Miranda

Revue pluridisciplinaire du monde anglophone /
Multidisciplinary peer-reviewed journal on the English-
speaking world

12 | 2016

Mapping gender. Old images ; new figures

Introduction

Karen Meschia

Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/8685>

DOI: 10.4000/miranda.8685

ISSN: 2108-6559

Publisher

Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès

Electronic reference

Karen Meschia, "Introduction", *Miranda* [Online], 12 | 2016, Online since 02 March 2016, connection on 16 February 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/8685> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.8685>

This text was automatically generated on 16 February 2021.

Miranda is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Introduction

Karen Meschia

- 1 It would be a serious oversight to begin an issue of a French e-journal (albeit in English studies) devoted to gender without saying a word about the varying fortunes and reception of the term itself in French and English-speaking contexts. It is generally said that sexologist John Money was the first to propose this terminological distinction between biological and social sex in 1955 (in fact to study sexual indeterminacy),¹ but it was not until the 1970s that English-speaking feminist theorists picked up the concept in order to deconstruct the seemingly natural conflation of biological sex with its socially constructed sexual roles and to separate the two conceptually. At the same period, in French-speaking countries (with the exception of Quebec), adoption of the term *genre* was not automatic and the notion was expressed periphrastically by expressions such as “*les rapports sociaux de sexe*” or “*la construction sociale des rôles sexués*”, while expressions like “gender inequality” would be rendered by “*inégalités home-femme*”.²
- 2 It is difficult to pinpoint the moment when *genre* gained wide coinage in the French social sciences, but in 2005 the Commission générale de terminologie et de néologie was still recommending that its usage be avoided. What seems clear is that as it gradually gained purchase from the 1990s, it did so, as it were, in a post Judith Butler climate and was thus differently connoted, particularly among the lay public. Rather than being the politically correct way of referring to sex that it had tended to become in the Anglo-Saxon world (where one might read in a newspaper article “Babies are screened at birth by gender for certain illnesses”), it seemed in France to place more emphasis on the open-endedness of gendered identities, and therefore to contain sulphurous overtones for some sections of society, not least politicians... The polemic and boycotting of schools in early 2014 over the introduction of the so-called “*théorie du genre*”, which would supposedly “teach boys to become girls”³ is ample evidence of this. Clearly, laypersons’ suspicions about a vulgarised, misconstrued interpretation of the concept in no way jeopardises its operational usefulness for specialists and researchers, but as Bourdieu reminds us “*Il n’y a pas de mots neutres*”.⁴

- 3 Another ongoing question which is addressed indirectly in many of the articles is that of the place of feminism within gender studies today. A starting point may be the following assessment by Naomi Wolf, from her 2015 shortened re-edition of *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*, first published in 1990 to wide acclaim, and whose author is clearly in no doubt as to its continuing relevance:
 Since the 1990s, feminism in the West has remained fresh, varied and vigorous; there has been a fourth wave and I would say we are admiring the rise of a fifth. The new feminisms differ in some ways from the iconic feminism of the 1960s and '70s – they are more pluralistic, more tolerant, more inclusive of men, more aware of LGBTQ issues, more sophisticated about the intersection of race, class and gender, more alert to the feminist issues of the developing world. [...] But though action and awareness overall is much better for women, in some ways the 'beauty-myth' issues raised in this book have stayed the same or become worse ...⁵
- 4 That Wolf herself is a figure contested by some—accused notably by Christina Hoff Sommers⁶ of promoting “victim” rather than “equity” feminism—testifies to the breadth and depth of the vigorous, but always enriching debate as to how gender imbalance is best combated. Yet Wolf's upbeat, optimistic description of the current “fresh, varied and vigorous” state of feminism, however, eludes somewhat the theoretical question of how identity politics can be a basis for collective action by women when, precisely thanks to “LGBTQ issues”, the very idea of a given sexual identity, other than contingent and fragile, is being challenged, in favour of more fluid, or fragmented constructions. In a recent publication Luise Von Flotow⁷ points out that this shaking of binary foundations and blurring of boundaries may preclude identity being used as a basis for oppression, but it simultaneously risks undermining its potential as a source of collective political power.
- 5 Meanwhile, if the category “woman” has become conceptually problematic, women seem in practice to be alive and well and, paradoxically, according to Wolf and others,⁸ Western women, whilst slowly, very slowly, making advances in terms of economic and professional equality, have never been more prey to the beauty injunction, as attested by the exponential increase observed in breast implants, facial plastic surgery, eating disorders and other (almost) specifically feminine responses to anxiety about body image. This throws a particular light on the hotly debated question amongst feminists as to interpreting the parallel increase, equally considerable, in the number of women throughout the world adopting the hijab, chador or burka. It seems that whatever the specific modalities, the female body continues to be the site of complex and contradictory inscriptions.
- 6 This topic finds wide expression in the following contributions, together with other common threads. As is invariably the case, setting side by side research work from different fields throws up interesting parallels and unexpected discoveries: the insufficiently acclaimed excellence of experimental women writers like Anna Kavan and Djuna Barnes, less widely known than their male counterpart, Wyndham Lewis, whose unexpected take on gender differences is however refreshing. The pervasive presence of unconscious archetypal forms that structure our thinking, be it in the arts, literature or the social sciences, is evidenced by recurring references to myth, folk and fairy tale in numerous articles dealing ostensibly with historical evidence, linguistics or cinema. Women's silence, literal and figurative, is another leitmotiv, with multiple readings of its significance; a thematic corollary to their marginal position, seen

variously as alienating or liberating. The subheadings below provide an indication of how these topics are woven into the selected articles.

Foundational stereotypes

- 7 To begin at the beginning, we remember that what motivated the creation of Women's studies as an academic discipline in its own right, in the context of the 1970s women's liberation movement, was the growing awareness that social arrangements cannot be changed overnight by a wave of the legislative wand and that if there was still a need for collective action, campaigns and demonstrations, this was not sufficient and it was clearly also necessary to examine and better understand the social, historical and cultural processes at work in defining men's and women's roles. Amongst many other things, this brought to light the tremendous power of the unconscious ideological stereotypes that underlie our psychosocial representations of gender. The first two articles offer readings of this phenomenon.
- 8 Lesley Lawton's subtle and erudite analysis of the way that medieval romance has been a means of transmission into modern times of familiar folk and fairy tale stereotypes, takes as its corpus the Middle English *Breton Lays*, suggesting that these illustrate how such foundational stereotypes operate in medieval romance in general. Focusing on *Sir Degaré* and *Lay le Freine* as a contrasting pair, she explores the differential treatment of the feminine or masculine protagonist, showing how foundational stereotypes are a feature of tales of identity, with the male subject position of active self-affirmation being developed in contrast with a female narrative of passivity and vulnerability, exemplified by Griselda, the enduring paradigm of wifely obedience. If different female figures nevertheless challenge this gender role: Le Freine's garrulous mother, guilty of the female "sins of the tongue", or Guenevere, a stereotype of the sexually insatiable, devouring woman, Lawton concludes that access to any sort of power for women is achieved "by serving others and holding their tongues", and that "women as desiring subjects are problematic."
- 9 Isabelle Richard, from a very different point of entry—a linguistic discussion about whether a masculine or feminine article is appropriate when using the untranslatable term *Common Law* in French—illustrates that the debate over relating grammatical gender to mental representations is never neutral, leading her to conclude: "*Le Common Law est une femme*." By analysing her central corpus, the oft-quoted lectures given by Sir Frederick Pollock at Columbia University in 1911, *The Genius of the Common Law*, and other related documents, she then proceeds to demonstrate how the female figures rehearsed in personifying Common Law exploit the familiar dichotomy between a warlike, conquering Athena (born motherless from the head of Zeus), and the sacralised figure of the Madonna. The sisterly rivalry between Common Law and Equity, couched in domestic terms ("[She] has come to keep house with her in England."), is another recurrent theme. This powerful and respected female figure is nonetheless placed at the service of a patriarchal system, where for centuries the judges were exclusively male.

Grappling with modernism; queering the pitch

- 10 Moving to literature and the arts in the twentieth century, the articles in this section all approach articulating gender representations with experimental forms of expression, notably modernism, which might be exploited for its liberating potential or eschewed for celebrating a particularly masculine form of machine-world, where speed is glorified. Gender-bending by contemporary artists completes the selection.
- 11 Annelie Fitzgerald, in exploring the “textual/sexual dynamics of speed” in Wyndham Lewis’s *The Revenge for Love* artfully combines close textual analysis to reveal Lewis’s stylistic prowess in representing the female protagonist’s perceptions of a speeding car, with a discussion of the gender dynamics at work in the text. Lewis’s Vorticist aesthetic philosophy and widely declared revulsion for the Futurist exaltation of “crude speed” translate into an ironic portrayal of female powerlessness and passivity, but where it is ultimately the male protagonist, Victor, obsessed with his “speed-toy”, who is revealed as the deluded puppet of his child-like machine-mindedness. Fitzgerald also provides some enlightening additional insights into Lewis’s notoriously complex thinking on gender identity; avowedly hostile to Virginia Woolf and her supposedly feminine standpoint, he declared in *Men without Art* that “a veneer of habit, and a little bit of hair on the chin and chest, is about all that fundamentally separates one sex from the other.”
- 12 In re-evaluating Djuna Barnes’ *Nightwood*, generally seen as a masterpiece of high modernism, and, as such, in need of protection from adoption as a cult work by minority groups that might “compromise the novel’s status as serious experimental or feminist fiction”, Margaret Gillespie skilfully shows how “Camp” elements in the novel were systematically glossed over or underplayed, until queer theory led to a re-assessment of modernism in the 1990s. Drawing on the writings of Sontag and Butler in an attempt to circumscribe the notion, Gillespie argues that camp in *Nightwood* is the novel’s “key aesthetic expression of deviant sexuality.” By subverting fictional conventions, inverting the hierarchy between authorial authority and subordinate voices and parodying the novelist’s role, Barnes’ work, according to Gillespie, succeeds in “... flouting dominant culture’s hermeneutics of depth, and de-robing as chimera the illusion of stable, gendered selfhood.”
- 13 The novels of Anna Kavan defy classification, and the chilling, apocalyptic, crepuscular narrative of *Ice*, her last novel, the subject of Céline Magot’s contribution, is an extreme example. In a dexterous reworking of the palimpsest theme, Magot reveals the multiple inscriptions which write and rewrite the body of the anonymous albino young woman (“the girl”) at the centre of the work, object of the apparently male narrator’s obsessional pursuit and alternately willing sadomasochistic victim and helpless child, in a succession of hallucinatory scenes. Teasing out intertextual references that go from the archetypal fairy-tale figure of Rapunzel to the “made over” Madeleine in Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*, Magot shows how the spiralling blonde coil of the latter and the girl’s silver-white tress become the locus of fetishistic obsession, reducing them to projections of male desire and depriving them of subjectivity.
- 14 Hair, in all its symbolic and cultural dimensions, is also the topic of Frédérique Villemur’s examination of the work of contemporary artists Del LaGrace Volcano, Daniela Comani, Katarzyna Kozyra, Ana Mendieta and Cindy Sherman. In asking the tongue-in-cheek question: does bodily hair have a gender? Villemur aims to

demonstrate how the smooth hairlessness of classical artistic nudity (parodied by the Guerrilla Girls' "Do Women have to be naked to get into the Met Museum?") is subverted and rewritten by the gender inversion or confusion of queer aesthetics; here hitherto hidden bodily hair might be revealed, or visible facial hair appear unexpectedly in an ironic form of cross-dressing that transgresses the norms and codes of traditional gender identity and throws up new categories.

Working from the margins; making it in the mainstream

- 15 Art and cinema offer examples of the various modes for women of occupying a marginal or mainstream position. It would seem that working within marginality, whether it be imposed or freely chosen, still offers greater scope for expressing women's subjectivity or proposing new gender identity models and world views. This is at any rate what the two contributions on mainstream American cinema suggest.
- 16 Penelope Collet gives us the results of her ethnographic research on the life histories of five Welsh women artists, Laura Ashley, Mary Lloyd Jones, Claudia Williams, Shani Rhys James and Kathy Williams, in "It's the fabric of the place". Starting from the difficulty of establishing an artistic tradition for women in Wales, which she sets within the double constraint of intersecting marginal identities—being women artists and being Welsh—Collet first examines Welsh women's historically hidden place in domestic arts and crafts. Then, in a sensitive reading of the women's accounts, she proposes a thematic analysis of her findings, which gives the reader considerable insight into how the particular instances of their experience as artists point to wider issues, such as Welsh identity, growing awareness of post-colonialism, pastoralism and the art/craft divide. As an artist herself, Collet's descriptions of the women's work are particularly evocative.
- 17 Lynne Ramsay's award-winning *Ratcatcher* (1999) was only the second Scottish feature film directed by a woman, and, notwithstanding her own refusal to be designated "the next Scottish director" or the "next woman film-maker", it is necessarily in this light that Kristine Chick approaches the film, together with the later *Morvern Callar*, in order to explore how Ramsey's alternative and experimental use of cinematic technique and conventions offers new ways of expressing subjective and marginal identities. Here again the intersection of Scottish, female and marginal identities is at issue and Chick's intelligent reworking of the notion of minor forms, quoting Alison Butler ("A minor literature is the literature of a minority or marginalized group, written, not in a minor language, but in a major one."), enables her to reveal how Ramsey's different use of cinematic strategies creates a shifting object/subject perspective that resists the stability of a fixed point of view: the absence of voiceover, the blurring of lines between diegetic and non-diegetic sound, the use of silence, normally the subtext of male actors' power, strength and authority, here used in the feminist tradition of defiance and resistance.
- 18 In one of two contributions on the evolution of women's roles in mainstream American blockbusters over recent decades, Hélène Charlery interestingly comes back both to the theme of speed, seen above in the context of modernism, and of intersecting marginal identities, here that of the black cinema heroine. Her analysis of the American remake

of the French film *Taxi*, renamed *New York Taxi*, shows how the temporary reversal of sex-gender roles, with Queen Latifah playing New York's fastest cabbie to Jimmy Fallon's inept cop, in a fresh take on the "buddy movie", ultimately culminates in a return to the norm, with the black female character at the service of white masculinity. Drawing on different theoretical sources, notably Laura Mulvey's seminal work on the male gaze and Jefford's categories of "hard" and "soft" Charlery charts modifications in how the female body is represented according to the role assigned, referring to the post 1990s backlash (which is further developed by the article that follows) and concluding with the reminder that even the most intrepid and invincible heroines invariably have a male patriarchal figure in authority over them.

- 19 Marianne Kac-Vergne's article on women in mainstream science fiction blockbusters of the past three decades nicely complements the preceding article by focusing on how, after the huge box-office hit of the *Alien* and first two *Terminator* films from the 1980s, the resulting cult status of their female protagonists, Ellen Ripley and Sarah Connor, seemed to promise the advent of new role models of tough, decision-making women who were no longer sex objects submitted to the male gaze. Kac-Vergne offers some elements of explanation for the subsequent backlash which led to the sidelining of female characters generally, suggesting that the 1990-91 Gulf War and massive deployment of military women seen regularly on television, together with the pervasiveness of post-feminism and the idea that women had now achieved equality, were instrumental in provoking what Susan Faludi has called "the remasculinization of America."

History in the making; great lives and new models

- 20 As the subtitle suggests, this final section contains work by historians and sociologists which is respectively "top-down" and "bottom up". Two prominent political figures of the 20th century, Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, notoriously close ideologically, are examined with the aim of assessing the impact of their discourse and politics on the lives of women at the time. Then the piece of sociological field work that follows focuses on an instance of grass-roots American politics to map the evolutions of feminism in the US. The final article by historian Penny Summerfield deals with the methodological and epistemological implications of the shift in oral history practices.
- 21 Margaret Thatcher is undoubtedly amongst the politicians who have most marked the last century, as Karine Rivière-De Franco reminds us, being the first woman leader of the British Conservative party and the first (and only) British Prime Minister. Starting from the commonplace that Thatcher adopted an entirely masculine style, which, paradoxically, did nothing to improve the position of women, nor increase their numbers in politics, De Franco set out to assess the truth of the first statement by an exhaustive analysis of the manifestoes, speeches, declarations and interviews, together with an examination of the legislation passed. Her article provides a synthesis of the results and reveals in some respects a more complex and ambiguous picture, which nevertheless concludes that her successor, John Major, presented a more humane, indeed more feminine side to Conservatism...
- 22 A similarly exhaustive content analysis by Françoise Coste of Ronald Regan's words and deeds during his two terms of office provides an interesting contrast. Of course, as Coste makes clear, Reagan neither understood, not approved of the changes in gender

roles that were occurring in American society at the time and actively pursued an anti-feminist agenda. He was, however, an astute politician and did not hesitate to oppose the Christian Right and nominate the first woman to Supreme Court in 1981, a move which, to quote Sandra Day O'Connor "...has probably done more to give women confidence in true equal opportunity than a thousand speeches." Furthermore, Coste reminds us, women kept their reproductive rights, they entered universities and the professions in record numbers and benefited from the return to prosperity after 1982.

- 23 Moving to the start of the 21st century, in an attempt to understand changes in the nature of collective action by women and thereby assess the state of feminism today in the US, Pauline Delage's contribution combines a theoretical reflection on individual subjectivity and collective action with the results of her field investigation into the nationwide "Clothesline Project", which has become an annual event on American campuses and aims to denounce sexual violence in all its forms by giving victims a physical space—a clothesline hung with teeshirts bearing names or commentaries—within which to give voice to their suffering. Delage notes that the emphasis on individual suffering and the mixed gender orientation means that women as an oppressed group remain invisible.
- 24 The final article by Penny Summerfield provides a limpid, learned overview of the ways oral history has been used traditionally, and of the current shift in perspective towards "greater interest in the narratives people compose about the past and the ways in which memory is socially, culturally and psychically constructed." Through her analysis of the articulation between individual subjectivity and the "cultural circuit" which informs it, she also sheds new light on narrative processes described by several other contributors. Summerfield concludes by suggesting that this move towards greater self-reflexivity is actually changing more widely the way history itself is conceptualised.
- 25 The final position of this contribution is not fortuitous, for not only is its author an eminent historian, whose use of the oral history method in her personal research—notably in collaboration with Mass-Observation—has been valuable in reassessing women's roles in World War II, a topic on which she has published extensively, but Penny Summerfield is also a long-standing collaborator with *Les Jeudis du [genre]*. Her insightful contributions, as visiting professor or keynote speaker, to seminars, conferences or study days have been inspirational for the research dynamics of the group and exemplify international cross-disciplinary exchanges at their most enriching. The article is thus a particularly fitting conclusion to an issue devoted to furthering feminist scholarship.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Le Sens pratique*. Paris : Les Editions de Minuit, 1980.

Hay, Josiane. "Le casse-tête de la traduction du mot 'gender' en français." In *Les Cahiers de l'ILCEA*, 3. Grenoble: Université Stendhal-Grenoble III, 2001-2002.

Hoff Sommers, Christina. *Who Stole Feminism ? How Women Have Betrayed Women*. New York: Touchstone, 1995.

Huston, Nancy. *Reflets dans un œil d'homme*. Arles: Actes Sud, 2012.

Kovacs, Stéphane. "Théorie du genre à l'école: la polémique prend de l'ampleur." *Le Figaro.fr*. 30/01/2014. Retrieved 28/12/15.
<http://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/2014/01/30/01016-20140130ARTFIG00364-theorie-du-genre-a-l-ecole-la-polemique-prend-de-l-ampleur.php>

Money, John. "Hermaphroditism: An Inquiry into the Nature of a Human Paradox." Cambridge : Harvard University, 1952.

Von Flotow, Luise (ed.). *Translating Women*. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2011.

Wolf, Naomi. *The Beauty Myth* (Vintage Feminism Shortened edition). London: Vintage Books, 2015.

NOTES

1. Money, John. "Hermaphroditism: An Inquiry into the Nature of a Human Paradox." Harvard University, 1952.
2. See for example: Hay, Josiane. "Le casse-tête de la traduction du mot 'gender' en français." In *Les Cahiers de l'ILCEA*, 3. Grenoble: Université Stendhal-Grenoble III, 2001-2002. 113-126.
3. Kovacs, Stéphane. "Théorie du genre à l'école: la polémique prend de l'ampleur." *Le Figaro.fr*. 30/01/2014. Retrieved 28/12/15.
<http://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/2014/01/30/01016-20140130ARTFIG00364-theorie-du-genre-a-l-ecole-la-polemique-prend-de-l-ampleur.php>
4. Bourdieu, Pierre. *Le sens pratique*. Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1980. 18.
5. Wolf, Naomi. *The Beauty Myth* (Vintage Feminism Shortened edition). London: Vintage Books, 2015. 8.
6. Hoff Sommers, Christina. *Who Stole Feminism?: How Women Have Betrayed Women*. New York: Touchstone, 1995.
7. Von Flotow, Luise (ed.). *Translating Women*. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2011.
8. See notably Huston, Nancy. *Reflets dans un œil d'homme*. Arles: Actes Sud, 2012.

AUTHOR

KAREN MESCHIA

Maître de conférences
 Université Toulouse – Jean Jaurès
karen.meschia@univ-tlse2.fr