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Phallus/Phallocentrism

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Phallus/Phallocentrism

in Literary Theory from 1966 to the Present

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In psychoanalytic theory, the phallus serves as the supreme symbol of masculine power and, concurrently, of feminine lack. "Phallocentrism" is a term used primarily by feminist theorists to denote the pervasive privileging of the masculine within the current system of signification.

The term was first coined by Ernest Jones, a British psychoanalyst, in reference to the primacy of the phallus in Sigmund Freud's theories. Freud (1965 [1933]) posits a phallic phase in childhood development, during which sexual difference is first encountered. In this phase, the distinction between the sexes is figured primarily through the genitalia, specifically the penis, which Freud conflates with the phallus as a symbol of power. Depicting the clitoris as a penis equivalent, Freud conceives the origins of female sexuality in terms of the masculine phallus. It is during the phallic stage that a child realizes the mother does not, in fact, have a penis and appears to be castrated. In the boy child, this apparent castration incites the Oedipal crisis, while, in the girl, it generates castration anxiety, provoking a rejection of the mother and a turn toward the father as the source of phallic power. Renouncing her clitoral phallus as inferior, the girl child exhibits Freud's controversial concept of penis envy, wherein she recognizes her lack and seeks to gain access to the phallus by having a baby/substitute penis. Though a disciple of Freud, Jones critiqued his mentor's theorization of female sexuality within a resolutely male model of development. Along with fellow Freud followers Melanie Klein and Karl Abraham, he opposed, in particular, Freud's claim that a girl child is unaware of her vagina in infancy. Abandoning the primacy of the phallic phase in female development, Jones and Klein attempted to theorize a more egalitarian, though biologically based, construction of femininity.

Throughout the work of Freud and Jones, the phallus maintains a direct correlation to the penis, and it is not until Jacques Lacan's rereading of Freud that this link is questioned. In his theorization of the human psyche, Lacan (2006[1966]) conceives identity and consciousness as conceptualized through language and employs the phallus as a central signifier that is not reducible to the penis. For Lacan, the phallus functions as a sign of power and the primary signifier of difference that distinguishes between the sexes in terms of lack. Though Lacan uses the term phallus in a variety of capacities throughout his work, ultimately the phallus symbolizes the cultural mechanisms that enable and are sustained by language. Furthermore, is it the phallus as a signifier that anchors the system of representation and upholds the categories of masculine and feminine.

Unlike the theories of Freud, Lacan's Oedipal crisis culminates with entry into the symbolic, the external realm of language and culture, where the child learns to perceive the world in terms of sameness and difference. In contrast to Freud's actual father, Lacan's father is a symbolic one, endowed with the full authority of the phallus, and it is this symbolic father that intercedes between the mother and child, creating a split between the conscious and unconscious in the emerging subject. The function of the symbolic father, what Lacan terms the "name of the father," is to curb desire by imposing restrictions and enforcing the rational structure of language. Together, the phallus and the name of the father give stability to the symbolic, enabling signification and socialization.

The primacy of the phallus in Lacan's model of the psyche highlights a sociolinguistic structure that is fundamentally male-centered. According to Lacan, only boys can fully enter the symbolic and attain subjectivity, because the power of the phallus is associated with the male body. Girls, perceiving their lack, conform to the linguistic and social prescriptions of femininity, which is constituted as the passive negative of masculinity. Lacan refers to the conflation of the penis and phallus as *mécon-naissance* (misrecognition) and suggests that the seemingly stable masculine identities constructed around the phallus are illusory. Although Lacanian theory undermines male authority by portraying phallic identity as ultimately bogus, it leaves little recourse for women, who access phallic power only through heterosexual relations. Some feminist theorists have used Lacanian psychoanalysis as a starting point for locating and critiquing male privilege, while others have been highly critical of Lacan's thought as phallogocentric.

Judith Butler (1993) is one theorist who employs Lacan while simultaneously exposing his bias. Butler concurs with Lacan's dissociation of the penis from the phallus and reaffirms the phallus's status as symbolic. She does, however, critique Lacan on the grounds that he privileges the phallus over other corporeal signifiers and ultimately fails completely to distinguish it from male genitalia. Despite his attempts to detach the phallus from the penis, she argues, Lacan offers the phallus as the metaphorical culmination of the penis. Taking Lacan's reasoning further, Butler concludes that the phallus, as a signifier with no intrinsic link to the penis, can be displaced and form symbolic relationships with other body parts, male and female.

Despite its masculine center, Lacan's thought has proved instrumental in the formulation of phallogocentrism as a concept. In the

wake of Lacanian psychoanalysis, the term has expanded from denoting a simple privileging of the masculine to reflect, as theorist Elizabeth Grosz (1989) describes, a system of representation that upholds a single model of male subjectivity, around which all others are defined. As such, critiques of phallogocentrism have become an integral element of feminist revision, particularly within French feminist theory.

Jacques Derrida, in his critique of phallogocentrism, combines the concepts of phallus and *logos* to form the neologism "phallogocentrism." Derrida's analysis of Western thought exposes a central assumption of absolute truth and a belief in *logos*, or reason, as the key to unlocking this truth. Derrida relates this notion of a single origin or meaning of the universe to the phallus and describes phallogocentric thought as a series of interconnected binary oppositions that privilege one (masculine) term over another (feminine) term. Derrida criticizes Lacan's vision of a single, masculine libido as a phallogocentric erasure of difference. He takes issue, likewise, with certain philosophical concepts, such as Heidegger's *Dasein*, that purport to be non-gendered, but are always already masculine. Derrida often broaches the subject of gender indirectly, through his deconstruction of other philosophers, and his two primary meditations on phallogocentric discourse are *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles* (1979[1978]), a reading of Friedrich Nietzsche, and "Geschlecht: Sexual difference, ontological difference" (1983), a reading of Martin Heidegger. In "Geschlecht," Derrida conceives of a sexuality that precedes the binary construction of man/woman by positing ontology, or being, as sexually indeterminate, but not asexual. *Spurs* is Derrida's primary attempt to deconstruct the relationship between man/woman by using the term "woman" as a trope for non-truth or *undecidability*. In addition to exposing masculine bias in Western philosophy, Derrida highlights second-wave feminism's collaboration with phallogocentrism, accusing feminists of aiding the male-centered system by aspiring to gain power within it, rather than attempting to alter the system itself. Such feminists, Derrida argues, betray women by striving to become men and attain phallic power.

Despite his critiques of phallogocentrism, some feminist theorists have found Derrida's deconstruction of masculine privilege to be inadequate. Gayatri Spivak (1997) asserts that his use of the term "woman" as a deconstructive trope reiterates rather than undermines the marginalization of the feminine. Likewise, while Derrida's occasional technique of writing in a feminine voice ostensibly exceeds phallic discourse, this method, rather than asserting woman's subjectivity, creates what Spivak calls double displacement. Derrida's analysis of phallogocentrism affirms that women are already displaced within the sociolinguistic order, and his movement into a feminine space locates "woman" as an empty subject position that men can occupy. Thus, women are displaced twice over. Spivak concludes that although Derrida's attempt to dislodge masculine privilege fails, Derridean deconstruction remains a vital tool for feminist theorists in undermining phallogocentrism. She urges theorists to reread and revise Derrida, just as he revised his philosophical predecessors.

French feminist philosopher Hélène Cixous employs Derrida's technique of deconstruction in her own account of phallogocentrism. Cixous (1986[1975]) echoes Derrida's analysis of phallogocentrism as a series of dual, hierarchical oppositions, pointing out that "woman" is always associated with passivity, functioning as the paralyzed other that orients the active, masculine self. Cixous asserts an urgent need for writers and theorists to undermine the amalgamation of logocentrism and phallogocentrism, a system that sustains itself through the subordination of the feminine. Though phallogocentrism primarily and visibly impedes female subjectivity, Cixous suggests that both sexes are harmed by a violently male-centered ideology. Using the metaphor of a machine, Cixous describes phallogocentrism as an enemy to both men and women, though in disparate ways. Within the "phallogocentric" apparatus, women are subordinated and defined by lack, while men are "given the grotesque and unenviable fate of being reduced to a single idol with clay balls" (1976[1975]: 884). Cixous affirms the presence of both sexes within each individual, a presence that is suppressed by the rigid bifurcation of masculinity and femininity. As a means of resisting phallogocentric discourse, Cixous offers the notion of *écriture féminine*, a mode of expression that gives voice to the silenced feminine.

Like Cixous, Luce Irigaray's philosophy calls for a reinterpretation of sexual difference, one unbound by phallogocentric hierarchies. Irigaray's first published works, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985 [1974]) and *This Sex Which is Not One* (1985 [1977]) serve as incisive and extensive critiques of phallogocentric bias throughout Western thought. Her subsequent works have focused on establishing a new mode of exchange between the sexes, a relation that fosters difference without hierarchy or appropriation. While working with the tradition of psychoanalysis, Irigaray critiques the phallogocentrism of Freud and Lacan, asserting that their theories rely on a traditional hierarchy of the senses that privilege visibility. The less-visible female genitalia are perceived as lack or absence compared to the prominent penis. Irigaray, advocating the cultivation of a feminine imaginary, mimics the idealization of the penis as phallus by presenting a metaphorical reinterpretation of the vaginal lips. The labia, in their plurality, present a distinct symbol of subjectivity, one that is fluid and open and exceeds phallic oneness. Irigaray overturns the sense hierarchy in her description of the vaginal lips continually touching, affirming their presence through senses other than sight. Irigaray's use of feminine symbolism challenges phallogocentrism by revealing the undercurrent of masculine bias within language and by conceiving alternative modes of representation and expression.

SEE ALSO: Butler, Judith; Cixous, Hélène; Core and Periphery; Deconstruction; Derrida, Jacques; *Écriture féminine*; Feminism; Gender Theory; Grosz, Elizabeth; Irigaray, Luce; Psychoanalysis (since 1966); Subject Position; Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty.

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