

# Ants and Women, or Philosophy without Borders

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Some months ago, when giving a paper about Sir Francis Bacon's philosophy, I mentioned that, according to him, Nature was a woman; true knowledge treats her like his legitimate wife, while false knowledge deals with her as if she were a barren prostitute. In the same paper, I also mentioned that according again to Bacon, there are three kinds of intellectual attitudes, or three kinds of philosophers, namely the pure rationalists, who are like spiders, the empiricists who are like ants, for they gather materials but do not work on them, and a third category—good philosophers who are like bees, for they gather and work on the material gathered. Now, during the discussion a gentleman strongly objected to Bacon's use of ants as a metaphor. He explained that there are many different species of ants, and some of them do not merely gather, some have gardens for instance, where they grow mushrooms. The gentleman concluded that philosophers do not know what they are talking about when they use metaphors. This is true enough, but I felt sorry indeed that nobody observed that it is not true that a woman is either a wife or a prostitute; nobody asked whether 'nature as her' implied that the scientist is, as a matter of course, male; nobody said that the simple fact of using 'woman' as a metaphor is questionable in itself. So, when speaking of feminism in contemporary French philosophy, one has to keep in mind that, on the Parisian stage, the honour, dignity, diversity and reality of insects are better defended than the honour, dignity, diversity and reality of women.

For we must start on a rather gloomy note. Most philosophers, from Plato onwards, have felt free to say everything and anything about 'women', or what they call 'Woman' or sometimes 'the feminine'. Everyone certainly remembers how spiteful Rousseau's theory on womanhood is: since things are not radically different in French philosophy nowadays, there is, in the arrogance of philosophy towards women, a basis for feminist involvement in philosophy. For feminism does not create its object itself. Sexism comes first, and feminist reasoning sets itself up as a critical point of view which brings forth some questions about sexist statements and sexist attitudes. And there is a masculinism in French philosophy which is at least twofold: our male colleagues are still writing debatable things, which should be

analysed and criticized; discriminatory and excluding attitudes still exist in the every-day life of our institutions, and we ought to be able to provide at least a theory of the link between attitudes and discourses.

This could be said of many subjects or fields, especially of all human sciences.<sup>1</sup> Claire Michard and Claudine Ribery wrote a book some years ago about the sexism of the most famous French sociologists and anthropologists.<sup>2</sup> On the front page they placed a quotation from Claude Lévi-Strauss about the fate of some explorers saying: 'The next day, all the villagers sailed away aboard some thirty canoes, leaving us behind, alone with the women and children in the abandoned houses'. The women did not go away, nor did the children, but Lévi-Strauss thinks that the entire community ('le village entier') had left, because in his opinion when there is no adult man there is automatically nothing but a wilderness. Not that he really wanted to argue that women do not exist. His statement is more or less a *faux pas* or a Freudian slip. The first goal of feminists writing in the field of the Humanities over the last ten years has been to make male colleagues at least aware of their own prejudices or *a priori*s.

A feminist critique of major works has been undertaken in every field of the Arts or Humanities. Women historians steadily call their male colleagues back to the paths of scientific duty whenever a sexist *a priori* makes them wander from those paths—for instance if any among them were to write a book on the nineteenth-century working class without mentioning that women were there, and quite often exploited or oppressed in a specific way. The same can be said of women anthropologists and women psychoanalysts. Should we add: and of women philosophers? or is there anything special in this case? It would be quite difficult for me to answer such a question today. For I am writing a book on women and philosophy at the moment. How could one produce a reflection on one's own work before it is completed? And anyway this is what I do not want to do. In a sense, this has often been the curse of French philosophers in the sixties: they outlined the programme of what was to be done (or not to be done), they could tell and emphasize what made their project specific or different from say tradition, ideology, or any other field, and in the end the whole work dissolved itself into its project or meta-discourse about itself.

Now today we can look at the question from a different point of view: when a woman anthropologist shows that a blunder in Godelier, Bour-

<sup>1</sup> *Les sciences humaines*: Foucault considers that those sciences include psychology (and psychoanalysis), sociology (and anthropology, etc.), the analysis of literatures and myths, and history. The category is broader than 'social sciences', I suppose. See *Les Mots et les Choses*, Paris, 1966, chap. x.

<sup>2</sup> Claire Michard-Marchal, Marchal et Claudine Ribery, *Sexisme et Sciences Humains* (Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1982).

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dieu, Clastre or Lévi-Strauss is due to a sexist *a priori*, what is she doing exactly? Is it still anthropology, or is it also philosophy? I would like to argue that, thanks to feminism, philosophy is more widely practised, and philosophical reasoning is expressed in more diversified forms than it would if it were limited to departments of philosophy or professional philosophers. The kind of analysis I am referring to could be described as epistemological. On the one hand, I would not consider it as a piece of anthropology, since it is not a study on a society in some suburban town or in South America, but a critical study of the present state of a science which studies various societies here and there. And the writer, instead of submitting herself completely to the rules and habits of her own field is submitting rules, habits and field to free examination. If epistemology is a branch of philosophy, or philosophy can be described as a free and critical inquiry concerning areas of knowledge, this is philosophy indeed. But, on the other hand, the authors of this kind of analysis do consider it as a part of their subject, calling it either 'sociology of knowledge' or reflective methodology. And, assuredly, this could be said also of Luce Irigaray's first book *Speculum*. When she provided a critique of Freud's lack of understanding of women, she wrote an epistemological, i.e. philosophical, study of a human science. At the same time, her work is also a contribution to psychoanalysis as such. There is a question here that I shall try to tackle later, a question about the borders of philosophy.

However, even though we think that this kind of work is a part of philosophy, is it contemporary French philosophy? This is slightly more difficult to argue. Critical epistemology may be viewed as the main tradition of philosophy. Here are discourses which call themselves 'knowledges', and claim an authority. The traditional philosopher is someone who wants to put this authority to the test of our reflection and survey: let us endeavour to sort out what might be a valid rule, and what is a mere intellectual habit or an opinion in these discourses; let us bring out what their major principles are, let us screen their methodology. Such an attitude could be traced back to the Greeks, and is also a feature of modern philosophy, by which I mean seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophical work. Now this kind of project applied to exact sciences is vanishing in contemporary French philosophy, or in philosophy which describes itself as 'contemporary' in France. First because fewer and fewer philosophers are able to discuss the theoretical choices present in physics, biology, or chemistry. Critical epistemology of those sciences must be done by people who have been trained thoroughly in that field, and are outstanding scholars in it. Let us mention Jean-Marc Lévi-Leblond and Françoise Balibar. It is more difficult nowadays to do what George Canguilhem did, namely to study philosophy first, and then medicine, in order to

become a specialist of the epistemology of biology. And those who are experts on those questions often think that only a team of people, trained in various subjects, are able to study certain difficult epistemological problems, say in recent physics. As to exact sciences, most philosophers are nowadays as it were lay-persons, unable to grasp the finer points of recent research. Since inability swiftly turns into contempt, this incapacity to produce the epistemology of exact sciences induces an effect. A fox could not reach some grapes he lusted, because they were growing on too high a stake. In the end, he left, saying: 'They are too green indeed, and suitable to feed churls'. In the like manner, contemporary French philosophy goes with the phenomenological stream, and concludes that, as Husserl made it clear in his *Krisis*, there is no reason to bother any longer with sciences.

Yet, it is still possible for any cultivated person to grasp, with some effort, the results of human sciences. It is still possible for the philosopher to understand the methods of those sciences which are thus still open to his or her critical research or epistemological work. It so happens however that professional philosophers have neglected this object, despising the whole stock of human sciences. An exception must be made of course in the case of Foucault. Other philosophers follow the doctrine of l'Inspection Générale de Philosophie (a *corps* supervising the teaching of our subject in high schools and chairing the top-level competitions through which teachers are hired). And this doctrine is that philosophy has nothing to do with the human sciences, moreover that philosophy *is* in the knowing of itself as completely different from those mock discourses on Man. Obviously enough, they are seen as dangerous rivals that must be discredited—not as serious theoretical endeavours which should be an object for reflective analysis.

Just as experimental scientists work themselves on the epistemology of their own subject, sociologists and psychologists could have proposed this reflective analysis themselves. But the male leading figures in those fields seem too busy defending the validity and dignity of the subject they are concerned with to provide a critical theory of it. Since *Tristes Tropiques* by Lévi-Strauss (Paris, 1955, éditions Plon), there is moreover an aim in the French school of human sciences: to lay down the pre-eminence of their subject, *on* philosophy especially, or to argue that, for instance, sociology can provide a theory to explain what is happening in the field of philosophy—conflicts between philosophers being seen as social conflicts. The same applies to psychoanalysis, and so forth. Just as philosophers, male specialists of human sciences are so absorbed in questions of rank and hierarchy that the idea of a critical reflection on extant works—particular works and methodologies—would hardly exist if some feminists had not been there to dig away at it.

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And it is an appropriate approach indeed, since all human sciences deal with a sexualized reality. When Pierre Bourdieu writes a study on a village in North Africa, his book must of course contain a chapter on the relations between sexes there. The problem is that this aspect of the book is by no means as good as the others. In the chapter concerning the calendar of this community, the conceptions of time people have and the highly complicated organization of time, he shows an acute sense of the otherness of that society, he is extremely careful not to project his own categories on to the reality he is studying, nor to allow the reader to forget how different it is from ours: the reader is requested not to identify what he reads in the terms or structures of an occidental idea of time. Now, when the same Bourdieu treats of the difference between 'the masculine' and 'the feminine' according to the villagers' system, you may have the feeling that it was not necessary to fly to North Africa to discover such material. It consists in a mixture of ideas borrowed from Greek philosophy and of typical Parisian sexual stereotypes—in short, what Bourdieu himself is likely to think about the difference between himself and women. Since you cannot find in his travel account a single element you did not know already just by being an inhabitant of the Latin Quarter, you may conclude that Bourdieu only proved his own inability to conceive that his own gender categories might not be relevant to describe the idea of genders in a North African peasant community. Perhaps any traditional person is someone who cannot imagine that there may exist different ways of thinking about differences. Perhaps P. Bourdieu was convinced his own system was the universal one. Perhaps . . . shall I venture to suggest he went to North Africa to seek out a priceless confirmation of this belief—elsewhere, things are definitely different, except for the difference between genders? Whatever the reason may be, Bourdieu's discourse certainly does not match the demands of his subject, or the standards he laid down himself when dealing with the question of time. His description of the gender system could be compared with the sudden appearance of a piece of alchemy in a chemistry book. If it is a philosophical task to sort out what is certainly not scientific in a scientific enterprise, then the work of feminist epistemologists (a work to which my remarks on Bourdieu will be a humble contribution) must be seen as philosophical. Not after the manner of the French demi-gods of the sixties, of course, but in a style partly inherited from Bachelard.

And such a work is also typical of the French tradition, in the sense that this tradition is, or used to be, interdisciplinary. A mutual and fruitful understanding is possible between women who have been trained in anthropology, and in linguistics, or in philosophy strictly speaking, and so forth. The arguments and ways of reasoning of each prove to be helpful to the other's work. Claire Michard and Catherine

Ribery provide a critical analysis of another methodological error in Bourdieu. Their analysis is based on a linguistic approach, but owes a lot to some sociological essays by Christine Delphy and Colette Guillaumin (Christine Delphy, 'Les femmes dans les études de stratification', in *Femmes, Sexisme et Société* (Paris, 1977), ed. Andrée Michel; Colette Guillaumin, 'Pratique du pouvoir d'idée de nature', in *Questions Féministes* (Paris, 1978), nos. 2 and 3, and 'Questions de différence' (Paris, 1979), no. 6 (éditions Tierce), especially this idea: in a sociological study, it is common indeed to consider 'women' as a professional group and you will read then how 'factory workers, executive managers, farmers, students and women' react to some question or issue. It is common indeed, but wrong. They forget that a woman is not just any woman, she may be running a shop, typing your next book, sweeping the streets, teaching at a university—she may be a right-wing MP, and all that does make a difference. You cannot assume that women react in the same way, whether they are factory workers, executive women, housewives, farmers and so forth. And if they did, this should be first diligently and scrupulously proved. Whenever a male sociologist uses a set of categories including 'women' as a professional group, his ideological prejudice shows, and this falls short of the demands of any good methodology.

In the same way as Michard and Ribery, if one day I succeed in arguing that every theoretician falls short of his own standards whenever he speaks of women, I shall be glad to be able to borrow arguments from friends in other disciplines. There is philosophical work, in a broader sense, which is being developed in the feminist critique of available areas of knowledge. If you accept this point, you will also perceive that, even though I am insisting on the similarity of that kind of critique with seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophy, it is nevertheless the beginning of something new under the philosophizing heavens, because, traditionally, philosophy is fundamentally concerned with the question of its frontiers, borders, or limits, its difference with everything else, or its specificity. There is then, in feminist epistemology something more than mere interdisciplinarity—a promise or foretaste of a philosophy unconcerned any longer with the question of its frontiers and hierarchy of subjects. It is true that, in the sixties, some male philosophers said they were creating a 'wandering philosophy' (*une philosophie nomade*), free from the idea of a 'proper place', and seeking the Other. But who among them acknowledged the equality of the various theoretical discourses existing, and for example the idea that linguistics, or sociology, could provide a relevant critique of philosophical discourse? See, for instance *Marges de la Philosophie*, by Derrida (*Marges de la Philosophie* (Paris: éditions de Mimier, 1972), 272): the main concepts of linguistics,

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especially ‘metaphor’, are byproducts of metaphysics, and that is why you cannot dream of a linguistic theory of images in the philosophical text: ‘*Il est impossible de dominer la métaphorique philosophique, comme telle, de l’extérieur*’. And the question of domination structures the whole essay. If, on the contrary, you acknowledge the equality—indeed dignity—of all the disciplines, you can also seek for a mutual critique and reciprocal enlightenment.

The philosophical work being developed by feminists has other features: the women involved in it take the (virtual or potential at least) scientific basis of their subject seriously. They are critical of the presence of ideological *a priori*s in works which should be more rigorous, and, in a sense, they are doing what Bacon recommended in the *Sylva Sylvarum*, namely ‘to inquire with all sobriety and severity’ and separate superstitious and magical observations from learning which deserves to be furthered. This is just the opposite of positivism. They can tell what is wrong from what might be proved relevant later, when sufficiently laboured, while the positivist view focuses on what is peremptorily ‘true’, so true that you can ground recipes on it—to avoid crisis in slummy suburbs, or to bring up your kids.

They are inside their fields or subjects and outside. For they acknowledge the demands of the discipline, and the idea that any subject has demands, but they are able to reject some of the habits of their field, because feminism gives them an outside point of view, a standpoint from which it is possible to see that the present state of the subject is mixture of scientific inquiry and mere opinions which come also from the outside of science strictly speaking, namely the prejudices of the many men who have founded and furthered the field without ever being challenged.

This feminist work is guided by values. The women involved know what they are at, they have a goal, since they are fighting a sexist ideology existing in a tricky form, disguised, because it calls itself ‘science’. For our time believes in science, which implies that scientific discourse is the place where beliefs are nowadays. Many researches claiming to be ‘scientific’ (and supported by public finances) have proved to be enormous frauds—from the N-rays to the scandal of ‘*les avions renifleurs*’.<sup>3</sup> Many discourses claiming to be scientific, and supporting sexist ideology are *ejusdem farinae*, as we say, of the same poor blend, and they provide excuses for sexual discriminations. Some years ago, a collective book, called *The Feminist Fact*, written mainly

<sup>3</sup> Planes which were equipped with a machine supposed to sniff out underground oil deposits. Quite a lot of money was given by the French government to the ‘inventors’ of this ingenious device during the seventies. The discovery of this fraud created an enormous political scandal.

by biologists, and edited by Evelyne Sullerot was published. The central focus of the book was the following: the existence of a yet unknown chromosome was alleged, a chromosome supposed to 'explain' the 'fact' of women's inferiority in various activities, mainly an inability to know where they are as soon as they have gone a few yards away from their dwellings. It is safer for them to stay at home. An 'unknown' chromosome and 'fact' (what a mixture of positivism and mystery!) and all that was presented as the 'results' of 'experiments'—experiments which were not described of course. The theory was guaranteed only by the academic titles of the contributors—the good old principle of authority. Now this book was taken seriously enough by colleagues to make me inquire (with, I hope, all sobriety and severity) into the stratagem by which experts go beyond the limits of their own expertise. The task of carrying out a critical epistemology is among philosophy's duties, and has an ethical end. On those groundless theories, the contributors were 'grounding' a regression. They argued that girls should not be given the regular education they have been receiving since the last century, but should be trained to be housewives.

It is true that severity and seriousness are not exactly valued in French contemporary philosophy, nor is the idea of an ethical end. The conception of philosophizing as a quest or search for freedom and humanity is supposed to be old-fashioned—and reactionary—in the Parisian atmosphere, in so far as French contemporary philosophy is called 'post-modern' by many. For they call 'modern' the idea that sciences, technologies, arts and politics have one and the same end, namely the emancipation of humankind. 'Post-modernity' is, according to Jean-François Lyotard, the acknowledgement that such an idea is falling away. When feminists think that Simone de Beauvoir's work mattered for the emancipation of at least a part of humankind, and that we must carry on, most of our up-to-date male colleagues at best smile, find us serious-minded, lacking a sense of playfulness, in short adopting an attitude which is neither up-to-date nor feminine. But we think we have to hold our heads above a stream of oppressive nonsense. Perhaps this is an eighteenth-century conception of philosophy—but he or she who will not live at all in the eighteenth century will never know what happiness is, as the saying goes.

Nothing will give a clearer idea of how French colleagues welcome feminism than this statement by Derrida: 'Feminism is the process by which woman wishes to resemble man, the dogmatic philosopher, seeking truth, science, objectivity, that is—along with the whole virile illusion—seeking the castration effect which is linked to it. Feminism is castration, and of woman too' (*Éperons* (Paris, éditions Flammarion, 1978), 50). Incidentally, it is not that usual to read such a straightforward statement by Derrida, whose style is often overcautious, full of

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preliminaries, always calling for previous questions, sometimes even vanishing into great numbers of caveats and prolegomena. And it is extremely rare to see him borrow a concept from psychoanalysis—castration—with no qualification. As I said before, when a male philosopher speaks of women, the mode of his discourse deviates from his own standards. The pleasure derived from speaking ill of feminists, and indeed from vilifying us, is so great that a Derrida does not mind bluntness and abruptness for once.

A second parenthesis: we do not think that feminism is an operation by which 'woman' wants to be like 'man', we insist on the fact that there are *women*, quite different from each other, and there are *men* also. 'Woman' is a mythical figure, a smoke-screen which prevents people from seeing the actual situations of real women. It is also the product of an oppressive situation. Every time a social group is oppressed, the dominant ideology creates a mythical figure or type, and all the individuals among the oppressed group are supposed to be like that. This is a well-known feature of anti-semitism, which has created a purely mythical figure, and an insulting one, first because the characteristics assigned to it are full of contempt, secondly because it is always an insult to be told: you *are* such a one or such another, for thus I choose you to be; I can decide, according to my own fantasy, what you are and should be. If some men find that it is their right to declare what 'woman' is, the practice of philosophy by women is useful indeed. For philosophy is quite apt to destroy poorly thought out ideas, and helps to hold one's own against dominant representations. And let me add finally that if there is a drastic distinction between on the one hand 'man' or a masculine subject, characterized by his desire to know, his claim to truth, science and objectivity, and, on the other hand, 'woman' or a feminine subject with just the opposite characteristics (lies?, ignorance?, affectivity?) then there apparently remains no one, unless angels exist, to make use of finer and more discriminative concepts which posit multiple forms of processes of verification, think out the pluralization of scientific fields, or the problems and difficulties of objectivation. 'Truth' in the singular, 'science' in the singular, and such a gross concept as 'objectivity' constitute a language which would sound crude to any scientist, male or female, and to any philosopher slightly aware of what is going on in twentieth-century scientific debates.<sup>4</sup> A drastic distinction between a 'masculine subject' and a 'feminine subject' is also meaningless if you consider that areas of knowledge, when they reach a mature and advanced stage, are no longer produced by individuals, but by a scientific community or communities. It is true

<sup>4</sup> Some scientists seem to resent the fact that philosophers have given up all dialogue with them. This is made clear by a special issue of *Esprit* (July 1987).

that should a scientific community remain totally composed of male fellows, some distortions may remain and do remain invisible, blunders caused by sexist *a priori*s. A scientific community must be an open society, not a brotherhood defined by its exclusions of entire groups of people. That is also why it is so important there there be Black scientists, and scientists from every corner of the world. If some bizarre lab were to start a programme of racist biology, there would be people around to protest and say that they cannot sell ideas like this as 'scientific' hypotheses or results. Now when male philosophers speak of women,—sorry, 'woman'!—they seem to be addressing an old boys' club, as if they were certain that no woman would be around to disagree.

Since this programme of lectures is devoted to contemporary French philosophy, I have put the stress on what is supposed to be 'contemporary' in French philosophy, although everything published recently is, by that very fact, contemporary. The Sorbonne still exists. It would be misleading to suggest a definite contrast between the philosophers who claimed to usher in a new epoch and the 'establishment', or a traditional teaching of philosophy and of the history of philosophy. And assuredly such a contrast would be irrelevant to our topic. In the most established institutions, there is an equal suspicion as regards feminist enquiries about philosophy, and at best we are seen as anarchists of a sort. Male philosophers who established themselves as 'contemporary' by opposing the establishment, and the existing establishment itself agree on denying women the right to speak about those who speak of 'woman', or to scrutinize the scrutinizer. For all of them keep speaking of 'the feminine' or 'woman', and are still allotting a special place and destiny to 'woman'. A crucial example: Vladimir Jankélévitch—the sweetest man who ever taught at the Sorbonne, and the fairest toward women students—wrote a chapter in *Le Traité des Vertus* on 'masculine and feminine' (*Le Traité des Vertus* (Paris, nouvelle édition entièrement remaniée, 1970) tome III, chap. VIII, p. 6). What moral virtue is specifically feminine?—it is fidelity, of course, while courage is the virtue of the forceful and 'the role of virility'. Again, this kind of theory did not prevent Jankélévitch from showing regard for women colleagues or students nor from appreciating their independence of thought (quite an uncommon attitude among professors). Was it philosophy itself, and not the person, that was uttering a sexist theory of morality? If the task of feminist philosophers was to challenge and moreover to analyse such statements, it would appear to be a mere variety of feminist work that has to be paralleled with the work done in other fields. But I think there is something more here, and this will be my last point.

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If you look at the history of philosophy you can find a pattern: on the one hand it would be all too easy to compile a big book based on the dreadful things voiced by philosophers on the subject of 'woman'. But those things could be summarized very briefly: she is said to be 'the Other'. When Rousseau says that the search for abstract and speculative truths is beyond her grasp, he is of course reminding the reader that philosophy is or should be a search for those truths and, indirectly, he is providing a definition of what philosophy is or should be. And when philosophers insist on the idea that myth or fables are 'old wives' tales', nanny lore, at best the inspired voice of a Diotima, they are also emphasizing the fact that there is a big difference between philosophy and myth. Even John Stuart Mill, who thought of himself as a feminist and wrote that women should be given the opportunity to undertake any sort of employment, said that no woman is cut out for philosophy. The main result of such an argument is that philosophy is totally different from any other sort of activity. This is one half of the pattern. Here is the second one: since the very beginning of philosophy, male philosophers have enjoyed having women listeners and admirers, and some women have been admitted into philosophy as women-in-love, admirers and lovers of a mentor who could see himself as a demi-god in her eyes.

Ten years ago, when I started writing on those themes, I endeavoured to show these different aspects are linked together, and are linked with philosophy's problematic status. For the existence of philosophy cannot be taken for granted, nor can its scope. Philosophy has always claimed to be different from any other form of knowledge or activity, and to be superior to all. But the fragility of this position, the incapacity of philosophical speculation, the lack that torments every metaphysical system are not things that the philosopher is unacquainted with. The reference to women as 'unfit' for philosophy allows this powerlessness to be overlooked; the idea that there is someone incapable of philosophizing is comforting because it seems to grant that philosophy is capable of something. And if the philosopher is tormented by the incapacity for definite proof which inhabits philosophy, if he experiences the bitterness of never being able to produce any knowledge that comes up to his own standards of validation, then the philosophical devotion of a woman is the welcome distorting mirror which transforms bitterness into satisfaction: through her, he is viewed as a fullness and an achievement.

Now philosophy can also see itself as the greatest achievement by excluding women from its field. When Condorcet explains that women could be statesmen, but not philosophers, he is drawing a line, putting a great distance between the nature of philosophy and the nature of ordinary politics, and suggesting a superiority of philosophy, philoso-

phy being for gentlemen only, when politics may be male or female. Moreover, this superiority is supposed to provide grounds for a control of politics by philosophy, and Condorcet maintains that politicians can err if they are not guided by the superior light and real providence of advisers who are the philosophers.

All this could be described as hegemony, in so far as hegemony is the absolute right of a power to formulate its own difference in comparison with its various others, its own relationship with the same others, its own superiority to them, without being challenged. And of course to be in the position of having the right and power to decide what are precisely the essence, substance, fate, limits and duties of those others. Now, in philosophical discourse, 'woman' stands as a metaphor for difference in general. No wonder then if, when a philosopher speaks of 'woman' he evokes just a mythical figure which has nothing to do with real women. What he is asserting here is his absolute right to decide what is different from his realm and what is the content of this difference. This is probably the reason why feminists are so unpopular among all kinds of philosophers. Because the position of hegemony excludes two challenging elements, the idea that there might be different ways of looking at difference (a difference in difference, then), and secondly any project of reciprocity—for if it is always possible to scrutinize any scrutinizer what is left of the hegemonic standpoint with which philosophy identifies itself? *Taceat mulier de muliere*, may not woman speak of woman. This famous injunction by Nietzsche is meaningful, and probably not out of date, even though it may seem that women nowadays are allowed to write on women—but on women only, on a womanhood whose concept has been previously determined and framed. In that sense Nietzsche's phrase still expresses what our male colleagues think: 'may no woman analyse the discourse of those who speak of woman', and above all let her not question their idea of the sexual difference, hint that this difference may be thought of in many different ways, let her not think of it in any different way. This could be a further interpretation of Condorcet's essay on the rights of women: he is ready to defend certain rights for them (civil rights mainly) so long as he, as a male-philosopher, is the one who determines the principle and the frontier between activities women have access to and activities they do not have access to. And women are not to be given access to the standpoint from which (in Condorcet's opinion) differences are moulded and posited, or from which they are ruled. This could be the delight of a woman philosopher: first to gain access to this forbidden place, and then to discover that philosophy ruling over the differences between subjects or between sexes is imaginary.

The delight, indeed. For I certainly do not wish to conclude this paper with the idea that we are unpopular, and why. I had better sketch

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briefly the main ideas a double involvement in professional philosophy and feminism can give, and what positive suggestions may be drawn from this.

It is very important to stress the fact that today areas of knowledge or various learnings are produced in communities. We should get rid of the old question on 'who is producing the theory?', which is old-fashioned anyway, irrelevant as to the understanding of theoretical achievements. But we should pose a newer question seriously: 'In which community does such or such a work take place?'—is it an old boys' club, or a place where women and men can equally feel at home, and where they can work together? Where they can be equally unsatisfied? For intellectual life is made of the perception of deficiencies and inadequacies as well as of achievements.

It is also important to acknowledge that philosophical work takes place in many more areas than that of mere professional philosophy. And we do not really know at what point a reasoning begins to deserve the name of 'philosophy'. If all philosophers were to stop asking what is the great difference between philosophy and other sorts of research, our male colleagues might stop answering that philosophy is more male than any other, and that is why women will never be good for it.

But if we are challenging the mythical superiority of our field, it is not to accept the superiority on the part of another. Must the state of knowledge be now understood as a democracy, where each limb has a limited relevancy? Perhaps, but—if we are to give credit to such metaphors, we shall induce the idea that tackling the wholeness is all the question. And is it the question really when each part tends anyway to overflow and to trade some of its hypotheses or results to fill various gaps in our culture, for instance the gap left by the decay of religious or poetical myth? We no longer believe in the '*Fiat*' of the Bible, but the 'Big Bang' works just as well, as a myth about the origin. It has the same linguistic conciseness, which can appeal to the imagination in so far as it appropriately describes, in a picturesque manner, an instant-long transformation of a nothingness into the whole universe.

There is many a place for myth in our relationship to learning, and there is many a place for learned imagination in our present culture. It is quite possible that women are particularly ready to open or to initiate the question of how mythical interests and rational enterprises are intermingled. First because their namesake 'Woman' is a figure of that intermixture. And might not the sweetest of our traditional attributes (namely unpretentiousness!) prepare us to be serious about the field we are involved in without championizing it? For the project to championize, to defend and illustrate a subject (or anything else), swiftly leads to create self-praising myths, and probably makes anyone blind to the

whole stock of appearances of the imaginary in theories as well as in everyday ideas.

But if feminist criticisms have any methodological relevance (concerning the Humanities mainly, but from there perhaps as concerns the broader question of the mythical use of any science), then their results should be taken up again, furthered, specified and so forth, by any expert, male or female. I really enjoyed reading Georges Duby's *The Knight, the Lady, and the Priest*. Not the least because the author is careful to note that 'the Lady' here does not refer to real women of the Middle Ages, but to an image, or the object of two different projects, the Knight's and the Priest's. What real ladies thought about their lives, and about these contradictory male projects, nobody knows, for they left no documents. Unless people speak for themselves, you cannot guess how they feel or think. All this may seem a matter of course methodological caveat; but a look at Michelet's works will show that obvious principles are not so easy to acquire.

These are some directions one may draw from a twofold involvement both in philosophy and feminism. I am perfectly aware, however, that other feminist thinkers are working on other lines. Women are not all alike, and feminists are not either. Perhaps, having been asked to speak about feminism in French philosophy, should I have surveyed the various strands of feminist philosophy and proposed a discussion of them. But this would have started a sort of internal debate, a debate supposedly taking place in a determinate field—and certainly creating the closure of that field. My aim is just the opposite, since I search that double involvement in order to seek questions (and experiences) that can enter eventually into common philosophy—regular and common-to-all philosophy. And it is pointless to ask whether those questions will be destructive (or subversive even) or constructive, since no one ever came across a single philosophical question or idea which was not, at the same time, a construction and a destruction. I also object to internal debates because they are always an attempt to impose a view as an orthodoxy, an orthodoxy for the small intellectual field of 'women's studies', or for the Women's Movement itself—an attitude which could reinforce the traditional role of philosophy as the lawgiver knowing what can be thought, said, or even done. In England, Janet Radcliffe Richards provided a full-length sample of that, a sample which left me quite sceptical as to the philosophical and feminist value of such a line of thought. But let us give up the traditional struggle for expertise, the contest about whose voice is the authentic and authorized one, whose view may become the orthodox one. Polemical rivalry is the poorest face of philosophy, while freedom of thought is still to be conquered, and moving towards it is such a pleasure.