

Seeing gender

Childhood

When I was a child, the only thing I wanted was to be a pirate. Because I wasn't a stupid child, I knew that I couldn't.

I couldn't send men down the plank, I couldn't see sights stranger and more wonderful than those seen in my childhood dreams, I couldn't dwell in seas that would freeze my lips and whose living and dead denizens would tear away my bones, I couldn't swing from any yardarm.

'Because,' I announced, 'my parents won't let me.'

'If only my parents were dead, I could do all that I wanted to do: I could run away to sea.'

I couldn't murder my parents because I couldn't imagine murdering them. There was no such thing in my world as murdering parents. And pirates weren't people who had murdered parents because pirates didn't have parents.

I was clever, like a rat, so I came up with another way that I could become a pirate. I was well aware that, in my family, my mother was the one who made all the decisions. I concluded that I wasn't a pirate because my mother wouldn't allow me to be one.

I argued: as if she's a map, she's the key to my buried treasure.

I argued: this is my mother's personality; she's a woman who loves to laugh and she never has any fun. She lives in a monogamous marriage with a man who isn't mean enough to her, who yields to her every silly whim.

I argued: if my mother begins to have an illicit affair with a handsome, intelligent, and nasty man, she'll know what it is to be happy and then she'll know that I need happiness and so I should be allowed to be a pirate.

With all my girlish strength, I begged all the dead pirates who lived in the seas to make my mother fall in love with a devastating man.

It was then that I knew that I could never be a pirate because I was a girl.

I couldn't even run away to see like Herman Melville.

Barely born, I was dead. The world of my parents, my bossy mother and my weak father, the world in which I had to wear white gloves and party girdles even though I was skinny, was a dead world. Whereas pirates lived in the *living* world because pirates had fun. Since pirates lived in my books,

I ran into the world of books, the only living world I, a girl, could find.
I never left that world.

Adult

I'm no longer a child and I still want to be, to live with the pirates.

Because I want to live forever in wonder.

The difference between me as child and me as adult is this and only this: when I was a child, I longed to travel into, to live in wonder. Now, I know, as much as I can know anything, that to travel into wonder is to be wonder. So it matters little whether I travel by plane, by rowboat, or by book. Or, by dream.

I do not see, for there is no *I* to see. This is what the pirates know.

There is only seeing and, in order to go to see, one must be a pirate.

Looking for a body

When I was a child, I knew that the separation between me and piracy had something to do with being a girl. With gender. With being in a dead world. So gender had something to do with death. And not with sight, for *to see was to be other than dead. To see was to be an eye, not an I.*

But it's not enough to live in books. The older I become, the more insufficient becomes this living in books. I want to find the body.

In *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un*, Luce Irigaray says that men see differently than women. 'Woman takes pleasure more from touching than from looking, and her entry into a dominant scopic economy signifies, again, her consignment to passivity: she is to be the beautiful object of contemplation. While her body finds itself thus eroticized . . . her sexual organ represents *the horror of nothing to see.*'¹

Judith Butler, talking about the body and so about the act of seeing in her discussion of Irigaray's deconstruction of Plato's *Timaeus*, argues: 'against those who would claim the body's irreducible materiality is a necessary precondition for feminist practice, I suggest that prized materiality may well be constituted through an exclusion and a degradation of the feminine that is profoundly problematic for feminism'.²

If we are to talk about gender, first we must locate the body, first we must see whether or not the body is and is only material.

Butler further argues that if materiality is to be considered a basis for the body and so for gender, it must first be asked whether materiality is a ground. That is, the metaphysics in which materiality as ground lodges

must be found, and the political concerns and aims that have led to these metaphysics:

If the body signified as prior to signification is an effect of signification, then the mimetic or representational status of language, which claims that signs follow bodies as their necessary mirrors, is not mimetic at all.³

I want to return to this key statement when I talk about language at the end of this essay.

Butler proceeds to demonstrate that an equation between the (female) body and materiality and the positing of that closure named *male/female* depends upon an exclusion of women. The 'phallogentric economy . . . produces the "feminine" as its constitutive outside. Matter is the site at which the feminine is excluded.'⁴ Women are excluded both as the improper and as the propertyless.

In his *Timaeus*, Plato divides generation into three parts: the process of generation, that in which generation takes place, and 'that of which the thing generated is a resemblance naturally produced'.⁵ The generation source or spring is likened to a father; the receiving principle to a mother; the intermediate nature to a child. The child resembles the father, for both father and child possess the capability of mimesis. Whereas the woman, the receiver, cannot change, for she has no form and so can neither be named nor discussed.

She has no essence, for all that comes into being, according to Plato, partakes of form.

I knew this as a child, before I had ever read Plato, Irigaray, Butler. That, as a girl, I was outside the world. I wasn't. I had no name. For me, language was being. There was no entry for me into language. As a receptacle, as a womb, as Butler argues, I could be entered, but I could not enter, and so I could neither have nor make meaning in the world.

I was unspeakable so I ran into the language of others.

In this essay, as yet, I am only repeating those languages.

Though I couldn't be named, everyone was naming me: 'This naming of what cannot be named is itself a penetration into this receptacle that is at once a violent erasure, one that establishes it as an impossible yet necessary site for all further inscriptions.'⁶ That is, the name *female* acts to erase the presence of women.

When I was a girl, I wanted to do anything but be a girl, for both *girl* and *woman* were the names of nothing.

Now that I am no longer nothing, now that I have run away and so thrown off the names *girl* and *woman*, I am left not even with that. Not even with nothing. With a name such as *pirate* which seems solely metaphorical. And that isn't good enough. I want to *see* my body.

Searching for the body

When I was a girl, I ran into books. Like Alice in Lewis Carroll's *Through The Looking Glass*, a text which Irigaray turns to in her introduction to *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un*, I was asking, 'Who am I?'

Alice falls, as I do when I read this book, into a mirror-world, a text world, and there is presented with five poems and songs. New texts as opposed to the songs and lullabies she remembers. These five texts try to teach her who she is.

The first poem is found in a looking-glass book and so, to be comprehended, must be read in a mirror. A mirror of a mirror: a labyrinth. Though many of the meanings of the words of this poem 'Jabberwocky' are ambiguous, its story is clear, simple.

Stanza 1: description of the natural world.

Stanza 2: a father warns his son to shun three different monsters.

Stanza 3: the son pursues the most monstrous of these monsters.

Stanza 4: suddenly, the main monster, the Jabberwock, appears.

Stanza 5: the son slays the Jabberwock.

Stanza 6: the father congratulates his killer son.

Stanza 7: whereupon nature is restored to herself. Or, to itself.

An Oedipal tale with a few interesting changes.

In the poem, the genders of the monsters are unknown; the major monster is an *it*. In the Greek myth and its reiterations, the monster is a Sphinx which, according to Robert Graves, had a woman's head, a lion's body, a snake's tail, and the wings of an eagle. Thus, in the Sphinx were united the female and animal worlds. As in related *monsters* or *wonders* such as Medusa. 'Was Oedipus', asks Graves, 'a thirteenth-century invader of Thebes, who suppressed the old Minoan cult of the goddess . . . ?'⁷

In the Oedipal myth, there are only two active females: the Sphinx, if the Sphinx is female, and Jocasta. Jocasta is not so much an actor as a site, the site for the wife-function and the mother-function. All else that we know about her is that she suicides: perhaps her only possible action in a male-dominated world. The Sphinx, one might note, fares not much better. Whereas in 'Jabberwocky', there is no female, person or site; there is only the *he* and the *it*. The *he* world is composed of humans; the *it* realm consists of nature and of the monstrous. One arises out of the other.

Since there's neither any antagonism between the men in 'Jabberwocky', whereas in the Oedipal myth the murder of father by son is the core of the tale, nor are there any females, it is possible to draw a connection, as does Hesiod in his rendition of the Pandora myth, between the presence of the

female and, if not patricide, at least male-to-male violence. The cliché would be that (hetero-)sexuality leads to violence between men.

In this sense, the centre of 'Jabberwocky', of that text the majority of whose words are ambiguous, is that which is missing.

Alice, in fact, doesn't understand this poem at all. More specifically, its perusal triggers the beginning of her confusion in looking-glass land.

As she continues travelling, her bewilderment increases. And so the child arrives in a woods where things have no name.

'What will become of *my* name when I go in?' asks Alice. When reading 'Jabberwocky', she was confused about words relating to objects; now she can no longer find the meaning of words relating to the subject. To herself.

This woods is the beginning of the mirror of the mirror, of the labyrinth, in which all will be lost. Placing her hand on the trunk of one of those trees, she exclaims, 'What *does* it call itself, I wonder? I do believe it's got no name . . .' And immediately she wonders, 'And now, who am I?'

Luce Irigaray quoted this passage in the preface of *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un*: 'I will remember,' Alice continues, 'if I can!' But she can't. All she knows is that who she is has to do with L.

Is it possible that the girl can find her actual body, and so what gender might be, in language? In a letter that, not yet language, has no discernible *mimetic* meaning?

Two 'fat little men', Tweedledum and Tweedledee, present the second text, the second mirror. This charming poem, which echoes a bit of King Richard's speech in Shakespeare's *Richard II*, describes reality as a male-and-neuter world which is cannibalistic, moralistic, and hypocritical.

Remember that Lewis Carroll wrote *Through The Looking Glass* for a child.

In the fat boys' song, a Walrus and a Carpenter seduce a number of oyster children and, then, eat all of them up. Afterwards, the Walrus weeps.

Hearing this poem makes Alice doubt what she thinks is reality. Specifically, her reality. Does she, as Plato might put it, partake of essence, or is she just a figure in a man's dream? In the Oedipal dream? For, red, the King is (like) Oedipus after his slaughter of his father. And it is he who is dreaming Alice. 'If that there King was to wake,' explains Tweedledum to Alice, 'you'd go out – bang! – just like a candle!'

After protesting her demise for less than a second, Alice comes up with this reply: 'Besides, if I'm only a sort of thing in his dream, what are *you*, I should like to know?'

'Ditto,' said Tweedledum.

'Ditto, ditto!' cried Tweedledee.

Leaving the reality brothers who are now doing just what an old song

said they would do, Alice sojourns through a landscape whose perceptual objects keep shifting. Until she meets a man who can take care of her *reality* or *essence* problem.

Humpty Dumpty, a true egg-head and individualist, tells Alice: 'When I choose a word, it means just what I want it to mean . . .' Then he presents the third text. In this poem, the narrator, who appears to be or mirrors Humpty, tries to tell some fishes what to do but they won't listen to him so he prepares to boil them alive. As he's trying to open the door to their bedroom so he can murder them all, the poem ends.

The main difference between this text and the previous one is that now the poem's speaker is first rather than third person. And so the terror of the world the poem is mirroring no longer is separate from the world outside the poem. Emphasising this terror, the egg-head's poem ends the way a dream ends when the dreamer / the dreamed is being chased by a murderer through sand. When the faster the dreamer tries to run, the more her feet get caught in those deepening, thickening sands . . .

Alice is searching for herself through texts of fear.

The Knight who, Alice had been told in the beginning of her journey, was destined to rescue her and bring her to sovereignty presents the next-to-last poem. Such is the nature of nights. He recites a song whose name is 'Haddocks' Eyes'.

Fish live next to the bodies of dead pirates.

'No,' says the aged crumbling Knight. 'The [poem's] name really is "The Aged Aged Man".'

He changes this name twice more.

Unlike the previous four texts, this poem does not tell a story. Beneath its fantastical surface, it is realistic: its content is that of an old man's experience of loneliness and poverty.

In his 'Isa's Visit To Oxford', Lewis Carroll referred to himself as 'The Aged Aged Man'.

When these songs are over, Alice becomes a queen. She has been initiated into language, into the reality of the world, for she has learned that, being female, she has no possible existence. So now she can be an adult:

"And what *is* this on my head?" she exclaimed in a tone of dismay, as she put her hands up to something very heavy, that fitted tight all around her head . . .

'It was a golden crown.'

The final text is the only one both spoken by a woman and which mentions women. In this song, Alice, once subject, becomes completely object or abject, for 'hundreds of voices' describe her to herself. As mirror mirrors mirror, she learns her proper place in the world as I, as Alice's

reader, thus as Alice, learn mine. I think that I, the reader, am a subject in the world until the White Queen warns me, in this world, things are reversed and subjects are not what they seem to be: “Which is easier to do,” she asks Alice, “Un-dish-cover the fish, or dishcover the riddle?”

Remember a joke in poor taste about smell and women.

The world is finally and fully nightmare. As soon as the song ends, Alice elects to destruct the world.

But she is only shaking a helpless kitten. She is destroying nothing. Can I escape by stopping reading?

I am Alice who ran into a book in order to find herself. I have found only the reiterations, the mimesis of patriarchy, or my inability to be. No body anywhere.

Who am I?

Has anybody seen gender?

Other than mimesis

There might be some clues to the White Queen’s fish riddle in Butler’s discussion of Irigaray’s deconstruction of the *Timaeus*.

According to the Platonic model of generation, both the father and the child, the image of the father, possess the ability to repeat themselves. If language is seen as mimetic, they possess language.

But what if language need not be mimetic?

I am looking for the body, my body, which exists outside its patriarchal definitions. Of course, that is not possible. But who is any longer interested in the possible? Like Alice, I suspect that the body, as Butler argues, might not be co-equivalent with materiality, that my body might deeply be connected to, if not be, language.

But what is this language? This language which is not constructed on hierarchical subject–object relations?

When I dream, my body is the site, not only of the dream, but also of the dreaming and of the dreamer. In other words, in this case or in this language, I cannot separate subject from object, much less from the acts of perception.

I have become interested in languages which I cannot *make up*, which I cannot *create* or even *create in*: I have become interested in languages which I can only come upon (as I disappear), a pirate upon buried treasure. The dreamer, the dreaming, the dream.

I call these languages, *languages of the body*.

There are, I suspect, a plurality or more of such languages. One such is the language that moves through me or in me or . . . for I cannot separate language body and identity . . . when I am moving through orgasm or orgasms. I shall give you an example. Nothing has been *made up* or *created*:

clear our forest water animals plants spout up twigs move twigs in lips go
down under liquid comes out the animal there turns over

in safe place. center of. the tendrils are moving over the water. going down
going deep and now the music begins only music is slow nothing happening
in there where the trees grow. (there it's all happening.) just goes on and on
what? nothing, for the body has taken over consciousness, is falling asleep as
if in a faint, all pleasant here and quiet, lilac and grey, water mirrors air, long
tall trees equal shadows. no difference. boat sails water like glass as long as
there's no possibility of coming the coming is more violent keep on going
because water and air mirrors endless therefore deep in there. the animals will
come out the fur fur all lots of little animals can't stop now beep beep I'm
going to find somewhere the gray going on there I go over again so there's
green in the landscape this is so intense it can hardly be handled.

the treasure in the
midst of the
churning waters gold
dot
churn/separate all
around under in rolling
cylinders gets deeper
and deeper isn't bearable
such an opening cut the
whole earth disappearing
until all there's left is cries –
oh oh oh oh no one knows
from what
the blackness
and afterwards the
repercussions
the very treasure – so horny for

Could gender lie here?

Notes

- 1 Luce Irigaray, *This Sex which is not One* (New York: Cornell University, 1985), p. 26.
- 2 Judith Butler, 'Bodies That Matter', *Engaging With Irigaray*, eds Burke, Schor and Whitford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 143.
- 3 Butler, p. 144.
- 4 Butler, p. 149.
- 5 Butler, p. 153.
- 6 Butler, p. 157.
- 7 Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths* (Rhode Island: Moyer Bell Limited, 1994), vol. 2, p. 13.