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Cixous, Hélène

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Cixous, Hélène

in Literary Theory from 1966 to the Present

from The Encyclopedia of Literary and Cultural Theory

Hélène Cixous is a highly prolific Francophone theorist, poet, novelist, playwright, philosopher, and literary critic: indeed, she is a writer whose work resists easy categorization. Although the majority of her publications are works of experimental fiction, she is most widely known in the English-speaking world for her contributions to French feminist and literary theory and for formulating the concept of *écriture féminine*, or feminine writing.

Cixous was born in Oran, Algeria, in 1937 of Spanish/French and Jewish/German descent. Coming of age in an atmosphere of lingual and cultural plurality greatly influenced her writing, as did experiencing the death of her father at age 11. When Cixous was 18, she moved from Algeria to Paris, where she passed her *agrégation* in 1959. While teaching at the University of Nanterre in 1968, she received the Doctorat d'État, upon completing an eight-year doctoral thesis on James Joyce. Later that year, in response to the May 1968 student uprisings, Cixous helped found the experimental University of Paris VIII-Vincennes and was soon granted a professorship in English literature. She published her first novel, *Dedans*, in 1969 and was subsequently awarded the prestigious Prix Médicis. In 1974, Cixous founded a doctoral program in *études féminines* (feminine studies) at Vincennes, which endured a tumultuous relationship with the French government, at times losing accreditation. This program was subsequently expanded into the Centre des recherches en études féminines in 1980 and now offers a range of undergraduate and postgraduate programs, as well as a research seminar led by Cixous.

Cixous first entered the English-speaking literary scene with the publication of "The laugh of the Medusa" (1976[1975]). In this essay, Cixous employs Derridean deconstruction to recast the binary opposition of man/woman. Along with "Sorties," a piece from *The Newly Born Woman* (Cixous & Clément 1986 [1975]), "Medusa" introduces and expounds Cixous's notion of feminine writing, a concept still regarded in the Anglo-American world as her most defining contribution to critical theory. Her conceptualization of *écriture féminine* is not limited to her theoretical texts, but continues on the creative front in her experimental fiction and drama. Indeed, her attempts to theorize *écriture féminine* cannot be separated from her practice of *écriture féminine*, which is displayed in all of her writing. Often misunderstood, feminine writing is writing that resists the dominant discourse and, as such, defies any stable codification. Building on Jacques Derrida's analysis of logocentrism and the post-Freudian theories of Jacques Lacan, Cixous envisions a mode of writing that represents what is repressed in the Symbolic order. This order, which she asserts as fundamentally phallogentric, sustains itself through a network of oppositional hierarchies such as man/woman, mind/body, self/other, which inexorably privilege the masculine. In an attempt to challenge and undermine this domineering logic, Cixous calls for a way of articulating nonhierarchical difference and asserts the revolutionary capacity of *écriture féminine*.

Cixous's ongoing theorization of writing adopts the Lacanian idea that identity and consciousness are conceptualized through language and also reflects Lacan's method of linking language to the body and sexuality. To resist the reductive definitions of "woman" in phallogentric discourse and the exclusion of embodied female experience, Cixous advocates writing that echoes the rhythms and processes of women's bodies, writing that is forceful and fluid, exceeding linear boundaries. She argues that writing, as a physical act, should not repress the reality of the body, but give it a voice. The phenomenon of pregnancy, specifically, provides Cixous with an ample metaphor for selfhood that accommodates, rather than appropriates, the other. In addition to representing female sexuality, she advocates writing that undermines the unitary, authorial "I," opening space for multiple voices and perspectives within a single text. For Cixous, writing is a method of surpassing the opposition of self/other and exploring the capacity for multiplicity within each person.

Though Cixous's concept of feminine writing elicits charges of essentialism for its expression of the sexed body, it is important to clarify that the markers of "masculine" and "feminine" within her work do not denote physical sex, but rather distinct behavioral models. The masculine mode of relation or exchange is marked by censorship, order, and binary logic, while the feminine is characterized by abundance, plurality, and excess. Cixous relates these modes to male and female libidinal economies, to the distinct ways in which each sex experiences *jouissance*, or pleasure. Though these economies are linked to the sexed body through the experience of *jouissance*, they are not irrevocably tethered to it. Women may be predisposed to feminine economy due to their libidinal experiences, capacity for motherhood, and marginal position in society, but men can enter a feminine relational mode, just as woman can participate in masculine economy. Cixous espouses the possibility of *bisexuality*, using the term in its psychoanalytic context to denote the capacity for both femininity and masculinity within each subject. Through her concept of writing, she seeks a balance of these economies, a coexistence of masculine and feminine that can only be achieved if the feminine is given a voice.

The “sexed” elements of Cixous's theories are perhaps the most misunderstood, due in part to occasional inconsistencies in her terminology. Since her initial works, she has avoided the use of gendered terms, while retaining the key concepts these terms represent. In the essay “Extreme fidelity” (Sellers 1988) Cixous recognizes that her use of the words masculine and feminine at times interferes with her attempts at deconstruction, causing misinterpretations, and recommends a movement away from gendered binary categories. In this vein, her later works have continued to explore the revolutionary potential of writing, without describing such writing as specifically feminine.

In her early works, the writers Cixous presents as exemplary of revolutionary writing are men, such as Shakespeare and Franz Kafka. It is not until Cixous discovers the Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector that she is able to put a female face to her vision of writing. In her capacity as a literary critic, Cixous has devoted much attention to Lispector, whose work embodies Cixous's notion of representing difference without appropriation. In the collection *Reading with Clarice Lispector* (1990), taken from Cixous's seminars throughout the 1980s, Cixous enters into dialogue with Lispector's texts, which continually destabilize the borders of the unitary subject and renegotiate the relationship between self and other. More recently, Cixous's work has drawn on numerous women writers, including Marina Tsvetaeva and Ingeborg Bachmann.

During the 1980s, Cixous formed an ongoing collaboration with director Ariane Mnouchkine and began writing theatrical works for the Théâtre du Soleil in Paris. The dramatic technique of speaking through multiple voices granted Cixous new-found freedom as a writer, enabling her to display openly her deconstruction of the closed “I” and assume several identities at once. For Cixous, the format of theater readily lends itself to the exploration of historical events. As such, her plays written for the Théâtre du Soleil reflect a renewed attention to post-colonialism and engage themes of political and ethnic, rather than gendered, alterity.

Throughout the 1990s, Cixous continued to theorize the practice of writing in the context of otherness. A series of lectures published as the book *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing* (1993) explore in greater detail Cixous's vision of writing praxis. Describing three distinct schools or means of writing - the School of the Dead, the School of Dreams, and the School of Roots she asserts the need for writing to tap into the unconscious and attempt representation of the repressed. She presents the practice of writing as a descending, inward climb, a continuous struggle to encounter the deepest of human mysteries. Linking writing with death, she describes how the writer, in submitting to the text, suffers a loss of selfhood by leaving behind the familiar and approaching the enigmatic. Cixous asserts the experience of loss as an important resource for writers and relates how the death of her father initiated her own descent into writing. Dream imagery is also presented as fuel for the writer, by forming a gateway to the unconscious mind. In her rereading of Leviticus, Cixous draws an association between birds, women, and writing in their status as *imund* (unclean) and asserts that writing should reach beyond censorship and societal taboos to approach what is deemed abominable. Her subsequent collection *Stigmata* (1998) resurrects this motif of birds and women and further explores her central ideal that writing should, above all, jar the reader out of complacency. She describes texts that sting and pierce as *stigmatexts*, using the notion of stigmata as that which wounds but also stimulates. Though questions of gender and alterity are featured throughout *Three Steps* and *Stigmata*, within these later works the question of man/woman is largely subsumed in an examination of self/other.

The most recent seam in her oeuvre is a string of autobiographical works. For Cixous, writing as both process and product is able to capture and remember what would otherwise disappear. Her life-writings reveal an endeavor to give expression to the numerous facets of her identity and personal history. *The Day I Wasn't There* (2006a[2000]) and *Reveries of the Wild Woman* (2006c [2000]) recount stories from Cixous's early life while investigating notions of presence and absence, exile and otherness. *Dream I Tell You* (2006b[2003]), addressed to friend and fellow philosopher Jacques Derrida and composed from the fragments of Cixous's dreams, is a collection of meditations that invoke familiar themes of death, friendship, and writing from the unconscious.

The reception of Cixous's work throughout her career has been mixed and primarily centered on her notion of feminine writing. Some feminist theorists, such as Toril Moi (1985), have deemed *écriture féminine* to be essentialist and colored by patriarchal conceptions of femininity. Cixous's work has also been criticized for its reliance upon psychoanalysis, particularly the phallogocentric theories of Freud and Lacan, though these criticisms overlook the myriad ways in which she deconstructs and revises psychoanalytic concepts even as she invokes them. Critics of Cixous's theories tend toward literal, rather than metaphorical, readings of her texts and often confuse her markers of “masculine” and “feminine” with physical sex. In response to the overall preoccupation with her earlier publications, critics such as Susan Sellers explore the progression of Cixous's thought throughout her wide range of works. Sellers offers a holistic vision of Cixous, elucidating her thought in its vast diversity by drawing on her fiction, theoretical writings, dream notebooks, and lectures. Such advocates of Cixous's theories seek to redeem *écriture féminine* from its many misconceptions, as well as draw attention to the overlooked and ongoing elements of her work.

SEE ALSO: Deconstruction; Derrida, Jacques; *Écriture Féminine*; Feminism; Gender and Cultural Studies; Gender Theory;

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