

Situated Authorship: Feminist Critical Engagement with Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author"

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In his 1968 manifesto "The Death of the Author," Roland Barthes decried the importance traditionally ascribed to a work's authorship in determining its meaning. Readers, he insisted, are free to explore any work for its myriad levels of signification, since all writing inevitably escapes the writer's control. To this, feminist critics have reacted with both enthusiasm and consternation. On the one hand, post-structuralist arguments like Barthes's challenged conventional methods of reading literary works that put great store on the unitary subjectivity of the canonical author, a subjectivity that was in almost all cases male. On the other hand, in dismissing the authority of the author, Barthes also seemed to be rejecting the significance of authorial identity, as if there were nothing relevant about the gender, say, of the person who wrote a work. As much as Barthes appeared to be embracing a more fluid notion of subjectivity in place of an older phallogentrism, his essay equally seemed to be denying women the possibility of a distinct subjectivity and hence robbing them of any ground by which they could be acknowledged as women writers. In her lucid review of feminist critics' responses to Barthes, Sarah Wilson shows how his claims confront them with "an insoluble dilemma," since his anti-essentialism, philosophically liberating though it may be, cannot serve them in their efforts to liberate women writers from the veil of anonymity they have long been forced to wear.

- Trevor Ross

Upon publication of Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" in 1968 and Michel Foucault's "What is an Author?" in 1970, theorists within the academy began to radically rethink notions of authorship, meaning, and the construction of a text. The author is dead, the reader is born; singularity is deconstructed and multiplicity of meaning and multivocality gain new importance. The implications for canonical works or canonicity as such are obvious: without an "author" proper, a centralized textual meaning, or metaphysics of essentiality, texts achieve a new power to be endlessly interpreted and considered. However, this power is also a resistance to ideology and positioned status in a rarefied, shifting "list" of sanctified, canonical works (although such a list has never and will never so coherently exist). Politics of inclusion lose their relevance and may even be derided as naïve or essentialist: how can authors of ethnic minority, for example, be included in the canon if the "author" concept itself does not exist?

Feminist critics were similarly faced with the challenge of expressing one's identity in an academic and literary world that no longer values it in the traditional sense. Women theorists responded in different ways to the question posed here by Toril Moi: "What then can it mean to declare oneself a feminist postmodernist or, perhaps more accurately, a postmodern feminist?" (4). On the one hand, the destruction of authority means the destruction of patriarchal, exclusionary forces within the canon and the academy, taking down the paternal hegemony in place and allowing spaces for writers representing repressed populations to enter into readership and canonicity. The male writer can no longer profit solely by his gender. On the other hand, this very anonymity

invalidates women and ethnic minority inclusion and representation in the canon as any talk of authorial identity is necessarily repressed. Comparing feminist critical theorists writing respectively near to and far from poststructuralism, geographically, ideologically, and chronologically, the reader can trace the progress of feminist engagement with the concept of authorship. This engagement seeks, through positioned intertextuality, to find a tenuous balance between claiming vocal subjectivity and falling into claims of a paternalistic, originary identity.

Barthes's "The Death of the Author" incidentally begins by engaging with the problem of portraying a woman (Barthes 253). In revealing the multiple meanings inherent in a passage from Balzac's *Sarrasine*, and the indeterminacy of authorial intention, Barthes writes, "Writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject steps away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing" (253). The meaning of a text is divorced from the single, originary voice that produced it; the text is compared to a woven cloth, to be disentangled rather than unlocked. The author, patriarch to his work, loses his responsibility for the coherence of a text. He is replaced by a reader who, without biography, history, or disposition, "holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted" (257). The author is further transplanted in his duties of production by the "modern scriptor," a personage enacting a performative, "pure gesture of inscription," drawing on a vast inner dictionary and mixing different writings to come up with something new, ultimately without singular, deep meaning (255). Feminist theorist Cheryl Walker dismisses assertions that Barthes is suggesting that authorship does not exist whatsoever: "What he is claiming is that a proper theory of the text does not make its meaning depend on authors as unified subjectivities or on readers given individual characteristics" (567). Writing becomes its own production, language speaking itself in anteriority, engaging with a multiplicity of influences, texts, meanings, cultures, and experiences, and constantly available to re-interpretation at the will of the reader.

This postmodern development in writing would seem to be amenable to feminist theory. Indeed, Barthes declares his concept "revolutionary," as "to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases" (256). God, interpreted through a feminist lens, is autocratic, male, positivist, and essentialist. His literal displacement from authority should allow subjectivity for those traditionally denied access to identity expression, paradoxically at the same time as identity is destroyed. The subject is dispersed among a range of discourses, differentially defined, and assembled. These discourses imply several positions from which a subject may experience reality. Catherine Belsey writes of the advantages this new rhetoric offers to women in actually seeking a more appropriate expression of identity: "The attempt to locate a single and coherent subject-position within these contradictory discourses ... can create intolerable pressures [for women]" (50). Belsey sees the discourse of feminism as the solution to this pressure, describing subjectivity, in the postmodern vein, as a process dialectically constructed through language; women may actually locate their subjectivity in the plural anonymity of Barthes' poststructuralism.

In locating subjectivity in a range of positions, not restricted to gender, class, or ethnicity, a text or author's relevance to academia and popular culture too is unfettered, unlimited by the actual identity of the author and thereby concealing or invalidating characteristics that would traditionally prioritize certain writers over others, for example, the characteristic of being European, Caucasian, or male. Nancy K. Miller speaks to the feminist possibilities freed by the death of the author: "It is, after all, the Author, canonized, anthologized, and institutionalized, who excludes the less-known works of women and minority writers from the canon, and who by his authority justifies the exclusion" ("Changing the Subject" 105). In eliminating the male author, women and other repressed literary populations may find a voice, as they are liberated from universalism and ideological essentialism.

Miller counters the supposed benefits of poststructuralism for feminists with the assertion that such advantages have not, or do not necessarily, become manifest. She states, "The removal of the Author has not so much made room for a revision of the concept of authorship as it has, through a variety of rhetorical moves, repressed and inhibited discussion of any writing identity...it matter not *who* writes" ("Changing the Subject" 104). In her work "The Text's Heroine: A Feminist Critic and her Fictions," Miller further states her concern, aligning herself with the canonical project of correction, the process of reinstating previously ignored or neglected populations into the canon. Correctionists are those "who wish to 'rectify or reverse women's exclusion' ... 'We women' must continue to work for the woman who has been writing, because not to do so will reauthorize our oblivion ... it matter who writes and *signs* woman" ("The Text's Heroine" 49). Using the ambiguously authored *Portuguese Letters* as an example, Miller, in deceptively simple terms, compares her view of female authorship to that of Peggy Kamuf, discussed below, who adheres to a much more poststructuralist theory: "Kamuf doesn't care whether the *Portuguese Letters* were written by a woman or by a man, and I do" (50). As witnessed by Miller, women and ethnic minorities experience a fundamental desire for expression that does not fit neatly with the obliteration of the authorial subject.

Miller asserts that women should maintain their claim to authorship as they have a different historical relation to identity formation than men. She wishes to emphasize the difference produced by the "asymmetrical demands generated by different writing identities, male and female, or, perhaps more usefully, canonical or hegemonic and non-canonical or marginal" ("Changing the Subject" 105). Women, according to Miller, have not had the same "historical relation of identity to origin, institution, production" as men; women have not "felt burdened by too much Self, Ego, Cogito, etc." as Barthes claims men have done (Barthes 254). As such, women writing must mean female authorship, as men cannot possibly historically or structurally, adequately or justifiably, represent or speak for women. Women are thus granted a distinct subjectivity. Cheryl Walker locates the fundamental contradiction in Miller's theory, namely "that women (or non-canonical and marginal writers) can be authors whereas men (or canonical and hegemonic writers) cannot" (Walker 557). Yet Miller sees this as historically and culturally justified: "Women for whom the signature – by virtue of its power in the world of circulation – is *not* immaterial. Only those who have it can play with not having it" ("The Text's Heroine" 53). Poststructuralism, though apparently freeing and egalitarian in its

anonymity, was constructed as a counterpoint to, and therefore based on, a phallogocentric structure. It is theoretically based on male cognitive systems. It does not, as a theory, suit the actual history and psychology of women. Miller calls for “a decentered vision...but a centered action that will not result in a renewed invisibility” (53). Acknowledging the possible accusations against her as a humanist, Miller sees the main triumph of feminist writing and theory as the destabilization of the idea of humanism as universality (52). According to Miller, it matters who writes; women writers should be given their place in the canon as women. Their main burden is not too much subjectivity, but not enough.

Peggy Kamuf, in the poststructuralist vein, responds directly to Miller’s claims, placing renewed value on the very indeterminacy of feminist writing and critical practice. She sees the conflict inherent in a simultaneous engagement with poststructuralism and feminism as an expression of the power of perpetual postmodern re-interpretation and renewal. Kamuf indicates the two prevalent feminist strategies for negotiating traditional sites of exclusion: “On the one hand an expansion of institutions to include at their center what has been historically excluded; on the other hand, the installing of a counter-institution based on feminine-centered cultural models” (Kamuf 45). Yet the issue with both these approaches is that they appear as superficial reworkings of an essentially patriarchal structure. What Miller seeks to protect is merely a tool of paternal ideology, and consequently, the death of the author may offer a productive alternate view of the canon after all. Kamuf asks, “To the extent that feminist thought assumes the limits of humanism, it may be reproducing itself as but an extension of those limits and reinventing the institutional structures that it set out to dismantle” (46). For Kamuf, plurality in the Barthesian sense actually frees women to experience their subjectivity as it is: fluid, individual, and, thus far, inadequately framed and explored.

Central to the debate surrounding feminist authorship in a postmodern society and academy, embodied by Miller’s and Kamuf’s arguments, are the conflicting concepts of what defines a “female author.” Indeed, this difficulty with definition is paramount to debates on canonicity in general; if the canon is to be reconstructed, representation becomes a key concern. This prompts the question, to which populations do various writers (or scriptors) belong to or identify with? Distinctions between sex and gender become problematic, mixed ethnicity and self-identification are salient, and inclusion becomes increasingly difficult to determine. Peggy Kamuf allows for a fluid understanding of who is considered a woman: “Women’s writing is writing signed by women ... If these ... are the grounds of a practice of feminist criticism, then that practice must be prepared to ally itself with the fundamental assumptions of patriarchy” (“The Text’s Heroine” 50). Kamuf elaborates, ascribing the status of women’s writing “not to ... productions signed by biological women alone, but ... all productions that put the ‘feminine’ into play – the feminine then being a modality or process accessible to both men and women” (50). Miller, on the other hand, uses biology as a provisional determinant of woman authorship, women’s writing being writing bearing the signature of woman. “Woman” as a stable category of subjects submitted to specific historical and cultural processes is thus aligned with Miller’s theory. Drawing on support from Catherine Stimpson and Virginia Woolf as to the political ramifications of Kamuf’s view, Miller writes that the inadequacy of a male author writing the “feminine” “has

everything to do with the ways in which the signature of women has functioned historically: in terms of the body, the sexual ideologies that define it; in terms of civil status, the legal restrictions that construct it" (51). Certainly, Miller indicates the same issue inherent to the death of the author, namely that the erasure or fragmentation of writing identity necessarily means the elimination of the female grounds of the feminist cause, a leap Miller is unwilling to make.

Interestingly, Walker, discussed below, is careful to use the qualifier "feminine" over "female" to describe the experiences of women, pointing to the prevalence of poststructuralist thought in feminist critical theory. Susan Stanford Friedman is similarly suspicious of overly humanist definitions of "woman" as potentially prioritizing certain feminist agendas over others. She adheres to a postmodern definition of woman, though she uses a more gendered designation than Kamuf: "Women are themselves multicontexted; gender can never be experienced in 'pure' form, but is always mediated through other categories like race, ethnicity, religion, class, national origin, sexual preference" ("Post/Poststructuralist" 471). Debate on the point of what constitutes "woman," including the problematic of invoking a universal "us" of women, indicates the larger issue at hand, that of determining how best to coherently approach feminism, poststructuralism, and the canon. There is a clear lack of consensus as to who exactly is even being discussed, let alone whether the death of the author is in her (or his) best interest.

Walker tries to navigate between Miller's and Kamuf's positions, succinctly setting out the dilemma posed by Barthes's dead author:

What we need, instead of a theory of the death of the author, is a new concept of authorship that does not naively assert that the writer is an originating genius, creating aesthetic objects outside of history, but does not diminish the importance of difference and agency in the responses of women writers to historical formations. (Walker 560)

Walker emphasizes the need for biography and text to interact. It is dangerous to reduce writing to the personal, but even riskier to ignore the way subjectivity is differently experienced and shaped in distinct historical periods. As Walker points out, subjectivity, even in male writing, meant something entirely different in the seventeenth century than it does now, just as subjectivity must necessarily take different forms for authors of different genders, cultural backgrounds, literary genres, and so on.

Walker ultimately decides on a sort of situated poststructuralism, arguing that to ignore the author's influence on a text is ludicrous, especially as other external factors such as culture and social history are consistently considered relevant. A work should not, however, be taken as a clear-cut representation of an individual; one should not be deceived as to the "contradictoriness and opacity of such works as information about the writer's psyche" (565). Women writers should not be designated as worthy of canonical

status simply because of their sex, and feminine writing is not the equivalent of female writing. The author, for Walker, is one among many traces present in a text, an idea that incorporates Barthes's language while maintaining the importance of the female claim to identity. Walker concludes: "To erase a woman poet as the author of her poems in favor of an abstract indeterminacy is an act of oppression. However, every version of the persona will be a mask of the author we cannot lightly remove" (571). The idea of gender as performative here is powerful: it allows for inexhaustible reading and writing experiences, as well as the perpetual re-construction of position in a text without reinscribing the silence of the repressed in eliminating any form or remnant of identity.

Miller outlines the dilemma academics, authors, and readers are therefore left with in trying to negotiate the contradictory position of feminist authorship: "metonymies as opposed to metaphors; psychohistorical needs as opposed to articulate, epistemological claims; material contingencies as opposed to theoretical urgencies" ("The Text's Heroine" 48). There are echoes here of her own emotionally driven arguments as counterpointed by Peggy Kamuf's epistemological claims to plurality, and encompassed as a whole by Cheryl Walker's tenuous position.

More recent theorists have tended to posit strategies of literary study that tend, interestingly, towards the material and psychohistorical needs of women and Third World writers. These strategies may be because of shifting worldviews, the dialectical nature of academic thought, or the increased capacity of marginalized populations to speak. Barbara Christian condemns what she refers to as the "race for theory": the radical turn towards criticism and complex theoretical concepts, such as Barthes's "The Death of the Author," has become the new hegemony, instructing marginal people as to the acceptable way to read and write. The modes of reading and writing prevalent in the academy do not work for everyone, just as poststructuralist pluralism does not work for women, to borrow Miller's phrase: "[Those with muted voices] have struggled ... to make their voices, their various voice, heard, and for whom literature is not an occasion for discourse among critics but is ... one way by which they come to understand their lives better" (Christian 53). Christian reminds the reader that women writers, writers of color, creative writers, and Third World theorists have long employed a different, more narrative mode of theorizing. In being forced to use a specific literary language that does not apply to them and that they do not know how to use effectively, these populations are re-marginalized.

In their attempts at liberation, poststructuralists have thus unwittingly reconstituted patriarchal domination. They have, "as usual, concentrated on themselves and were not in the slightest interested in the worlds they had ignored or controlled" (Christian 56). For Christian, postmodern thought does nothing to open opportunities for voices typically silenced, instead narrowing the scope of literature that is considered valuable or worthy of hearing. Poststructuralists have simply redefined what constitutes proficient ways of writing. Such a move only serves to reinforce the existing canon, rather than challenging, re-negotiating, or destroying its implicit hegemony.

Susan Stanford Friedman similarly challenges the dominance of poststructuralism as the current central academic theory. Friedman argues against devaluing the agency of

subjectivity, a subjectivity that, in producing a work, necessarily acts and produces. Friedman makes an interesting point regarding the differences between French and American feminist theory. While French theory more readily dismisses the importance of the self, a paternalistic authorial identity, in favour of pluralism and free expression, American theorists tend to defend the woman author against poststructuralists, either rejecting postmodernism altogether or attempting to argue for a situatedness within plurality, as Kamuf does. Friedman attributes the latter attitude to the prevalence of the American Dream in popular and cultural rhetoric:

Groups who have been denied the agency and status of the individual for reasons of race, class, gender, religion, ethnicity, sexual preference (and so forth) have traditionally felt excluded from “the American Dream” ... Redefinitions of the Self to be (re)claimed have been critically important to these movements. (“Weavings” 157)

While this explanation is useful in terms of the direction of American feminist theory, the real interest lies in the theory’s justification by social history and situated identity. In American feminist theorists’ and authors’ engagement with the erasure of authorship, the negotiation with and reclaiming of identity becomes acutely relevant. Perhaps then, the absolute death of the author is not possible for those whose lived experience does not permit them to give up their subjectivity. Those American critics who do affirm the French model must deny their cultural, historical, and social actuality, an erasure of identity in itself. Walker’s authorial masks might be useful here: these theorists must choose between their academic and individual personas. Whether this dilemma is a particularly feminine one, and what it denotes about the priorities of canon-formation, is unclear. At risk of overstating the intentions or experiences of these American French theorists, it would appear that forfeiture of female identity, even when personally willed, might be the most effective method for marginalized populations to gain inclusion in the canon. Whether this forfeiture is liberating or repressing remains, ironically, radically subjective.

Friedman sees a way out of the dilemma outlined here through Miller’s concept of political intertextuality. Texts, for Miller and, consequently, for Friedman, are, to borrow Barthes’s image, woven as tissue or cloth, the intersection of “other cultural and historical texts,” linguistics, and sign systems held together in the reader (153, 158). In a feminist context, intertextuality becomes “the weaving of women’s texts as they are interwoven with many other texts (female and male),” though Miller retains the author-function (158). The postmodern authorial signature becomes “a historically specific configuration of gender, class, race, sexual preference, religion, and so forth” (172). Political intertextuality seems to provide for a situated subjectivity, both allowing for fluidity and acknowledging the inevitably plural nature of identity. This situated subjectivity at least partially satisfies both feminist schools of thought.

In heralding the death of the author, the destruction of every voice and the introduction of an anonymous, intertextual multivocality, Barthes creates an insoluble –

and still ongoing – dilemma for feminist critical theorists. As authorial identity is erased, marginal populations who have not had the opportunity to speak, such as women, ethnic minorities, and Third World theorists, are given the opportunity to take their place in the canon and the academy. They must do so, however, stripped of the very identity they seek to express, the subjectivity traditionally denied people outside the mainstream. Female theorists argue from both sides of this issue, some claiming the distinct female need for subjectivity, others the freedom associated with the destruction of identity, and still others for something in between, a positioned, yet culturally, historically, and socially dispersed subjecthood. Ultimately, the dilemma centres on two questions: what does it mean to be a woman writer, and how and where should such a writer situate herself within the academy?

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