

MEN IN FEMINISM: INTERVIEWS WITH VAMPIRES

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Alice Jardine and Paul Smith, eds., *Men in Feminism*. New York: Methuen, 1987; 288 pp.

Friends of mine were engaged this past year in discussions of men's place vis-à-vis feminism. My friend Andrew and I positioned ourselves on the side of men's impossible relation to feminism, arguing that men could not be feminists. We felt that our friends who had "come out" as self-proclaimed male feminists, were not as sensitive as we were to the privileged epistemological loci from which they were naming and theorizing. We declared ourselves "radical male feminists" and defined this as a theoretical separatism between men and women founded in the often upspoken assumption that feminist theory is better than male theory.

At the time, I was reading the works of Teresa de Lauretis, Gayatri Spivak, Alice Jardine, and Jane Gallop. Our theoretical separatism did not want to appropriate feminist discourse for male theorizing, and I could not help but notice that men who declared themselves feminists did not question their (straight) male sexual privilege. They also exchanged women more frequently than we did, even though we knew ourselves to be cuter and more sexually desirable than they were. We began to tsk-tsk and roll our eyes at men declaring their male feminism in lectures and seminars. We talked much about male disempowerment and, realizing that although this is impossible, being simply a displacement, it must be "risked" now. If women are taking the "strategic risk of essence," following Gayatri Spivak, why aren't men taking any risks?

CRASH POLITICS

Last week when I began reading for this review, I realized that in my haste to be “cooler” than men who called themselves male feminists, all that I had been doing was dressing up what my female lover had been telling me in *my* theoretical Sunday best. She thinks that men use feminism to facilitate the exchange of women and she views male sexual and theoretical privilege as the *main problem* in the West. She also believes that men must stop their paranoid fretting over losing access to the most exciting theoretical and political site in the academy. I had been using (unacknowledged) my lover’s political struggles as a feminist to give live to my theory (now published) of why men need to be “in” feminism right now. I was vampirically appropriating a women’s ideas without even finding it necessary to cite her. I hope this acknowledgement is not too late.

Edited by Alice Jardine and Paul Smith, *Men in Feminism* is a collection of essays that were originally presented at the Modern Language Association Meeting and published with additional contributions from the likes of Jacques Derrida, Craig Owens, Meaghan Morris, Jane Gallop, and other theory luminaries, the book concludes with an exchange between Smith and Jardine. Like the MLA session, the collection is organized around the problematics of men in/and/of feminism. Eleven women and seven responses address Smith, and his framing of the question is important: men in feminism is a question of men’s relation to a body of theory, not necessarily to the bodies of feminists writing theory or writing feminism.

Compared to Smith’s demand for free access to the feminist theoretical terrain, Steven Heath’s piece, entitled “Male Feminism,” is penitent and apologetic. Heath’s text is melancholic in its invocation of the “impossible” relation that men must occupy with regards to feminism. Men cannot be feminists, he admonishes, and later criticizes Smith in a somewhat grandfatherly style for conflating feminist theory and feminism. Heath is especially incredulous to Smith’s proclamation that feminist theory does not exist outside the academy. Smith writes that “the intellectual task of understanding feminist theory is not a problem since feminist theory is situated within the array of post-structuralist discourses with which many of us are now perhaps over-familiar.”¹ Heath seems slightly self-righteous in his declaration that the problem for him, unlike Smith, does not lie in men’s relation to feminist theory as simply a representation constructed and fixed by men, but in the understanding that feminism

is a huge problem for men, for us, because it involves grasping the fact that it is not another discourse (let alone a post-structuralist array), not another voice to be added, an approach to be remembered and catered for, but that it radically affects and shifts everything and that that shift is not negotiable, is not radically translatable into a problem of ‘inclusion/exclusion’.²

Heath is rearticulating the real problem of men’s relation to feminism as a problematic of boundaries. He finds Smith’s desire to be “in” feminist

theory as not respectful of the struggles women have undergone in the process of procuring institutional respect for the project of feminist theory and women's studies in general. Framed as a text that is insensitive and not respectful enough towards feminists, Smith's essay reads as being somewhat arrogant and his irony seems out of place next to other pieces that are somber and severe in tone. But I think Heath's initial refiguring sets the tone for the subsequent responses by the women who do not seem to take kindly to Smith's claim that as simply a body of discourse, of course, he has a right to reterritorialize feminist theory. Smith is *not* sensitive to the problems inherent in an institutional feminism and the daily battles women wage for hiring, canonical change, and tenure. Smith is implying that feminism is sacrificing its political concerns for institutional rewards and he would hope that alliances would be formed by male and female post-structuralists outside the academy to combat the reactionary 'realpolitik' in the U.S.

For better or for worse, the argument is set and the women contributors do not appreciate Smith's immodest concerns for the political resuscitation of feminism, and they focus on his hubris and the insensitivity Heath emphasizes. This framing of Smith's paper by Heath earns Heath male feminist credits. Alice Jardine tells us in her reply to the men that the members of her feminist theory group found a methodology for locating and recognizing a feminist text: "the inscription of struggle – even of pain."³ Jardine finds Heath's paper the "most inscriptive of struggle." She admires Heath's confessions of the potentiality of a pornographic effect in men's relation to feminism and she admires the way in which he accuses men (especially Smith, but also Jacques Derrida's comments in this volume) of fetishizing feminism. Jardine likes the insecurity and unfixing of Heath's position vis-à-vis feminism and she quotes Heath asking feminists: "Do I write from desire – fear to say simply in the last analysis, 'love me'?"⁴

Contrastingly, Jardine critiques Paul Smith's whiny frustration at the way in which women foreclose the question of men in feminism. Not sure how and why he could be excluded, Smith claims legitimation through having taught feminist theory. Jardine corners him on his insatiable desire to name and, through naming, set limits. She asks, "Why do you even think it's necessary to try to find a way to say this? What's wrong with withdrawing? What is this desire to play the rhetorical field?"⁵ She goes on to say that some men, in their infatuation with always being right and "correct," are wasting their time when it comes to employing feminist discourse. Men in feminism can never possess the correct tone of voice, they "just can't get it right." She is clearly not working out modes of teaching "Feminism as a Second Language" at Berlitz or the Alliance Feministe; (Rather something like, "OK boys, hold down your tongues, round your lips and repeat slowly, clearly, phah-low-goe-sen-trizm").

Isn't it ironic that I am being derisive of Jardine for not having the forti-

CRASH POLITICS

tude to tell men to fuck off. It is easy for me to ask, totally ignoring (or fetishizing) her attempt to straddle two difficult and *not* exclusive positions: 1) to be a feminist requires a women's body; and 2) there is no *essential* relation between having a women's body and being a feminist. To have much to learn and unlearn from men is related to and not coterminous with the acknowledgement that for heterosexual women, men are a problem that must be confronted. And of course, Jardine knows very well the real risks faced by academic women, many of whom have no tenure, in telling men to find their own playground.

Here I am observing the effects of introjections from a long line of paternal metaphors, Smith and Derrida inclusive: that is, the male drive to always be in the position of the masterful subject vis-à-vis women; the need to direct and guide female bodies, whether they be bodies moving across streets or theoretical bodies. Stephen Heath's awareness of this desire, and his flirtation with the necessity of an object position for men in relation to feminism are obvious in his paper. He is close to accepting an object space in relation to the female subjects of feminism. This desire/fear that Jardine admired is absent in all the other (primarily defensive) pieces by men, who don't want to sacrifice their ostensibly inalienable rights as subjects to and in feminism. Rosi Braidotti in her essay reminds men that "it's easier for any man to forget the historical fact that is the oppression of women: it's one of their favorite blindspots."⁶ Paul Smith cannot imagine that his biological status alone could prevent him from attaining his subject position in feminist theory, and he fights to maintain this space against the much less attractive theoretical topos of an object position resulting from his straight, male, academic place.

Stated like this, the question of a male subject contaminating the object feminism is reduced to a point at which it seems to be primarily one of boundaries whose borders should or should not be respected. The women seem obliged to consider the issue of transgressing boundaries while rejecting men's privilege to do so. The men (with the exception of Heath and Cary Nelson's beautifully emotive essay) want to cross over. For them and for me, feminist theory appears to be a valuable commodity. We often do not see, however, that the purchase of this intellectual capital is achieved at a price. We do not think of it as an exchange; *of course* we do not want to give up or risk much. If feminism is only a theoretical body or space (or topos, a topic to be discussed and "won over") then bodies with a predilection for appropriating and invading will want to pillage and conquer. How do appropriating bodies come to digest theoretical bodies and rob them, vampirically, of their blood – life blood?

In Ann Rice's *Interview with a Vampire*,⁷ the vampire Lestat is obsessed with the act of giving birth through killing. He kills and then names in acts of self-paternity. This seems very close to the naming of "self-proclaimed" male feminists. The vampiric desire for naming and self-paternity is a complete disavowal of the mother. The vampire father has

that “go anywhere, do anything” spirit. Acts of transgressing boundaries are meaningless to this preternatural creature who moves with the speed of light and is able to disappear at will. Male theoretical vampires, however, have been scolded for not embodying their texts and writing as if they never had mothers. Women have been hurt for too long by disembodied metaphysical systems that have sucked the blood of the female victims of their epistemic violence.

The answer to all this would seem to be that boundaries should be guarded and not be allowed to be violated. The boundaries of the book itself are narrowly drawn. It confines itself to the site of feminist theory in the academic institution, but the book knows this and several of the pieces are quasi-apologetic for this focus. Ignoring these apologies, I hasten to violate the book’s boundaries. Difference, it seems, should be maintained. Paul Smith’s point that difference within academia is not worth all the trouble that this book mobilizes is either rejected or unheard due to his possibly inappropriate irony. But I, trying to acknowledge my privilege to speak on it here, would like to return to Smith’s contention that feminism might be losing any political clout it once had by rejecting alliances with political men and ghettoizing itself in an institution. Again, it is easy for me to say.

There is much talk of difference in feminist theory right now and *Men in Feminism* mirrors this well. Smith’s concern for the narrow academic positioning of difference can be buttressed by similar invocations from another masterful theorist, Jean-François Lyotard. In “One of the Things at Stake in Women’s Struggles” Lyotard argues that the containment and neutralization of the question of difference is the ultimate goal of capitalism, that the erasure of real difference will increase exchange value.” Then, in the *Boston Sunday Globe*, I picked up the Business Section by accident and read: “Fighting Racism, Sexism at Work,” an article about the new corporate emphasis and privileging of difference, as minorities and women flood the job market. Companies such as McDonald’s, Digital, and Hewlett Packard make their employees attend bi-monthly “Valuing Difference” seminars. Corporations now hire “difference experts” to meet with workers individually and in groups to lecture to them on the pernicious effects that racism and sexism can have on profits and corporate morale. The Valuing Difference Director for Hewlett Packard says,

Now companies do not look at minorities or women as a deficiency they have to blend in, rather, valuing difference strategies are [designed] for managers and [teach] how we can get the most out of each employee so the company benefits [*sic*]. People are beginning to understand that this (valuing difference and ending discrimination) is a business issue. Business can no longer ignore the contributions from women and minorities, or continue ignoring potential contributions and survive.⁸

As usual, corporate capitalism is ahead of academia. I am wondering if

CRASH POLITICS

Smith's critique of a depoliticized feminism is relevant here. Is institutionalized theory playing right into the hands of First World multinational capitalism in exploiting workers domestically while raping and pillaging in the Third World?

The absence of any mention at all of the political economy in *Men in Feminism* is somewhat frightening. Let me appropriate an economic critique of Gilles Deleuze and Michael Foucault that is posited by Gayatri Spivak. To paraphrase her remarks made in "Can the subaltern Speak?", perhaps a political response for the post-structural feminist would be to put the corporate capitalist economic structure "under erasure," to "see the economic factor as irreducible as it reinscribes the social text, even as it is erased, however imperfectly, when it claims to be the final determinant (or transcendental signified)."⁹ Once again, it is easy for me to say this, my sole economic concerns being the sharpening and upkeep of these fangs and the dry cleaning bill for my preposterous black cape.

I now realize that Andrew's and my own post-*Men in Feminism* concern over disempowerment and non-mastery cannot be assumed unproblematically. Jane Gallop warns in *Reading Lacan* that to choose to give up one's masterful position may be another ruse towards a more resilient mastery. Men clearly have easier access to positions of non-mastery and we should not occlude the presence of power in these possibly insidious locations. Maybe the answer for me can be found in the oscillating tension at the beginning of this piece when, in the space of one paragraph, I claim: "men couldn't be feminists" *and* "I am a radical feminist." There is inscribed there a flux, an insecure space of decentering, a contradictory place of confusion, resembling the place Stephen Heath recommends as being possibly the most "correct" for men right now. Nevertheless, from where will the motivations come for entering this "most correct" place and what pleasures will men find there? Can male subjects, used to assuming rights of mastery over any space and topic, simply give up these privileges overnight? Moving and regrouping from utopia to oscillating, shifting atopia (from all places to no place) won't be easy. There's no place for atopias in the male psychic economy presently, no Nowhere Man's Club. It seems that nothing less than the revamping of the structures of male desire will be necessary to maintain membership quotas in such a Club. I know, I am not yet one of its clients.

My review has been unconsciously centered on the male contributors and, retrospectively, this doesn't seem very "correct." I do not think I made a decision to do this, nevertheless I do completely ignore excellent pieces by Meaghan Morris, Elaine Showalter, Elizabeth Weed, and Peggy Kamuf. In *Interview with a Vampire*, Lestat mainly keeps company with other male vampires in a striking homosocial mirroring of this review. Lestat also prefers male kills, commenting that in comparison with girls, boys stand "on the threshold of the maximum possibility of life."¹⁰ With vampires and male feminists, men are often the primary erotic focus. A few turtle-

MARC DRISCOLL

neck sweaters might take some of the sting out, but probably will not deter me from draining all the blood from feminist theoreticians's necks, after all the boys go home.

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Notes

1. Paul Smith, "Men in Feminism," in Alice Jardine and Paul Smith, *Men in Feminism*, (New York: Methuen, 1987), 35.
2. Stephen Heath, "Men in Feminism," (New York: Methuen, 1987), 35.
3. Alice Jardine, "Men in Feminism: Odor di Uomo or Compagnons de Route?" in *Men in Feminism*, 58.
4. *Ibid.*, 59.
5. Jardine and Smith, "A Conversation," in *Men in Feminism*, 256.
6. Rosi Braidotti, "Envy: or with your Brains and my Looks," in *Men in Feminism*.
7. Anne Rici, *Interview with a Vampire* (New York: Ballantine, 1976).
8. Jean-François Lyotard, "One of the Things at Stake in Women's Struggles," *Substance* 20 (1978).
9. "Fighting Racism, Sexism at Work," *The Boston Sunday Globe*. 7 August 1988, (Business) Section C.
10. Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, (Urbana and Chicago: The University of Illinois, 1988), 280.
11. Anne Rice, *Interview*, 43.