rewritten to conceptualize female subjectivity. Because women are constructed within the Oedipal myth as lack, as projections of male desire, female desire (which implies subjectivity) poses a threat to the Law of the Father; thus, the boundary between identification and desire must be scrupulously maintained. The difficulty of installing female desire is demonstrated by Carter's texts which breach the border between identification and desire in order to articulate a female desiring subject, but which have only limited success at representing a new order of female subjectivity. Capitalism revives the holy family and the Oedipal family as the "nuclear family" which serves as a purchasing unit and which is invested with a sacred character derived from Christianity and a natural character which owes its seeming inevitability to psychoanalysis' Oedipus myth. In Acker's texts capitalism appears as the logical outcome of domesticated Christianity plus the Oedipus: the boy-child grows up to inherit the earth, to become the despotic law-giver; he kills his father and marries his compliant mother. The girl-child is bought and sold as capital. The Oedipus, in both its familial and its larger political manifestations, is the adversary which Acker confronts, ascribing women's oppression, in large part, to its institutions and structures.

Acker, like Deleuze and Guattari, sees the libidinal economy and the political economy as indistinguishable. In the Lulu section of Don Quixote, Lulu, a unit of currency being bargained for by her two fathers, provides a link between the politics of the family and the politics of a capitalistic society. As Deleuze and Guattari argue, the

---

36 The "holy family" refers, of course, in its first meaning, to Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, and provides the shifting, but common ground in my theorizing of the structure which is the basic unit of Christianity, psychoanalysis, and capitalism.
Oedipus sustains capitalism; capitalism demands the Oedipus. Acker's constant target is the Oedipus, as well as the other institutions and structures which support Western patriarchy: "The sexual is the political realm," she claims ("Realism" 41). Because this infrastructure—government, the corporation, education, and the legal system—largely underwrites the heterosexual script, a study of the construction of sexuality necessarily includes attention to political structures. "Civilization and culture are the rules of males' greed." Acker writes, and, I might add, the rules that sustain women's oppression. (Don Quixote 69).

In Empire of the Senseless, in which capitalism and the Oedipus are represented by Acker as mutually dependent, Thivai, a would-be pirate and his female partner, Abhor, part human and part robot, journey through an apocalyptic world of the near future, a world of terrorism and chaos in which the Algerians have taken over Paris. Episodic, like all Acker's novels, and stitching together issues of incest and politics, Empire has a plot of sorts, alternately told in the voices of Abhor and Thivai. Thivai searches for a drug which he requires for love, and Abhor, a "knight" like Don Quixote, searches for their maker, a "construct" named Kathy (10, 34). A text which links the oppression of sexism with that of racism and classism, Empire includes a terrorist conspiracy against the CIA which merges with a revolt of the underclass against a quasi-fascist regime. Above all, however, this disordered novel forces the reader to confront questions of meaning, declaring "The demand for an adequate mode

---

37 Many feminist theorists have articulated the connections between capitalism, class structures, and women's oppression; see, for example, Gayle Rubin, Luce Irigaray, Cora Kaplan, and Donna Haraway.

38 As a composite of human and machine, Abhor suggests Donna Haraway's cyborg, and, like Haraway's cyborg, Abhor poses a way out of the dualisms which paralyze us. Not only part machine and part human, Abhor's gender is unstable, and it may be that Thivai is just her male aspect for, as he argues, "genders were complex in those days" (179-80).
of expression is senseless," and, then asking plaintively, "Then why is there this searching for an adequate mode of expression?" (113). In a high-tech landscape reminiscent of William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer* and Ridley Scott's film *Blade Runner*, Thivai and Abhor explore questions of meaning, of identity, of love, power, and sexuality. Acker, in her own reading of *Empire*, says that it is an attempt to portray a society defined by the oedipal taboo and to imagine a society not so defined. 39 Of the first section, "Elegy for the world of the Fathers," Acker says, "I wanted to take the patriarchy and kill the father on every level" ("Notes" 17). 40 A novel in which scenes of corruption and horror alternate with brilliantly funny moments such as a parody of *Huckleberry Finn*, *Empire of the Senseless* does just that—it kills the father on every level.

The link which Deleuze and Guattari posit between the Oedipal structure of sexuality and capitalism is most explicit in *Empire*. Acker writes, "My father's no longer important because interpersonal power in this world means corporate power" (83). Fathers run the world as CEOs, and the hierarchical Oedipal organization of the family undergirds the political-economic system:

A child who doesn't lose his reason over certain events has no reason to lose. I'm not hinting at any possible link between the micro-despotism in the American nuclear familial structure and the macro-political despotism of Nazi Germany.

I am giving an accurate picture of God: A despot who needs a constant increase of His Power in order to survive. *God equals capitalism.* (Empire 45-46)

For Abhor, as is evident in this passage—which immediately follows her association of Freud's Dr. Schreber with President Reagan, both "paranoid, schizophrenic."

---

39 See both the Friedman interview (16-17) and Acker's "A Few Notes" (35-36) for Acker's own interpretation of the novel.

40 Acker credits feminism for the realization of "why one would want to decentralize the father, take the father and tear him apart" (Lotzinger 18).
hallucinated, deluded, disassociated, autistic, and ambivalent"—religion, the Oedipal family, and capitalism are mutually dependent. And all depend on power and terrorism to survive. Daughters are raped by fathers: in the first chapter of the novel, "Raped by the Father." Abhor is raped by her daddy as he shouts.

    I know you're mine!!! . . . I made you!!! . . . I'm making you!!!
(Acker's ellipses, 15).

And nations are raped by capitalists: the Algerians cry,

    MASTER. MASTER MISTERY MEESTER WANNA COCK SUCK. With
this cry—MASTER—let your place of business—our bodies and minds—
resound. With this cry—MASTER—reap your profits in us, out of us. (70)

In Acker, feminism's slogan,"the personal is political," becomes "the sexual is
political" and, perhaps even more potently, "the political is sexual." For Acker concurs
with Deleuze and Guattari that sex is not just about sex:

    The truth is that sexuality is everywhere: the way a bureaucrat fondles his
records, a judge administers justice, a businessman causes money to circulate;
the way the bourgeoisie fucks the proletariat; and so on. And there is no need
to resort to metaphors . . . . Hitler got the fascists sexually aroused. (Deleuze
and Guattari 293)

The macro- and micro-politics of rape come together in *My Mother: Demonology*,
where the father who rapes "B" (Laure) turns out to be President Bush (168-69). An
investigation into the nature of the heterosexual script, such as this project engages in,
has implications for every facet of life, for power and sexuality are everywhere. For
"Hitler got the fascists sexually aroused."

For Deleuze and Guattari, the disorder of our time is schizophrenia, a tool
which they use in their political analysis of the relation of desire to reality. They extol a
schizophrenic universe of productive desiring machines which escape the codes of the
Oedipus and the oedipalized territorialities which sustain it (family, government,
education, business). There is so much perversion in familial and political structures,
they maintain, that a "schizoanalytic flick of the finger" is all that is necessary to push
the Oedipus so far that it topples. Acker does precisely this. She is the exemplary schizo artist who "scrambles all the codes and is the transmitter of the decoded flows of desire" (Deleuze and Guattari 35). Deleuze and Guattari's "schizoid-flows," — forces that escape coding—work through Acker's disjunctions and contradictions, her collapsing of the binaries of male/female, homo-/hetero-sexual, machine/human, alive/dead and macro-/micro-politics. The description of Proust's In Search of Lost Time as the work of a schizo artist describes Acker's texts as well:

We are struck by the fact that all the parts are produced as asymmetrical sections, paths that suddenly come to an end, hermetically sealed boxes, non-communicating vessels . . . pieces assembled by forcing them into a certain place where they may or may not belong, their unmatched edges bent violently out of shape, forcibly made to fit together, to interlock, with a number of pieces left over. It is a schizoid work par excellence. (Deleuze and Guattari 43)

Acker's work, too, I am arguing, is "schizoid work par excellence." Her texts interrupt conventional scripts, leaving gaps and holes, missing links in signifying chains. By refusing to fill them in, Acker sets in motion new signifying chains of effect which disrupt the heterosexual script on both a micro- and a macro-political level. And by refusing the logic of rationality, Acker establishes a space for her impossible attempt to encode in language the realm of the abject.

The Abject and an Aesthetic of Disgust

Perhaps one way of theorizing the effect of Acker's texts on the reader is to postulate that the signifying chain which is initiated by the act of reading her fiction lingers longer at the level of Peirce's emotional and energetic interpretants. This would be the response arena of pornography, but Acker's texts are not pornographic, for pornography in most cases stops at the energetic interpretant; it's work is done. Acker's texts, on the other hand, continue the movement of effect into an intellectual act of meaning-making. By conventional definition the act of signification is the
intellectual act. But what if our traditional understanding of meaning—represented in Peirce as the final stage of the signifying chain, the logical interpretant—is only an incomplete explanation for what happens when subjective meaning occurs? Acker claims that she is "trying to make a text that [is] an 'environment' rather than a centralized, meaningful narrative" (McCaffery Interview 89). I would argue that Acker is working in the space of the emotional and energetic interpretants, and that, although the reader draws logical conclusions about what the text-environment means and can make intellectual statements about it, the most powerful experience of the text happens in the early stages of Peirce's model of signification. Further, I would argue that, when one speaks of meaning in connection with Acker's work, it is the total experience of the significate effects—emotional, energetic, and logical—that must be included as the meaning of the text. Although I have maintained that Acker's technique is not expressive, but is, rather, strategic, the writing "experiments" she conducts don't read as distant, abstract texts, but, rather, at moments, have profound emotional and visceral effects on the reader.41 It is these effects and their efficacy as interrupters of the conventional heterosexual script which I wish to explore in the final part of this chapter.

"Sexuality isn't trustworthy," Acker maintains in her unorthodox analysis of Caravaggio's "Self-Portrait as Bacchus," and thus, wishing to explode trust, she mines sexuality for its potential to undermine trust ("Realism" 35). In her texts love becomes fucking; parental affection, rape; desire, masochism; woman's body, a cunt. Transforming decorous scripts into bathroom graffiti, Acker uses the obscene, the sensational, the disgusting as effects that traverse the narrative, generating ever new effects in the reader, as intensities which arouse in the reader new confrontations with

41 Acker explains her conceptual approach to writing as a series of experiments: "You have an intention, then you set up the experiment, you go ahead and do the experiment as you set it up" (Rickels 103).
the culture. Her protagonists, like those of Genet whom she admires, are often outlaws, criminals who find themselves trapped in the prison that is culture. "Our generation came out of mutilation," she says. "We wear our mutilation like badges" ("Lust" 53). Thus, it is not surprising that we find brutal language and brutal acts in Acker's fictions. It is death for Acker "to not feel every feeling there is" (In Memoriam to Identity 173). And yet she suspects that "the world is full of people who no longer feel. They are carrying on their business as usual, in fact better than usual, because they no longer feel" (Empire of the Senseless 38). In her effort to defy death, to interrupt the deadness of business as usual with "every feeling there is," Acker constructs narratives which, though often surreal and dream-like, are unflinchingly graphic in their depictions of bodily sensations and acts of sexual violence. Worried about internalizing cultural censors, Acker seeks tactics that will take her reader by surprise (Rickels Interview 62). The talking dirty and the explicit sex, thus, may be seen as efforts to assault the reader, while simultaneously rendering her or him complicit, as the writer invokes and transgresses class distinctions, defies the censors, and offends bourgeois morality.

In "Economimesis," a critique of the Kantian critique of pure judgments of taste, Derrida summarizes the classical humanist construction of "art" via Aristotle and Kant: "Art properly speaking puts free-will to work and places reason at the root of its acts" (5). For Acker, the artist who was the man-god of classical philosophy is no longer male, no longer divine, no longer free, and no longer acts out of reason; nevertheless, she would argue, art is still crucial to survival: the word still saves. Accordingly, a new aesthetic is necessary to break with the humanist (male) tradition. Kant's aesthetic poses two concepts of aesthetic pleasure: positive pleasure, or the beautiful, and negative pleasure, or the sublime. The absolute excluded, the single unassimilable thing, in Kant's aesthetic (and our entire Western aesthetic tradition, 1
would add), is the disgusting. Vomit is the single excluded term, Derrida argues; it is the unrepresentable (21, 22). Furthermore, Derrida claims, because the disgusting is outside signification and outside the beautiful or the sublime, the system is interested in positioning the other as literally disgusting (25). "The system" does this, in fact, quite successfully through racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism. Acker's work, in which the narrative voice is always the voice of the other, represents an attempt to develop an aesthetics of disgust.

By joining the two elements which Kant argues are irrepresentable, the disgusting and the colossal, Acker succeeds in getting the reader to mourn the disgusting (that is to incorporate it, to idealize it). She joins these two by means of sheer sensory overload, by colossal repetition, by total immersion of the reader in the disgusting. (In Acker's environmental texts which rely on immersion and repetitiveness there is something of Philip Glass, only with infinitely more variation.) Another striking thing about Acker's work is that contradictory impulses and feelings are held simultaneously, without a loss of intensity or purity in either: e.g., pain and pleasure, self-hatred and self-acceptance, disgust and relish, longing for intimacy and for autonomy, hatred and love, fear and anger.42 A new aesthetic, Acker finds, is necessary to hold these contradictory states in tension with no loss of energy to either term. The experience of the disgusting and of affective contradiction, hallmarks of Acker's aesthetic, serves her purpose of inviting the reader's complicity, but not identification with the text. By staying close to the surface, by refusing commonplaces of the psychological novel, by resisting plausible motivation, by blatantly contradicting her own text, and by incorporating the disgusting, Acker challenges the reader to a

42 Contradictory feelings, I might note, are experienced both intratextually and extratextually, i.e., by characters and by reader.
flexible relationship with the text. The reader, denied identification with and easy consumption of a readerly text, is necessarily engaged in a writerly production of the fiction, as no other kind is possible. Acker's aesthetic of disgust, then, interrupts the reader's passivity and insists on attention to the unacceptable, even the unintelligible, that which is excluded in the classical aesthetic, as well as in conventionally morality.

To represent the unrepresentable, to somehow put into signification the absolutely excluded is a bold aim. As motivation, I would point to the epigraph which introduces My Mother: Demonology:

After Hatuey, a fifteenth-century Indian insurrectionist, had been fixed to the stake, his Spanish captors extended him the choice of converting to Christianity and ascending to Heaven or going unrepentantly to Hell. Gathering that his executioners expected to go to Heaven, Hatuey chose the other.

The choice in this epigraph represents, for me, the choice offered Acker as an artist practicing within a Western male tradition: the heaven of a masculine aesthetic or a hell of her own making. Of course, Acker is fully aware that, in either case, she is still tied to the stake of conventional language; knowing there is no escape from language, she nevertheless, brazenly declares her intention to represent in language the unrepresentable. An aesthetic of disgust is a conscious "experiment" in representing that which is unacknowledged, excluded from conventional reiterations of the heterosexual script.

Acker's interest in reinstating what is excluded from conventional discourse finds theoretical validation in Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject, which argues that the structures of our culture (which, in the context of this dissertation, might be the heterosexual script or the Oedipus) are founded on exclusion, and, further, that the excluded term is disavowed, rendered unintelligible, outside signification. For Kristeva, this position of "abjection" or "defilement," related to perversion, has subversive potential. But how to speak of the abject which, by its nature, is outside or
beyond language? How to make intelligible what is, by definition, unintelligible? It is my contention that Acker's fiction is an example of sublimation, which Kristeva argues is "nothing else than the possibility of naming the pre-nominal . . ." (11). However, unlike Joyce, Proust, Borges, Dostoyevsky, or Celine, Kristeva's examples of artists who attempt to probe the abject, which is always coded feminine, Acker attempts to speak from within the abject, using the very tools of signification that have made of it the constitutive outside of signification. As Judith Butler, in her investigation into the abjection of homosexuality, argues:

... the heterosexual imperative enables certain sexed identifications and forecloses and/or disavows other identifications. This exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings . . . . The abject designates here precisely those 'unlivable' and 'uninhabitable' zones of social life which are nonetheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of subject, but whose living under the sign of the 'unlivable' is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject. (Bodies 3)

It is from that excluded and abjected realm, from the "uninhabitable zones," that Acker draws her protagonist/narrators, one of whom speaks for them all: "by birth I'm wrong" (In Memoriam to Identity 102). Nevertheless, although this sense of personal "wrongness" represents the speaker's internalization of the status of the abject as the unspeakably wrong, it is only half the picture of abjection which Acker portrays.

Deep within the world of the abject, hidden because it has been foreclosed or disavowed, the domain of abject beings includes, besides women who succumb to their victimization, women who flaunt their abjection, their wrongness, and who refuse victim status. In My Mother: Demonology, a novel which explores a woman's contradictory needs for love and autonomy, Laure remembers that her mother "thought that there must be a romance other than romance" (30). As evidence of this, of the existence of an abject domain which provides the constitutive outside of the normative
romance plot, Laure cites Elizabeth Roudinesco on the new representation of the female in the twenties. The new female, she says, is

nocturnal, dangerous, fragile and powerful. The rebellious, criminal, insane, or gay woman is no longer perceived as a slave to her symptoms. Instead, "in the negative idealization of crime [she] discovers the means to struggle against a society [that disgusts]." (Acker's brackets, 30)

One of the techniques that Acker chooses to resist a society that disgusts, is, ironically, to not shy away from the disgusting, but to remove the veils of conventionality and propriety that usually shroud it. By embracing their abject status, their defilement, Acker's female characters make visible the domain of excluded and delegitimated sex, forcing a confrontation with the regulatory heterosexual script through abjection and disgust. Refusing to avert her eyes, Acker enters the "uninhabitable" zones of social life, and seeks her protagonists from among a population of women who represent both sides of abjection: the broken, thoroughly abased woman who crawls through dog shit for sex (My Mother: Demonology 38), and the woman who finally comes through the other side of her abjection, whose non-subjectivity has been so thoroughly beaten into her, that she has nothing left to fear. A scene which takes place near the end of Don Quixote represents a triumph of sorts for abjection. In a battle with religious white men, Don Quixote suddenly realizes:

She wasn't scared of them because she felt that she was such a failure as a person and she was so sick of the world in which she was living that she wasn't scared of anyone anymore. Finally, in a manner of speaking, she was a knight. (179)

In a manner of speaking, abjection becomes valor in this scene. In Acker's account, however, valor is born out of failure and fatigue; it has as its source a zone of unintelligibility, of abjection, the zone which is produced as the excluded term against which valor is constituted.

In "New York City in 1979," as in many of Acker's texts, the female characters are whores and abused wives—sexed and sexual positions which are not only outside
respectability, but which represent the distance between the idealized family of
normative heterosexuality and its often violent reality. The existence of these female
roles, the necessary "outside" to the intelligible female subject—respectable, straight,
happy wife and mother—is, at once, privately acknowledged and publicly rendered
culturally unintelligible, thus, non-existent. The repudiation of both female positions is
crucial to the uninterrupted dominance of the heterosexual script. Acker, however,
refuses to play this game, and, in her texts, the viability of these unviable categories is
tested as the women speak their own abjection. In the first scene of "New York," for
every example, two whores in jail discuss their pimps:

—Your man ain't anything! Johnny says that if I don't work my ass off
for him, he's not going to let me back in the house.
—I have to earn two hundred before I can go back.
—Two hundred? That ain't shit! You can earn two hundred in less
than a night. I have to earn four hundred or I might just as well forget sleeping,
and there's no running away from Him. My baby is the toughest there is.
—Well, shit girl, if I don't come back with eight hundred I get my ass
whipped off.
—That's cause you're junk. (36)

A scene that reads as a comedy of one-up-manship quickly turns to horror, as one of
the girls starts bleeding from an abortion, only to have the matron respond to pleas for a
doctor by throwing an "open piece of Kotex" to her with the words, "You're not in a
hotel, honey" (37). From the pimp represented as the capitalized pronoun "Him" (a
capitalization conventionally reserved for God) to the unsympathetic matron, those who
construct and control these women either use them as capital to turn a profit or dismiss
them as junk, a label the women pick up and turn against themselves. These whores
sitting out the night in jail represent abjection speaking for itself, talking back, although
the back-talk is generated out of the discourse which positions them as objects, as junk.
The unspeakability of lack is spoken in "New York" by the whores, and also by Janey,
who, having been "sexually hurt" by her husband, leaves him, thinking, "He made her
a hole. He blasted into her. He has no feeling." And yet, this woman, a hole, who
represents all the Acker characters who identify themselves as lack, says, "But there's no such thing as nothingness. Not here. Only death whatever that is is nothing" (38).

Over and over again Acker narrators refuse death: "there is only the will to live," Laure says; and Airplane, speaking of herself in the third person, says, "She would survive. . . . women dream of survival" (My Mother: Demonology 29, In Memoriam to Identity 115). Survival for Acker, however, means acknowledging your feelings, speaking even, or especially, your abasement and defilement. "New York City will become alive again when the people begin to speak to each other again," Janey says, "not information but real emotion" (38). This expression of real emotion demands a new language, however, and, as this study continually asserts, there is no "other" language. In order to speak abjection, the inside-out of the culturally intelligible, one must defamiliarize familiar scripts, must turn language inside out. Art, Acker believes, is a cry, not a description. "The cry . . . is primary, . . . is stupid; it has no mirror; it communicates. I want to cry," she maintains ("Models of Our Present" 64). The challenge, then, is to somehow put the cry into language. Grunts and moans don't satisfy the need to tell our stories; and it is, ultimately, as Capitol understood, the act of telling which guarantees our subjectivity, which is our story.

Our stories are, as this project has argued, constructed out of received scripts, and told within narrative frames which fall within cultural intelligibility. But those scripts and frames, narrative habits which construct our subjectivity can be challenged and bent. For example, Laura Mulvey, invoking the sexual frame of S/M, contends that "sadism demands a story" ("Visual Pleasure" 64). Acker's texts, on the other hand cry out, "masochism demands a story." Women have been trained in masochism, Acker maintains; they have been taught to turn feelings of anger, rage, inadequacy against themselves, to hurt themselves. But masochism is all about power, about not having it, but wanting it and looking for it (Acker, in Juno Interview 179). Let's not
pretend that women are not submissive—they've been taught to be submissive—or, on the other hand, that women aren't interested in power. Acker's work is, above all, a refusal to bury negative energies and feelings, women's feelings which have been constructed as "improper," "dirty," "unfeminine," or "unfeminist." "You don't get through trauma," Acker believes. "by burying it.... We should take the word 'submissive' and write it on the sky!" (185). Acker's female narrators, masochists who speak the flip side of the sadistic story, do write "submissive" on the sky; their masochism represents a point of view, always buried, which, when exhumed, pushes back the limits of intelligibility, bringing regions of abjection, heretofore unspeakable, into language. The masochist's pain and even her pleasure are part of Acker's radical performance of what, in her hands, ceases to be the performative heterosexual script. Masochism gets its story.

Pain and pleasure, although mediated by language, are irreducible to scripts, as the experience of pain and pleasure quickly teaches. Elaine Scarry's brilliant study, The Body in Pain, argues that pain is perhaps the most difficult human experience to describe, the most beyond-language experience we have. Because the vocabulary of pain is so insufficient, Scarry says, people who suffer pain rely almost entirely on the "as if...structure": "it feels as if..." (15). Intense pain takes place in an abyss where language fails, where the analogy provides a mere glimmer of the grim reality. Nevertheless, Acker's female protagonists, although they find their pain to be virtually inexpressible, hold onto pain, for, by it, they know that they are alive. Like pain, pleasure, too, although shaped and given meaning by language, is almost beyond description; if pain is the abyss where language fails, pleasure is the pinnacle which leaves words behind. Both, intensities which punctuate dailiness, interrupt conceptual habits. Scarry maintains that when pain (or pleasure, I would add) finds a voice, it begins to tell a story (3). Acker's stories represent an effort to put into language
women's experiences of pain and pleasure, and it is for that reason that sex, an intense source of both, is one of her major textual obsessions.

The attempt, however, to render intelligible women's experience of sexual pain and pleasure, which is denied intelligibility by the heterosexual script, is frustrated not only by language, but by the constitutive constraints of the Oedipus which positions women as lack. Because the logic of exclusion on which normative heterosexuality is founded demands that the realm of the abject—the feminine—remain unspoken, efforts to encode it in language must rely on indirection, obscenity, and disjunction. The schizo artist constructs schizo characters who appear fragmented and unreliable in their attempts to express their own abjection. In the following passage Laure's *honesty* about her abject status and about her ambivalent position vis-à-vis language is undercut by her unreliability as a narrator:

Do you see how easy it is for me to ask to be regarded as low and dirty? To ask to be spat upon? This isn't... the sluttishness... but the language of a woman who thinks: it's a role... I'm a woman... outside the Law, which is language. This is the only role that allows me to be as intelligent as I am and to avoid persecution. . . .

My life's disintegrating under me so I'll not bear the lie of meaning. . . .

Even when I believed in meaning... this opposition between desire and the search for self-knowledge was tearing me apart, even back then I knew that I was only lying, that I was lying superbly, disgustingly, triumphally.

Life doesn't exist inside language: too bad for me. (The first two ellipses are Acker's; the remainder are mine. *My Mother: Demonology* 253)

The tension between subjectivity and abjection and between meaning and abjection is rehearsed here as the conscious struggle of a self-conscious woman. Laure claims that, as an intelligent subject, she must deliberately adopt a position, or a pose, of abjection; performing "a role" of sluttishness, she asks *to be regarded as low and dirty* in order to avoid punishment for her intelligence, for her assumption of subjectivity. Acker suggests here that, for women, abjection is protective coloration in the law of the patriarchal jungle which privileges masculinity. The "lie of meaning," which offers
women the untenable choice between punishment or abjection, is the lie Acker is contesting in her texts.

The pull toward death, toward ultimate abjection, is represented in Acker by mothers. In My Mother: Demonology, a dark, hallucinatory autobiography narrated by Laure, dreams and real events, which, as I noted earlier, have equal status as Laure's "reality," represent Acker's experiments in encoding the abject in the symbolic. Although abjection, in Kristeva's model, is associated with the maternal, with the pre-symbolic, in Acker, the mother is missing. There is no pre-symbolic—the daughter can't get back there. She is trapped in language—that is all we have, the novels claim. The maternal, the pre-symbolic, is accessible only through the symbolic. Abandoned by their mothers, Acker narrators wander alone in the dark wood of childhood; in My Mother: Demonology, the narrator's mother has "suicided," leaving her daughter to make her way to adulthood without the maternal presence. Maternal absence, however, is itself a presence in Laure's life, acting as demon, working the mother-daughter identification to undo any moves toward subjectivity which Laure attempts. For Acker, the notion that "women are kind and gentle," that "there is no fear and trembling involved in the incorporation of the mother's body," and that "there is no demon aspect" of the mother are myths which keep women enslaved to "niceness" within the heterosexual script ("Bodybuilding" 104). In reality, daughters identify with mothers who, trapped in abjection themselves, attempt to reproduce in their daughters a script which relies on women's abjection. Daughters, seduced by their "suicided" mothers, are drawn toward total abjection, pulled toward annihilation and death. In In Memoriam to Identity Capitol, after her mother's suicide, has thoughts of suicide

43 In both In Memoriam (109) and My Mother (79) Acker explicitly refers to childhood as "a dark wood," even providing Virgil as guide in In Memoriam, suggesting, of course, that childhood is a replica of Dante's hell.
herself: "she who was in my blood wanted me to be dead" (159); and in *My Mother* Laure realizes that "my mother was trying to kill me through me" (252). Both women feel the pull to abjection not merely as the effect of larger cultural scripts, but, most profoundly in the intimate familial script, in the rape of fathers and the abandonment of mothers.

Laure and Capitol, however, reject death; their abjection stops short of ultimate annihilation. Acker, thus, simultaneously brings into language the inscription of woman as lack and contests such an inscription. "I will not be nothing," Capitol says defiantly. Although the grammatical construction of this sentence, a negation, is not as strong an assertion as its alternative, "I will be something," Acker opens a very small space—a mere cracking or splintering—in the social space, in which female desire may exist. In devising these cracks or splinters, Acker makes of the abject something. Her texts represent, not so much a search for woman’s desire as a woman’s search for desire. Female desire, as Acker portrays it, constructed in and against the heterosexual script, wears two faces: a capitalist prison and a liberating pleasure. That desire is compromised and sex commodified as a unit of exchange in capitalist culture threatens the very notion that female desire might escape abjection:

I’m not fucking anymore cause sex is a prison. It’s become a support of this post-capitalist system like art. Businessmen who want to make money have to turn up a product that people’ll buy and want to keep buying . . . . Sex is such a product. Just get rid of the puritanism sweetheart your parents spoonfed you in between materialism which the sexual revolution did thanks to free love and hippies sex is a terrific hook . . . . New capitalists are doing everything they can to bring world sexual desire to an unbearable edge. (*New York City* 41-42)

Unless sex can be extricated from a capitalist system which commodifies not only sex, but persons too, Acker is not interested. But sex has another face, one that opens up,
rather than closing down subjectivity, and the same narrator, moments later abandons
her pessimism about sex as something more than a product:

I am lonely out of my mind. I am miserable out of my mind. Open, open what
you are touching me. Touching me. Now I'm going into the state where desire
comes out like a monster. Sex I love you. I'll do anything to touch you. I've
got to fuck. Don't you understand don't you have needs as much as I have
needs DON'T YOU HAVE TO GET LAID? (43)

The two faces of desire for women co-exist, and, in Acker's discourse of desire,
norther neither wins ascendency. Rather, the meaning of sex for women is in the
contradiction. The reader must hold the two experiences in suspension: sex as prison
and sex as an opening out. Women's desire, impossible within the conventional
heterosexual script, is installed in Acker's texts in an unconventional performance of
sexuality which contests its containment in old scripts—cultural and psychic. Acker's
unabashed portrayal of women's desire invites the reader's resistance to the deadening
effect of the heterosexual script which serves only to shore up oppressive regimes of
power. Desire that overflows its scripting, that scrambles the codes, that instigates
women's subjectivity, has the potential to be the schizoanalytic finger which topples the
Oedipus. In the conventional Oedipus narrative woman is the fixed object of the
masculine quest, the prize awaiting him at the end of his journey. In Acker's narrative,
however, the female protagonist, abject as she is, doesn't hold still long enough to be
the object of any man's quest, or of his gaze. Men use her as object; nevertheless,
moments later, she is on her way to a new position in the text. In Acker's texts, the
female object talks back, gets up and walks out. The vicissitudes of her journey mark
the process of always-becoming female subject. And this process is the way out of
abjection and into a space of female desire.

Acker's plagiarized performances of the normative heterosexual script, her
unauthorized iterations of a received performative, alter the relation between her female
reader and the Oedipus which has produced her. A schizo reader is produced by
Acker's texts, a counterpart to Deleuze and Guattari's schizo artist, a reader who becomes an active participant in scrambling the codes of desire. A willingness to live with gaps and holes, with missing links in signifying chains, marks the schizo reader. Most compellingly, moreover, the attention with which such a reader, woman or man, reads the everyday signifying effects of the conventional heterosexual script, effects which become habits of sexual belief and behavior, is the prerequisite for contesting that script. Interruption of the chain of signifying effects, the total accumulation of which produces a sediment of sexual habits, offers to the schizo reader of scripts a mechanism for agency in the social and psychic construction of sexuality. Such agency, as a contestatory citational practice, understands itself to be immanent to power, but has learned to co-opt power from within its signifying practices. The strategies of abjection which have positioned bodies outside of intelligibility based on race, gender, or sexual object choice, are met by strategies of co-option in which the very abjection which has been used to exclude is appropriated and reversed as a move toward subjectivity and desire. Despite Acker's empowering of schizo readers who may act as agents of change in the culture, critics universally note the pessimism, the hopelessness of her texts. One of the best, Ellen Friedman, says that "Acker's questers' searches . . . lead to silence, death, nothingness . . ." (44). While I would not want to claim optimism or utopianism for Acker, I strongly disagree with Friedman's contention. A woman writing women's experience of the heterosexual script is not without effect, a writer bringing abjection into language is not without power, and a schizo artist producing schizo readers is not without agency. "As long as you don't die, you survive," Airplane counsels herself (In Memoriam to Identity 112). Acker's female questers are not dead at the end of the novels, are not silent. There is life, there is language, there is the text.
Conclusion
Seizing the Script

Love is about . . . pleasure made out of the possibility of pain.

Leslie Dick

The question with which this study concludes is the motivating question of the entire project: so what of agency? By arguing that the heterosexual script marshals social institutions, discourses, technologies, the family psychodrama, and even our signifying systems in order to replicate hierarchized social and sexual relations, the previous chapters have charted the work of the script in conscripting women into roles which consolidate current power relations. The heterosexual script represents, in white, middle-class, Western culture, a coding of sex, which without the script, has no meaning as such. By assigning meaning to particular sexual desires, attitudes, and practices, the heterosexual script, as we have seen, produces certain subject positions and certain sexual relations as privileged, and all others as devalued, deviant, or worse, as culturally unintelligible. This organization of subjectivity around culturally sanctioned sexual ideals works to limit agency and to circumscribe identities and behaviors. Nevertheless, because it depends on continual citations to produce and replicate its authority, the performative script is necessarily dynamic and unstable. A re-formulation of the terms of the heterosexual script, then, is possible if it works within the structure of citation; within this structure, agency is possible: scripts produce subjects who, in turn, produce scripts.

---

1Without Falling 117.
In this study I have assumed Foucault's analysis of subjectivity which insists that regulatory power produces the subjects it controls. My use of Althusser's theory of ideology, Freud and Lacan's psychoanalysis, and Peirce's semiotics has been guided by the project's double intention: to investigate how regulatory power constructs individuals as sexed subjects and to discover how those subjects might—in fact, do—intervene into their own production. In this final chapter I trace repressive responses to perceived interventions into the normalizing work of the heterosexual script. I argue that a prohibition logic structures a conservative response to perceived threats to the status quo by women and homosexuals, a prohibition logic which represents a move away from reliance on the power of the norm and toward a mentality of statutory and judicial regulation. These recent attempts at repression through government regulation, articulated as expressions of piety which disguise the implicit violence and fascistic male desire which they contain, are attempts to maintain current systems of privilege. Arguing that there is a complicity between efforts to contain all non-normative sexualities and efforts to contain women within a monogamous reproductive version of the heterosexual script, I read three recent government documents as conservative efforts to return to an imaginary "way we were."

An anti-sex backlash, which I see as an attempt to resist the demands of both women and homosexuals for full participation in the discourses surrounding sexuality and for an inclusion in power structures, has gained momentum in the last decade and has, perhaps, not peaked yet. The tactics of repression, designed to thwart gains by the feminist and gay rights movements, include government regulation, moral intimidation, violence, and, still most powerful, I argue, the profound normalizing power of the heterosexual script. The categories of sexuality and gender, used in this study as tools of literary analysis, are, I have argued, contingent and constructed. I do not, however, as this study demonstrates, underestimate their force as categories-become-scripts in
individual lives. The material effects of the designation of an individual as "homosexual" or "heterosexual, "woman" or "man," are no less weighty for deriving their meaning and value from a normalizing script than from anatomy. Although, this project asserts that normalcy and pathology, as well as privilege and abjection, are social constructions, it asserts also that such constructions are not easily undone. The will to undo is, itself, constructed within and against the heterosexual script; i.e., a woman’s subversive citation or performance of the heterosexual script is always dependent on and implicated in the scripts which have produced the performing woman herself. Nonetheless, the scripts are being contested.

The question, then, remains: how does a subject of an oppressive heterosexual script summon the resources to resist the script? How can one produce a citation of the script which is not presumptively identical to the script which it cites? Once again Peirce is helpful in thinking through this question. A "deliberately formed, self-analyzing habit" can be cultivated, Peirce argues (5.491). It should be remembered that habit, which Peirce names as the final interpretant in a chain of interpretants, arises from a series of not only intellectual or mental signs, but also from somatic and emotional signs or interpretants. The unplanned, unsought—and, in some cases, undesirable—effect of the chain of interpretants is the implantation of a habit of thought or of action. A habit of self-analysis, then, might act as an antidote to habits born in unconscious servitude to the heterosexual script.² Put another way, meaning-habits, with resultant behavioral habits, are the signifying effects of cognitive-emotional-somatic signifying experiences (Peirce’s interpretants) which take place and are

² Self-analysis, as a tool for radical change, is at least as old as the ancient Greeks; it has been theorized recently by Foucault as the "care of the self," which, he contends, was the basis of the organization of Greek sexuality. Although self-analysis, it may be argued, may be used in the service of either conservative or progressive aims, it continues to be an indispensable element, if only one among many, of political change.
understood—are assigned meaning by the subject—within the context of cultural and
psychic scripts. Habits of self-analysis, then, require a double semiotic move: first, the
assignment of meaning to a given semiotic habit, and, second, a self-conscious analysis
of the meaning so assigned. How are these self-chosen, self-analyzing habits
cultivated against the normalizing force of scripts? By "the aid of analysis of the
exercises that nourished it," Peirce claims (5.491). One wishes for a further explanation
of the nature of these self-analytical exercises, but Peirce doesn't oblige. He says only
that this self-analyzing habit is the final interpretant because it gives way, not to a
further logical interpretant, but to action.

Although Peirce himself fails to elaborate his theory of self-analyzing habits, we
can derive illustrations of how such an analysis might proceed from the texts of
Weldon, Carter, and Acker. Their citations of prior scripts—the romance novel,
psychoanalytical narratives, and male-authored canonical literary texts—have been read
as self-conscious analyses of the unconscious heterosexual habits which cultural and
psychic scripts reproduce in individual subjects. This dissertation is another such
analysis of culturally induced habits, which, of necessity, includes a measure of self-
analysis on the part of its author. Heterosexuality, as the novelists who have been the
focus of this project demonstrate, and as this dissertation has argued, has been (and
continues to be) constructed as "normal" erotic desire out of a repertoire of masculine
representations of femininity, masculinity, and sexuality. Simultaneously, it has been
structured by ideologies as diverse as Christianity, psychoanalysis, and capitalism, as a
quasi-permanent system of power relations. Women writers cannot simply wish away
the scripts which are the result of these masculine representations and power systems,
but must self-consciously engage with them, turn them back on themselves. Weldon's,
Carter's, and Acker's texts may be read as examples of the double semiotic move of the
self-analyzing habit: the representation of habitual scripted meaning plus an analysis of
both the meaning and the act of representing itself. This tactical engagement with familiar scripts is the work of the female schizophrenic artist who, employing the microscope of self-analysis, uncovers the work of scripts within herself and uses them to undermine their own claims. Seizing upon the inconsistencies within regulatory ideals and upon the hypocrisies of prohibition logic, the schizo-artist engages in a performance designed to topple an oppressive cultural performative. Weldon, Carter, and Acker, as schizophrenic artists, have found the means for this kind of self-conscious performance in the contradictions between the erotic and domestic versions of the heterosexual script, in an acknowledgment of the entanglement of the psychoanalytic processes of desire and identification, and in the aporia of the signifying process itself. By exploiting these generally unacknowledged conjunctions and disjunctions, the texts which we have read make visible the political stakes of the scripting process itself and interrogate its normalizing effects.

The novels which have been the object of this study all have as one of their principal concerns, not only the effect, but also the mechanism of the subject's insertion into the heterosexual script. The subject, as theorized in this study, does not exist behind or prior to the script, but rather is interpellated and continually re-interpellated by it as it is encountered in its various guises. As Althusser argues, I can say "I" only to the extent that I have first been addressed by discourse, or, for our purposes, by that part of discourse that constitutes the heterosexual script. Concretely, this interpellation, or "hailing" of the subject, occurs in fiction in the process by which the text confers subjectivity on its reader; i.e., the reader is involved in an imaginary and symbolic

---

3 Scripts, like habits, of course, are not inherently evil, but are, in fact, necessary to free us from repetitive, mundane decision-making. There are, nevertheless, oppressive scripts and liberating scripts, and we must depend on self-analyzing habits to tell the difference.
transaction in which s/he is inserted into an already existing script. The reader's subjectivity is activated—or, rather, re-activated—by the text. Novels, in other words, do ideological work: they produce readers as subject to a particular ideology and as scripted into a particular system of power, and they do this work primarily through reader identification with the hero or heroine. We see this in the Harlequin editorial policy which instructs its authors: "it is up to the author to ensure that the readers will fall in love with [the hero] as deeply as the heroine does" (n. pag.). In a Harlequin romance the female reader, acquiescing to the particular pleasure of the romance, assumes a subject position fully compatible with the most repressive version of the conventional heterosexual script, as she identifies with a young, innocent heroine and falls in love, herself, with a mature, masterful, sexually magnetic, powerful hero. Carter, Weldon, and Acker all refuse the reader the pleasures of falling in love with the hero. By foregrounding the apparatuses of fiction, by refusing the transparency of mimetic narrative, and by turning the romance plot inside out to reveal its darker underside, their novels do the work of subverting the prevailing ideology which structures sexuality.

As argued throughout, the postmodern fictions of this project invite reader identification, not with a protagonist who represents normative, culturally appropriate subjectivity, but rather with a process of enunciation which undermines such a normative subjectivity by inducing habits of self-analysis. The reader of Weldon's, Carter's, and Acker's texts is required to participate with the writer in the production of meaning: the text engages the reader in an active subjectivity which is a direct challenge to the conventionally passive consumer of realist fiction who is scripted unawares into an insinuating dominant ideology. This may, after all, be Weldon's, Carter's, and Acker's most radical challenge to the transmission of the conventional heterosexual script through the mediation of the alluring "norm." The texts which this project has
read deny their readers the conventional pleasures of consumer reading which seduces into normative identifications. Furthermore, they demand their readers' participation in the textual analysis of the usually veiled ideological work of cultural scripts, an analysis that may trigger a self-analysis of the work of psychic scripts, which contain desire within a socially approved reproductive heterosexuality.

The undercurrent of the normalizing work of the heterosexual script is violence, as was amply demonstrated by the fictions which we have read. As I chose fictional texts only for their relevance in a feminist study of the construction of heterosexuality, I was not looking for, nor was I prepared for, the "theme" of violence which emerged from my reading. The texts, nevertheless, insisted upon my attention to violence as underlying the micropolitical practices of our everyday lives, as well as to the violence underlying language itself as it is presently circulated. The violence which is disclosed in these feminist fictions is the violence of heterosexism, sexism, classism, and, repeatedly, the violence of denying women access to the places of enunciation in the culture. Acts of physical or psychic brutality that occur in these texts represent, to some extent, these three writers would argue, the underlying paradigm for "normal" relationships in a patriarchal and heterosexist society. The violence of objectification and dehumanization in Carter's texts and the violence of rape and abandonment in Acker's texts position women as subject to symbolic and material erasure or violation. Carter claims that "violence has always been the method by which institutions demonstrate their superiority" (The Sadeian Woman p. 23). Pornography, she argues, is condemned because "it can become too vicious a reminder of the mutilations our society inflicts upon women and the guilt that exacerbates this savagery" (23). Pornography, in other words, is merely an uncomfortably literal representation of the violence against women which prevails, albeit insidiously, in the culture at large. In Weldon's texts the violence which is embedded in social institutions such as law, medicine, the PTA,
the romance novel leads one heroine to a hermetic existence and an eating disorder and another to a three-year program of self-mutilation which annihilates the self and replaces her with an object of male fantasy. The ironic apogee of violence in Weldon's narrative of a she-devil is that the culture rewards the self-mutilating woman with a share of power which would never have been hers without her vicious self-transformation. If the precise source of such self-hatred and self-inflicted violence is difficult to pinpoint, it can be understood as an effect of power which is exercised from numerous points, but which acts with the single effect of interpelling the subject into "normalcy" as defined by the power regime. In his discussion of the tactics of power, Foucault argues: "the logic is perfectly clear, the aims decipherable, and yet it is often the case that no one is there to have invented them" (*The History of Sexuality* 95). The politics of violence, although its "invention" is quite impossible to trace, operates by regulating what counts as "normal" sexuality—procreative vaginal intercourse within the structure of the family. As women, with access in the last several decades to birth control and abortion, have contested the containment of their sexuality within an ideology of the family, conservative efforts to control all sexualities have accelerated. The mechanism of control is the violent exclusion, or abjection, of all non-normative sexual identities and the condemnation of pleasure for its own sake which becomes more shrill as we near the end of the twentieth century.

In her last work, *Erotic Welfare*, Linda Singer argues that the sexual panic caused by AIDS has resulted in a "logic of contagion," a "panic logic," which is manifested in an increasing regulation and surveillance of all areas of sexuality. The production of sex as high-risk, dangerous, has given the regulatory apparatuses almost free rein to divide the field of sexuality into the normative and the pathological. The production of the nuclear family as the prime site of "safe sex" has been a result: "As an accompaniment to the homophobic discourse, the family is being repackaged as a
prophylactic social device" (85). Ironically, Singer notes, the family has never been a safe place for women and children, but rather has been a site of sexual subordination, sexual abuse, even death. "Sex was safe, it seems, as long as it was mostly women who died for and from sex in childbirth, illegal abortions, faulty contraception, rape, and murder at the hands of their sexual partners" (67). What is being marketed as "safe sex" is likely to have just the opposite effect for women, Singer argues. Nevertheless, within the political imaginary, the discourse surrounding AIDS has produced an increasing polarization of "healthy sex," i.e. domestic, monogamous, procreative heterosexual sex, set against every other sexual variation. The epidemic has become an epistemic, what Judith Butler, in the introduction to Singer's text, labels "a contemporary knowledge/power regime of the erotic" (11). Rather than finding in the AIDS epidemic an opportunity to imagine new social and sexual relations, the current power regime has escalated its efforts to reify traditional boundaries between normal sex and deviant sex. There is, thus, an effort to concretize the violence of exclusion of all non-normative sexual identities and practices, as a concerted attempt is made to encode the heterosexual script as law. The rhetoric of Singer's "panic logic" is increasingly transformed into a prohibition logic.

To conclude this study, I would like to look briefly at three texts which I read as examples of an increase in the legal surveillance and regulation of sexuality consonant with this logic of prohibition. These three documents, efforts to confirm as law what is otherwise merely a normalizing social script, represent the executive, legislative, and judicial branches and lend to the heterosexual script the force of explicit government policy. The 1986 Final Report of the Attorney General's Commission on Pornography, informally known as the Meese Commission Report, the 1986 Bowers v. Hardwick Supreme Court decision regarding sodomy between consenting adults, and the 1994-95 Republican agenda for change, Contract with America, three texts
which claim as an explicit goal the protection and reaffirmation of the family as the single "normal" expression of sexuality, all share the same repressive logic. If the informal social sanctions for non-compliance with the normative heterosexual script fail to contain illicit desire, these texts imply, formal penalties must be drafted into law. Law has, of course, always been used to codify majority morality; these three documents are merely recent reminders of the continual attempt to regulate—first, through normalizing scripts, and second, through law when non-legal, cultural scripts are deemed inadequate—what will count as appropriate, and protected, sexuality in the culture.

Why now? one might ask. A repressive vision—which is expressed in efforts as various as a move to "defund" the National Endowment for the Arts (for funding sexually explicit work) and a move to pass a constitutional amendment prohibiting abortion—seeks to prescribe and prohibit private sexual behavior. Sex is considered a special case in our culture, in need of remediation and regulation; a perception that groups, and, of course, particularly women, are challenging the authority of the authorized sexual discourses fuels efforts of political sexual repression. Abortion rights, the women's sexual revolution, the slow, but perceptible movement of women into upper levels of management, together with an increasing frankness about sex, threaten a radical Right which wishes to keep women in the home and sex in the marital bed. Women are perceived, in some cases correctly and in other cases incorrectly, to be accruing sufficient cultural capital to have a voice in their own definition within the culture, threatening the status quo. Added to this, gay men and lesbians are increasingly demanding freedom from persecution and discrimination, and a right to live out their sexuality without loss of their basic civil rights. Gay rights and women's rights offer related, although not identical, threats to a system of power which is organized around a narrowly defined, familial, heterosexual script. Institutions with a
vested interest in the status quo, thus, rush to shore up the borders of what they perceive to be a threatened dominant power regime. Attempting to bolster the power of ideology to produce compliant sexual subjects by *legislating* both morality and normalcy, authorizing institutions couch such efforts in a romantic idealization of the bourgeois family. Prohibition logic, which attempts to circumscribe sexual identities and behaviors by reaffirming the outlaw status of certain sexual practices, makes itself felt in various institutions, but nowhere more publicly than at the level of the federal government.

In all three documents, the Meese Commission Report, *Bowers v. Hardwick*, and *Contract with America*, the nuclear family takes on a sanctified status. For example, Commissioner Cusack of the Meese Commission invents an entire sacred history of the family to give weight to his argument against pornography:

> For 2500 years of Western civilization, human sexuality and its expressions have been cherished as a private act between a loving couple committed to each other. This has created the strongest unit of society—the family. If our families become less wholesome, weaker, and less committed to the fidelity that is their core, our entire society will weaken as well. (35).

The assertion contained in Commissioner Cusack's first sentence, that sex has "for 2500 years" (read "forever"), had only one form, is blatantly not true, as Foucault and Laqueur have made clear. Sex between a man and a woman in the service of procreation within the bonds of legally recognized marriage, here, as well as in the *Bowers v. Hardwick* decision and the *Contract with America*, is held up as a trans-

---

4 The Meese Commission, set up by President Reagan to investigate pornography and to determine whether or not new legislation was required to regulate it, was composed of eight men and four women. In the "biography" section of the document, which lists the credentials of each of the commissioners, three of the four women, all of whom had substantive professional backgrounds, are, nevertheless, named as "Mrs.," and their marital status and number of children are cited; none of the men is given the title Mr., and their marital and parental status is undisclosed. The female commissioners, unlike their male counterparts, are, thus, situated as safely contained within the conventional heterosexual script.
historical ideal, an idea contrary to everything this project has argued. Commissioner Dobson, too, frames the pornography question in apocalyptic terms, with the potential outcome the destruction of the "family itself." He adds a further emotional note with an appeal for the "little children":

Can anything which devastates vulnerable little children . . . be considered innocuous to the parents who have produced them? Raising healthy children is the primary occupation of families, and anything which invades the childhoods and twists the minds of boys and girls must be seen as abhorrent to the mothers and fathers who gave them birth. Furthermore, what is at stake here is the future of the family itself. (82)

In this indignant comment we have a government text which explicitly defines "family" and its role. Dobson's complete statement, which rests on the primacy of the traditional nuclear family and the necessity to protect it from deviant sexualities, establishes an opposition between health and "addiction" (to pornography), between "respectability" and "perversions." In a tone of shock and outrage, he calls for the government to come down clearly on the side of respectability and the family. A rhetoric which sets selfish masturbatory pleasure against the wholesomeness of a loving family, framed as the very core of society, is pervasive throughout the Report.

In the Meese Commission Report, moreover, there is a fascinating conflation of the representation of sex with sex itself. Although usually unacknowledged in the arguments of the Report, this erasure of the line between signifier and referent becomes explicit at times. Chairman Hudson, for example, claims that "what emerges [from the study] is that much of what this material involves is not so much a portrayal of sex, or discussion of sex, but simply sex itself" (266). And it is "sex itself" which, it turns out, the Commission wishes to regulate. In a brilliant move, the Meese Commission brought together the interests of the radical Right and of anti-pornography feminists like Andrea Dworkin, whose rhetorically eloquent testimony equated pornography and violence against women, further eroding the distinction between representation and
material reality. Repeatedly the Commission refers to "very normal people" as the standard to which they are appealing, with the unstated assumption that they themselves, as the designated arbiters, are such "very normal people." Susan Stewart, in her analysis of the Report, argues that, in their eagerness to make the world safe for "normal people," the Commission is silent on the working conditions of the pornography industry, masking their inattention to the illegal labor practices of the industry with their single-minded concern with the morality of sexuality (Stewart 175-76). By constructing a scenario in which perverse sexual desires are so powerful and pervasive that the family itself is endangered, the Commission creates the conditions necessary for repressive state surveillance and control of all sexual relations and practices which do not fall within the narrowly defined and scrupulously defended heterosexual script.

"The family" has become the rallying cry of recent efforts to regulate sexuality in order to return the country to some nostalgically imagined yesterday, when women knew their place, homosexuals, if they existed, were in the closet, and children were raised by a contented stay-at-home mom. This is the script to which the radical Right, overlooking both the problems inherent in such a repressive social order, as well as changed economic and social conditions, would return us. That the heterosexual script is broader than the nuclear family has been a contention of this project. The heterosexual script, as I have discussed it in this study, has cultural and psychic components, is manifested in both the literary and the material, and includes familial love, the erotic, and the domestic. As its undercurrent, its dark side, unspoken but existent, the heterosexual script also includes familial rage, abuse, the sadistic, the masochistic, the abject, and the indifferent. Romance plots, fairy tales, song lyrics, pulp fiction, and pornography, although, ultimately, they may work to contain women within the family, are filled with non-familial representations of sexuality. This multi-
dimensionality of heterosexuality is presently being reduced by the radical Right to "family." As social structure, the heterosexual script exists to form identities, to conscript real men and women—especially women—into the service of capitalism, racism, colonialism, and of culture as we know it, including, but not limited to, the nuclear family. The current effort to assert reproductive sexuality within the confines of the family as the only "normal," thus protected, sexuality, flattens out the multiple variations of heterosexuality and condemns erotic variation.

The most explicit target of the right-wing effort to make the world safe for the nuclear family has been homosexuality. In the 1986 Supreme Court decision, *Bowers v. Hardwick*, involving the constitutionality of the Georgia anti-sodomy law, a similar presumption of a powerful and perverse sexuality which threatens decent people underlies the majority opinion written by Justice Byron White. The finding of the decision is:

The Constitution does not confer a fundamental right upon homosexuals to engage in sodomy. None of the fundamental rights announced in this Court's prior cases involving family relationships, marriage, or procreation bear any resemblance to the right asserted in this case. And any claim that those cases stand for the proposition that any kind of private sexual conduct between consenting adults is constitutionally insulated from state proscription is insupportable. (*The United States Report*, vol. 478, 186)

The decision is quite explicit that what is protected by the Constitution, as determined in previous decisions such as *Griswold v. Connecticut*, with contraception, and *Roe v. Wade*, with abortion, is the right to privacy within the context of "family, marriage, or procreation," and not the right to privacy for "homosexual activity" (191). The language of the majority opinion is clear: rejecting the language of "intimacy," "privacy," and "relationship," which has structured Supreme Court decisions about marriage, the *Bowers v. Hardwick* decision speaks only of "sodomy" and "homosexual acts," despite the fact that the case in question was a matter of sex between consenting adults in the privacy of the bedroom. The implicit rationale for the
decision is that sexual relations between gay people are fundamentally different from those of straight people, that homosexual relations are merely matters of perverse "acts," whereas, heterosexual relations are matters of relationship and loving intimacy—and are, thus, deserving of state protection. The explicit rationale of the majority decision, that the majority of the electorate find that "homosexual sodomy is immoral and unacceptable," is carried even further in the concurring opinion of Chief Justice Warren Burger (196). Appealing to the entire "history of Western civilization" and "Judeo-Christian moral and ethical standards," Chief Justice Burger raises the emotional stakes by citing centuries-old English law which describes sodomy as "the infamous crime against nature," "an offense of 'deeper malignity' than rape," "a heinous act 'the very mention of which is a disgrace to human nature,' and 'a crime not fit to be named'" (196-97). By including such incendiary rhetoric in the opinion, the decision ensures that centuries of hatred, bigotry, and fear will continue, and that the language of "relationship" and "family" will continue to be reserved for those whose lives fit securely within the heterosexual script.5

The homophobia which is manifested in Bowers v. Hardwick, in addition to its explicit intent to prohibit homosexuality, has implications for the containment of heterosexual women within normalizing scripts. Eve Sedgwick argues, in Between Men, that homophobia is not primarily an instrument for the oppression of a sexual minority, but is rather a powerful tool for regulating the entire spectrum of male relations, which, of course, regulates women as well. The relationships between

---

5 The Bowers v. Hardwick Decision has been harshly criticized by legal scholars as badly reasoned and decided. The groundwork for such a critique may be found in Justice Henry Blackmun's excellent dissenting opinion which condemns the Court's "almost obsessive focus on homosexual activity" and claims that "the right to be let alone," "the constitutional right to privacy," does extend to homosexuals (The United States Report 200, 199). Since 1986, the date of the Bowers v. Hardwick decision, the homophobic rhetoric of the radical right has continued to escalate.
women and men, in fact, the gender system as a whole, are dependent, in patriarchies, on the relationships between men and men. The heterosexual matrix is kept firmly in place by homophobia, which threatens every male who must repeatedly ascertain that he is not (and that his male bonds are not) homosexual. Culturally sanctioned homophobia and the clear labeling and maintenance of sexual boundaries by the dominant power regime serves to relieve the heterosexual's anxiety about his own sexuality, as the threshold is clearly marked and socially specified. The conscription of women into erotic and domestic roles within the heterosexual script is, thus, allied with homophobia as means of reassurance to men who must repeatedly ascertain that they are not homosexual. In a project which theorizes heterosexuality, it must be constantly remembered that homosexuality, which has been produced as the abhorrent constitutive outside to heterosexuality, directly affects the production of the heterosexual script.

"Sex is presumed guilty until proven innocent" in contemporary Western culture, Gayle Rubin contends (278). Rubin's "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," makes the broad and useful argument that the culture is committed to the idea that erotic variation is "dangerous, unhealthy, depraved, and a menace to everything from small children to national security" (280). According to Rubin, only a very small portion of human sexuality is certified as "safe, healthy, mature, legal," and, I would add, as argued by the religious Right, moral (282). There is "good sex" (heterosexual monogamous, reproductive) and "bad sex," (transvestism, sadomasochism, sex for money, cross-generational sex), Rubin claims; acts which fall into a contested area (unmarried heterosexual sex, homosexual sex—monogamous or promiscuous, masturbation) stir debates about where to draw the line, i.e., which acts may cross over into acceptability. Claiming that the culture operates by an assumption of the "domino theory," or the need to draw the line, she writes, "Only sex acts on the good side of the line are accorded moral complexity" (282). Rubin's argument that the
majority claims sole rights to moral complexity offers quite productive ground for analyzing the rationale and method of sexual exclusion and discrimination, such as homophobia. Heterosexual sex, for example, may be sacred or sick, sublime or disgusting, free or forced, romantic or mercenary. It is precisely this moral complexity that is denied to homosexuality by the rhetoric of "homosexual acts" in Bowers v. Hardwick. Applying Rubin's "domino theory" to recent attempts to prohibit any sexuality which falls outside a small protected sphere, which, in the decision, is narrowly defined as marriage, suggests that sexual repression, such as Bowers v. Hardwick, threatens not just homosexuals, but heterosexual women who challenge the constraints of the conventional heterosexual script.

The condemnation of pleasure for its own sake and the extolling of the bourgeois family as the single site of normal, healthy sexuality is the moral impetus for both the Meese Commission Report on Pornography and Bowers v. Hardwick. Much of the social policy of the Contract with America, authored by Representatives Newt Gingrich and Dick Armey, is framed also as a question of morality. The Contract shares with the Meese Commission Report and the Bowers v. Hardwick decision the presumption of privilege for the family, and shares also a kind of panicked presumption that the nuclear family is threatened from all sides. Addressing the American voters in a folksy tone, item number four of the Contract. "Strengthen Families and Protect our Kids," asks:

Shouldn't we do more to protect and strengthen the American family? The American family is at the very heart of our society. It is through the family that we learn values like responsibility, morality, commitment, and faith. Today it seems the values of the family are under attack from all sides—from the media, from the education establishment, from big government. (79)

In a dissimulation of power, the Republican agenda for change couches material political changes in tax and welfare policies in moral platitudes about children with which no one could disagree, while, at the same time, constructing a rigid model of the
"family," which excludes non-traditional families and builds in penalties for non-compliance with such a model. In a central item of welfare reform, the *Contract*, in what it calls "The Personal Responsibility Act," states:

Today, one of every five white children and two of every three African-American children are born out of wedlock. The Personal Responsibility Act is designed to . . . reduce illegitimacy. While AFDC is prohibited to mothers ages seventeen and younger who have children out of wedlock, mothers age eighteen who give birth to illegitimate children must live at home in order to receive aid—unless the mother marries the biological father or marries an individual who legally adopts the child. Mothers already receiving AFDC will not receive an increase in benefits if additional children are born out of wedlock. (70-71)

It is not my intention to comment on the specific legislative proposals of the *Contract with America*; I am interested, rather, in how its rhetoric works to produce a model of sexuality consistent in every way with the normative heterosexual script. In policies like the denial of welfare to unwed teenage mothers unless they marry the biological father, policies which are currently being implemented as law, the heterosexual script, in its narrowest sense, is being used as a template to organize sexuality in a most material way, where the economic interests of the public and private sphere intersect.

Repetition is the key rhetorical tool of the *Contract*. As though the authors suspect that the reader won't get it the first time, each of the ten items on the agenda of reform is repeated numerous times, with very simple vocabulary and in very short simple sentences. Thus, we find frequent repetition of such sentiments as:

Our Family Reinforcement Act is pro-family because it recognizes the value of families. (79)
After forty years of putting government first, Republicans will put families first . . . . (79)
Our *Contract with America* recognizes families for what they are—the basic building blocks of society. Renewing the American Dream is our goal, and renewing that dream starts at home, with the family. (85)

This pro-family rhetoric, paired with an evocation of the American Dream, provides the rationale for the material effects of such economic policies as the welfare reform package cited above and a $500-per-child tax credit for families. The Republican
agenda, which takes money from young, unwed mothers and their children (those who
can least afford it) and gives it to "families" (defined by the agenda as a child and two
parents) is based on an implicit recognition that the nuclear family is a socially cost-
effective way of organizing sexuality and reproduction, with the economic and psychic
costs of reproduction remaining within the private sphere. The cost-effectiveness and
efficiency of a system of coercive familial heterosexuality structures property relations
to permit fathers to pass on property to their own legitimate offspring and allocates
primary responsibility for the care and upbringing of offspring to women.
Furthermore, the nuclear family provides the most accessible sex for men and, at the
same time, provides the illusion of transgressive sex through prostitution and extra-
marital affairs. And, as Linda Singer argues, "the family romance, with its images of
the pleasure of maternity, has the effect of mobilizing women to seek gratification
through the very forms of social organization that exploit and devalue them" (79). In
the family, women learn the "pleasures" of self-sacrifice and nurturance, the emotional
satisfactions of which are intended to substitute for financial reward for service. What
Singer terms the "disciplinary mechanism of the nuclear family," thus, works to
support phallocentrism with its privileging of certain body parts and practices over
others and its asymmetrical organization of sexuality (78). The Contract with America,
like the Meese Commission Report and the Bowers v. Hardwick decision, acts as such
a disciplinary mechanism to further the already asymmetrical organization of sexuality
in contemporary America.6

6 The Contract with America is to be succeeded by the Contract with the American
Family, authored by Ralph Reed of the Christian Coalition and endorsed by the
Republican leadership. This second contract, an agenda for a profound experiment in
social control, aims to bring many facets of American life into line with fundamentalist
Christian beliefs.
What is unspoken in the *Contract* in *Bowers v. Hardwick*, and in the Meese Commission Report is the violence of exclusion by which sexual identities, sexual relations, and sexual practices which fall outside of the protected nuclear family are produced as deviant, reprehensible, and, in some cases, subject to legal penalties. Gays, lesbians, bisexuals, readers and viewers of pornography, women who choose an abortion, poor unmarried teenage women with children—all who do not fit securely within a repressive heterosexual script which exalts the traditional family—are increasingly subject to a rhetoric of exclusion and shame. The America constructed in these documents has no room for alternative sexualities. In addition to the symbolic violence of exclusion which motivates these three government texts, however, the homophobia, sexism, puritanism, racism, and classism which is just barely disguised by their moralistic rhetoric creates a climate in which actual physical violence is somehow permissible when it is directed against a person whose sexuality is perceived as a threat to "the American family." Both the moves toward increasing regulation and the escalating violence may be traced to what *The Nation* terms the "dark currents of paranoia and violence now overtaking American politics (May 15, 1995). Even mainstream periodicals have begun to fear the moralistic regulatory ambitions of the Right. A *New York Times* editorial finds that the theocratic aspirations of the religious Right embody "a radical vision for regulating the private behavior of law-abiding citizens to accord with the preferences of fundamentalist and evangelical Christians (May 17, 1995). The tension between increasing pressure for a sexually plural society and increasing pressure for a sexually pure society sets a stage for violence.

---

7 Hate crimes against homosexuals, from gay-bashing to murder, is on the increase in the United States, a fact attributed by gay activists like Mel White, former ghostwriter for Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, and Billy Graham, to the escalating anti-gay rhetoric of the Christian right (*Stranger at the Gate: To Be Christian and Gay in America*, especially pages 248-317).
We find ourselves, at the end of a millennium of violence, and of a century which Avital Ronell characterizes as "a history of indecency," facing an increasingly violent bias against all non-normative sexualities (ix). By the end of the century, Ronell argues:

humanity will have exhausted the heroic mythemes on which so much has been staked. Humanity (a term which acquired the prestige of its contemporary usage at the Nuremberg trials) will certainly have to rethink the projects and projections that have, despite everything, traced out a history of indecency—a history which compromises the very possibility of thinking of a futurity. (Finitude's Score ix)

Ronell, considering the inhuman technologies with which we live, from the "smart" missiles of Operation Desert Storm to the "technopolicre in Los Angles with their electronic tagging systems and state of the art helicopter surveillance," speculates that this time we have "gone too far" (xi, xiv). However, this pessimistic assessment of the current moment holds within it, I would argue, a kernel of hope: once the fascistic, totalizing "heroic mythemes" have exhausted themselves, perhaps "humanity," always an exclusionary notion, will give way to smaller, more modest, but more inclusive models of social relationships. For the heroic myth of "humanity," which claimed, at its best, to honor the dignity and uniqueness of each individual, was the heroic myth which, at its worst, celebrated the blond, blue-eyed, heterosexual white male Aryan hero, and which made the Nuremberg trials necessary. As the century nears its close, the heterosexual script, in its various manifestations as persuasion, surveillance, and regulation—embedded in high-culture and pop-culture texts, religious and state documents, and familial and institutional structures—continues to be deployed as a tool which conscripts subjects into the current power regime and which uses the threat of violence to induce compliance.

The real enemy to liberation from the amorphous violence of surveillance and regulation is fascism, which, as Deleuze and Guattari are at pains to point out in Anti-
*Oedipus*, is not merely a historical phenomenon which died with Hitler and Mussolini, but is a present danger which inheres in us all in our love of power and our desire for that which dominates and oppresses us. The link which Deleuze and Guattari establish between fascism and the Oedipal family, based on an historically specific *production* of woman as lack, was explored in the last chapter, on Acker. Acker's narrator, Abhor, in an ironic disclaimer, says, "I'm not hinting at any possible link between the micro-despotism inherent in the American nuclear family and the macro-political despotism of Nazi Germany" (*Empire of the Senseless* 45). Of course, Abhor, Acker's voice here, is, like Deleuze and Guattari, claiming precisely that there is, in fact, a link between fascism and the Oedipal family, and that the link is the subordinate position of women within the social structure. I would like to look at Klaus Theweleit's study of fascism and misogyny for the light it throws on current right-wing efforts toward sexual purity. Prohibition logic, which attempts to outlaw all erotic variation, in Hitler's Germany and in contemporary America, is rooted in a link between the "holy family," male fascist desire, and the subordination of women.

In *Male Fantasies*, a two-volume psychoanalytic study of fascism, Theweleit investigates this link, arguing that the fascism of Nazi Germany is deeply entangled with a hatred and fear of women. In the Third Reich, Theweleit demonstrates, an extreme and rigorously enforced version of what we have termed the heterosexual script sublimated sexual desire and converted its repressed energies into violence. Theweleit links the murderous unconscious of the Freikorps warrior with a deep hatred and fear of female sexuality and power. The Freikorps, a volunteer army that stayed alive in Germany between the World Wars to fight the rising "Red tide" and which was the core of Hitler's Third Reich, expressed the suppressed drives, the hidden desires of the masses, Theweleit argues. Like Irigaray and other feminists, Theweleit claims that, in patriarchy, the unconscious and femaleness are so closely linked as to be almost
inseparable. Thus, masculine identity becomes a flight from femininity and from fear of ego dissolution. Hatred and dread of women, specifically of women's bodies and sexuality, is ultimately a fear of being swallowed, engulfed. The unisexual world of the Freikorps offered the bourgeois male refuge from women as material beings and, at the same time, fulfilled a longing for fusion with the Other, in this case, the legitimate camaraderie of the masculine warrior caste, as well as with the more abstract, and even more legitimate ideal of the German race.

Using the letters, songs, and memoirs of Freikorpsmen themselves, Theweleit meticulously paints a portrait of a male society in which women are, at once, conspicuously absent and triply oppressed through "adoration, murder, exploitation" (367). In an eerie first chapter the relationship of officers to women becomes vivid through the words of the officers themselves. Women as wives and sweethearts, even as "brides," are rendered asexual and nameless in letters and memoirs, present only as objects of worship which are, nevertheless, representations of weakness, thoughts which threaten to distract from manly duty. The chaste idealized and dematerialized woman of the imagination has, as her opposite, in the duality of fearful femininity, the class enemy, the "Red woman." Integral to the fascist ideal of masculinity is the persecution of the sexuality of this "Red woman," the "low-born' woman—proletarian, communist, Jew (=whore)—by first making her a prostitute, then murdering her" (367). Fascism thus equates male power with the complete elimination of female sexuality either by means of actual murder or by means of what Theweleit calls the "de-realization" of the ideal woman:

Relationships with women are dissolved and transformed into new male attitudes, into political stances, revelations of the true path, etc. As the woman fades out of sight, the contours of the male sharpen; that is the way in which the fascist mode of writing often proceeds. It could almost be said that the raw material for the man's 'transformation' is the sexually untouched, dissolving body of the woman he is with. (35)
In Theweleit's portrait of the Freikorps, the homosocial bond between men replaces almost entirely the sexual love between men and women, while a chaste and dematerialized version of the heterosexual script continues to be elevated as a German ideal. Real, flesh-and-blood women were sacrificed to the Nazi duality of the "de-realized," desexualized good woman and the sexualized "Red woman," associated with wetness and filth.

The subtitle of volume one of Male Fantasies, "women floods bodies history," contains the sustained metaphor of Theweleit's study: the fear of dissolution through union with a woman is analogized to the German fear of "floods," "blood," "all that flows," "dirt," "the mire," "the morass," "slime," "pulp," "shit." Fear of contamination transforms itself into acts of violence. A fascinating aspect of Kathy Acker's fictions is her brazen exploitation of these recurring metaphors which link women and filth. President George Bush, as Daddy-Fascist, curses his daughter for her immersion in the physical world of blood and shit:

(Kneels on the ground.) "God, if these masses of flesh that we call the women of this country—in particular, my daughter, her blood, this part of me that is diseased, whom I've just raped—were made by You:

"God, listen: . . .

"From its beginning, America has been a religious civilization.

"As soon as my daughter's dead, she'll be unburiable—no dogs will stick their noses into this cunt—because the stink of rebellion that is named menstrual blood never ever leaves skin, even that which is dead.

". . . It is the physical world that has caused all this. The physical world that is always changing, menstruating, turning to shit and turning its shit and sex, putrefaction into our white minds. All that is flesh will rot; women give birth to flesh. (My Mother: Demonology 173)

The images of mire and filth associated with women by Acker's Bush are uncannily close to the language of Theweleit's soldier's horror of slime. The fascist assault on the Red flood was an assault on the soldier's own unconscious, "the things that had to remain locked up, hidden in the dark" (427). The flood set loose by the rebels "was
connected, in some frightening, intolerable way, with [the soldier's] own pent-up streams. . . . Anything which was moist, wet, or flowed was intolerable" (427):

It was a physical certainty for him: If that stream reaches me, touches me, spills over me, then I will dissolve, sink, explode with nausea, disintegrate in fear, turn horrified into slime that will gum me up, mire that will suffocate me, a pulp that will swallow me like quicksand. I'll be in a state where everything is the same, inextricably mixed together, and no one will be able to tell what it is that's flowing down there. A demented inner scream—Heeelp! Who's going to pull me out of this? Who's going to put me back together, dry me out of this? . . . . White mother! come over here quickly with your rough washcloths and your bony hands and rub me down! Strict father, give me your gun (if YOU can't hold back this flood any longer) and let me go hunting for all those people who are letting it run out of themselves like animals . . . . I'm about to explode! (ellipses, Theeweilet's, 428)

"Those people," of course, included women who displayed their sexuality, or to whom sexuality could be imputed, gypsies, homosexuals, communists, and Jews. The fearful soldier's cry, "I'm about to explode," contains all the pent-up, deformed sexual desire that will be transformed into the violence of the Nazi regime. The images of moistness, wetness and redness which fill both Acker's and the Freikorps soldiers' texts are set against images of ostensible purity and whiteness: in Acker's text, "our white minds" represents masculine hardness and purity, a purity which Bush fears will be tainted by feminine menstrual blood and "putrefaction"; in the letters and memoirs of the Nazi soldiers, "white" suggests the desexualized, disembodied ideal woman, such as the "White mother" in the above passage, who is usually set up in opposition to the sexualized "Red woman." The warped and tormented sexuality which surfaces in the fictional passage attributed to President Bush and in the soldiers' texts may be read as an extreme version of a paradigmatic heterosexual script which constructs women as the inscrutable Other, object of either worship or fear, contempt, and hatred.

My deliberate juxtapositioning of three contemporary American government texts, a contemporary American fictional text, and texts from the letters and memoirs of Nazi soldiers is an effort to establish a historical continuum for "the 'territories' of a
fascistic male desire.8 Fascism, I wish to argue, far from marking a single monstrous episode in history, is, rather, any abrogation of power that relies on an assumption of a certain godlike certainty, along with a concomitant willingness to turn others into the Other by denying them their full humanity. Theweleit assumes both that the subject is produced in language in opposition to and in difference from the Other, and also that it is male subjectivity and desire which underlies the symbolic systems of Western patriarchal culture. As Turner and Carter point out, Theweleit's analysis is based on an understanding of language as founded on and as endlessly reproducing "fundamentally dichotomous relations between the sexes," in which women are positioned as object, as Other, to man's subject (202). For Theweleit, as for Deleuze and Guattari, fascism is seen as the paradigmatic expression of patriarchal violence against women. His project is conceived as an attempt both to evaluate and understand history and to negotiate with present manifestations of fascism. Theweleit makes quite clear that he is speaking not only of an aberration in Nazi Germany:

I don't want to make a categorical distinction between the types of the men who are the subjects of this book and all other men. Our subjects are equivalent to the tip of the patriarchal iceberg, but it's what lies beneath the surface that really makes the water cold. (171)

What lies beneath the surface, and what surfaces from time to time in acts of both symbolic and physical violence, is the urgency with which that abject Other is maintained in patriarchy as the necessary outside of white heterosexual male privilege.

The experience of Nazi Germany and contemporary America illustrates the way in

---

8 This is the term by which Chris Turner and Erica Carter describe the textural landscape of Theweleit's *Male Fantasies*, in their "Political Somatics" (200). They correctly point to the most disarming feature of the two-volume study as its framing of the political analysis as a Theweleit family narrative, which, I would add, immediately implicates the narrator in his subject, and possibly defuses reader defensiveness about his own implication in the portrait of male fascism.
which both women and other groups, most notably blacks, Jews and homosexuals, are
dehumanized, demonized, and produced as despised Other.

The violence of exclusion from the carefully policed borders of the heterosexual
script, the texts which we have looked at seem to imply, is based on fear of the Other.
Such a fear is, fundamentally, I would suggest, a fear that the Other has or will
somehow escape from the control of the dominant power regime. Pleasure which is
sought and found outside the regulatory script is a threat to the familial organization of
sexuality which perpetuates the current system of privilege. It is only this fear of a loss
of control and privilege, for example, that can explain the continuing distrust of the
auto-erotic pleasure of masturbation which underlies the Meese Commission Report.
Women who find pleasure outside the heterosexual script, i.e., lesbians and unmarried
sexually active women, are perceived as a particular threat, although even they are, of
course, within the social system which heterosexuality constructs: perceived through it
(butch/femme), regulated by it (you can or cannot do this or that in public), and
disciplined by it (labels of "nympho," "pervert," "dyke" and actions such as rape).
Even women whose sexual roles fall clearly within a narrowly defined heterosexual
script, however, find that their social power is limited by their production as eroticized
objects of desire or as de-eroticized mothers, both circulated within a rhetoric of male
possession. In addition to the physical violence of rape and sexual abuse to which
women have been subject, they have consistently suffered from the violence of
exclusion from a discourse of desire and of pleasure. Pleasure, like knowledge, has
become a crucial currency of power in late twentieth-century Western culture, and
masculine control of the production, circulation, and representation of pleasure ensures
that women's pleasures will be erased, or, at best, marginalized. Male representations
of woman's sexuality facilitates male pleasure and privilege and ensures women's self-
censorship by producing, as peculiarly feminine, the pleasures of submissiveness and
self-sacrifice. Much of the actual work of surveillance and regulation, moreover, is accomplished by soliciting women to police themselves. Among the obstacles which women writers have traditionally faced, in addition to the realities of the literary marketplace, is the reality of self-censorship (the choice of silence over social disapproval) and the reality of the woman who silences another woman by recalling her to her designated role within the heterosexual script. As long as men are the only ones authorized to answer the question, "What do women want?" women's "wants" will necessarily reflect and maintain male interests.

The women writers who have been the object of this study have seized a place of enunciation, answering for themselves the question of what women want—or at least what some women don't want. Their novels, which interrupt the habits of thought and behavior which are the signifying effects of the heterosexual script, begin to take up the question of female desire. Each writer has produced texts which make trouble for the conventional heterosexual script, reiterating the script in such a way as to foreground the pain and alienation of some women trapped within the Oedipal organization of sexuality, and at the same time, the pain and alienation of women for whom non-conventional choices are labeled "deviance." Making trouble, troubling oppressive scripts, is, thus, an act of refusal of male-produced representations of docile femininity. "Now I believe in making trouble. If women have any duty at all," Avital Ronell asserts, "essentially it's to be a pain in the ass" (*Angry Women* 130). The previous chapters have shown three contemporary writers, Fay Weldon, Angela Carter, and Kathy Acker, self-consciously engaged in the work of making trouble, of being a literary "pain in the ass." Challenging both literary and sexual conventions, their texts

---

9 In Fay Weldon's novels, as we have seen, women act as both enablers to other women's liberation and as obstacles. Phyllis, for example, works hard in *The Fat Woman's Joke* to bring Esther back to her senses, i.e., back into the domestic role in the family, the role which she had fled.
trouble the gendered and sexed power relations that structure a sexist and heterosexist culture.

Judith Butler, believing, like Ronell, that it is women's duty to be trouble-makers, recalls the complicated relationship between power and transgression as she remembers a child's formative insight into the nature of a law that generates trouble in the same moment that it prohibits it:

To make trouble was, within the reigning discourse of my childhood, something one should never do precisely because that would get one in trouble. The rebellion and its reprimand seemed to be caught up in the same terms, a phenomenon that gave rise to my first critical insight into the subtle ruse of power: The prevailing law threatened one with trouble, even put one in trouble, all to keep one out of trouble. Hence, I concluded that trouble is inevitable and the task, how best to make it, what best way to be in it. (*Gender Trouble* ix)

Weldon, Carter, and Acker have understood how best to make trouble, how to most productively unsettle the normative heterosexual script which works to privilege certain identities and to abject others. The risk, of course, is that their troublesome texts may be recuperated by power, may be merely the transgression that confirms the dominant power regime, as their resistance is subsumed into the dense web of apparatuses, institutions and scripts that is the matrix of our habitual existence. Each of the texts which we have read, however, in its subversive performance of the great performative of the heterosexual script, has rendered the script a bit more vulnerable, a bit more fragile. Ultimately the tactical efficacy of the novels' exposure of the mechanisms by which the script conscripts subjects depends on their success in engaging readers in the project of undermining a system of power which marginalizes women and homosexuals. A swarm of resistant texts, interrupting habits of thought and behavior, may traverse a culture, leaving a disrupted heterosexual script in its wake. Put another way, a convergence of trouble-making texts in the hands of trouble-making readers makes revolution possible.
I began this study with the assertion that we need new stories. The study has proceeded as an analysis of stories that interrogate old scripts and that hint at new sexual possibilities. The task of the woman writer is to work within and against male narratives, I have argued, in order to present not just a reimagined female subjectivity and desire, but, rather, to show also the ambivalences and contradictions of women's current position within social and sexual structures. That women find pleasure and fulfillment, as well as violence and exclusion, in the heterosexual script is a complicated story that is not easily told. If the emphasis of the fictional texts which have been the object of this study has been on the script as oppressive, this emphasis may be seen as a crucial counter to the masculine narratives which they engage, narratives which have produced woman as a pliant domestic, a submissive sex object, and a self-sacrificing maternal nurturer. This cultural and psychic construction of woman to the measure of male desire, while it has, incidentally, produced female pleasures and satisfactions, has been systematically organized to exclude women's own participation in the discourses surrounding sexuality and desire. Silence is the ultimate violence practiced against women in the fictions we have read: in Carter's *The Passion of the New Eve* the villainous poet Zero forbids his wives the use of speech, and, in Acker's *My Mother: Demonology*, the narrator's rape by her father, President Bush, leaves her unable to speak. The anguish of women's alienation from language is a thread which runs through the texts of all three writers, yet the texts themselves stand as contradictions to female silence. Distrusting language because it has been used by masculine culture to script their lives, women writers nevertheless acknowledge that it is all we have, and their stories twist it to their own purposes. When Acker's Don Quixote suggests to her dog companion that pornography incites rebellion, the dog replies, "All stories . . . are revolt" (146). The women writers of this study, as well as their female narrators—all tellers of stories—stake out dangerous territory: the narrator's life, in many cases,
depends on her story-telling. The relation between power and stories and performance is a matter of survival, we learn from women's fiction. Women—writing, seizing scripts—perform themselves into subjectivity.

Carter, Acker, and Weldon follow in the tradition of another woman who told stories to save her life. The figure of Scheherazade lingers in the cultural imagination as a woman who not only uses stories to stave off death, but who captures the power of the throne in the process. An educated woman who "had collected a thousand books of histories," who had "perused the works of the poets" and "studied philosophy and the sciences, arts and accomplishments," Scheherazade is also courageous and cunning (The Arabian Nights 13). She rejects the position of privilege and exemption from harm that is her due as the daughter of the sultan Shahriyar's closest advisor, and insists on becoming the sultan's bride, knowing that it will be her fate to die on the morning after the consummation of the marriage. However, refusing to accept the death that has been the fate of all the previous brides of the sultan, Scheherazade plays a high-stakes game of a thousand and one nights in which she reverses the power relations of sultan and subject, of man and woman, of husband and wife, replacing these with a relation of story-teller and rapt audience. Scheherazade's political power can best be imagined as using the cultural capital she has acquired to exploit woman's potential as subversive performer. Simultaneously both offering and withholding, she celebrates difference in a seductive performance of her Otherness, but as the Other who is also a subject of language, a subject to whom the sultan himself becomes subject. Stories are always seductions, and it may be that it is the seductive female story-teller who exercises the most power to re-write cultural scripts. Scheherazade, the archetypal figure of the strategic female story-teller, not only saves her own life, after all, but also the lives of her sisters, those women who would have been the next murdered brides of the sultan. For, as myth has it, during the thousand and one nights, Scheherazade won
the sultan's heart. After the thousand and first night, Shahriyar protests his love for Scheherazade and praises her for restoring him to reason and for being a "means for delivering His creatures from oppression and slaughter" (816).

The political currency of the Scheherazade figure is evident in Naguib Mahfouz' recent re-telling of her story in *Arabian Nights and Days* (1995). In Mahfouz' hands the exotic tale of an Arabian princess who brings succor to her people takes on bitter contemporary political overtones. Although her stories are described as "white magic" by her adoring husband in this contemporary Egyptian version of the story, Scheherazade cannot relinquish her bitterness about the sultan Shahriyar's arrogance and despotism and cruelty. "May God have mercy on those innocent virgins."

Mahfouz' Scheherazade cries bitterly, long after her own life is no longer in danger (2, 3). For her, the blood of the women who have died to fulfill his grisly need still stains the sultan's hands. The power of Scheherazade as trope in contemporary America and Britain is that women are, in fact, gaining access, as storytellers, to vast audiences. What kind of stories they tell, however, and whether their stories open up other avenues of power to women will determine the potency of their story-telling.

For finally, of course, to subvert scripts is not enough. To denaturalize heterosexuality without calling into question the terms of its organization and deployment may simply re-install the heterosexual script as it currently exists. To perform a masculine performative script with an eye to subversion implies a dependency on the structures being critiqued, an inevitable dependency, but a weak first step only. What, then, are the schizophrenic acts which would topple the Oedipus with all that has come to imply in the course of this project? What is better than subversion? "Anger is better. There is a sense of being in anger. A reality and presence. An awareness of worth. It is a lovely surging," Toni Morrison writes in *The Bluest Eye* (43). The fuel for the political work that must be done to restructure social
and sexual relations may, then, lie in anger. In the 1991 RE/SEARCH publication, *

Angry Women*, female performance artists, musicians, philosophers, theorists, "sexperts," and novelists—straight and gay—discuss with honesty and passion critical questions about sex and gender. Giving voice to their anger about the dogmas, taboos, and clichés which have scripted their lives and to their determination to resist such scripts, this collection of interviews integrates theoretical speculation with personal disclosure. The performance artist Karen Finley says that a lot of her work is about "trying to get people angry," trying to get them to really experience their feelings. It's also about trying to get her audience to acknowledge other people's pain and anger:

What's weird is: often when a woman gets angry at a man, he'll say this cliché: "You turn me on when you get mad!" as if to tame her. And there's something about "taming" (or controlling) a woman struggling to assert herself, that's really hideous. I'm angry, but I feel like I'm doing something about it—so it feels good. (49)

Because the passion which these "angry women" invite is about self-empowerment, not about taming the other, it is not allied with the violence which the fascist rhetoric of the Right spawns. It is, rather, an assertion of subjectivity and self-determination which is a kind of coming-out experience for women as self-defining sexual subjects. bell hooks, too, talks of an "emotional coming out" which occurs when an emotion which has been locked away is permitted to surface. "So when you reopen those doors, the emotion that first emerges is monstrous—... feel that rage," she implores (81). A sense of dissonance between the expectations of the ideal heterosexual family and women's actual experience of pain and violence and repression broaches, for some, a more determined immersion in the conventional heterosexual script, and for others, an angry questioning of the script. The anger that these women artists urge is Morrison's "awareness of worth," an anger of empowerment that takes women beyond a feeling of victimization to motivate and fuel resistance and, perhaps even, to fund the
work necessary to bring about a system of social and political and economic justice and
equality.

To tell stories as Weldon, Carter, and Acker have done is to lay the ground for a
new politics which goes beyond identity politics. Stories are powerful agents of
change, as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* demonstrated. The Mecse
Commission Report is, in fact, a symptom of the fear that the dominant power regime
has of representation. Women who self-consciously use the power of representation to
speak the truth about their experience of the heterosexual script begin the difficult work
of resignifying heterosexuality. Such a refusal of silence is a radical act. Mobilizing
the revolutionary power of the schizophrenic artist to topple phallic structures through
small signifying acts which unsettle conventional scripts, women writers like Fay
Weldon, Angela Carter, and Kathy Acker—angry, aware of their own worth, and
empowered by language—are working to bring about a more equitable distribution of
power. Together with their readers, in whom they activate an angry subjectivity, they
are rethinking the terms of the heterosexual script, reterritorializing sexuality, and
seizing the apparatuses of discourse. Women must acknowledge that we *want* power,
*want* sex, *want* love, *want* self-determination. We must meet prohibition logic with a
logic of desire which is grounded in pluralism and tolerance. Feminist writers provide
an oppositional consciousness to repressive power regimes, a consciousness which
works to reconfigure sexuality and restructure sexual power. Stories will be crucial to
this reconfiguration and restructuring. For those who would undo the heterosexual
script are still themselves implicated in its workings, and it requires a leap of
imagination to envision another way of pleasure and of power and of relationship.
Acker, Carter, and Weldon invite just such a leap of imagination by enabling their
readers to see the scriptedness of a coercive heterosexuality and to begin the process of
negotiation with the script. Their texts incite readers to break with the heterosexual script and to begin the difficult task of remapping sexual relations and reimagining love.
Works Cited


320
"Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)."  


