



**Toril Moi**

## "I am not a woman writer"

*About women, literature and feminist theory today*

In the 70s and 80s, many women found the female in literature inspiring but then Nathalie Sarraute snarled in an interview: "When I write I am neither man nor woman nor dog nor cat." To her, the notion of female or male writing — *écriture féminine ou masculine* — was totally void of meaning. Moi finds that since then the discussion has gone nowhere. "To make women second rate citizens of the world of literature is to say that the female experience of the world carries less value than the male."

Why is the question of women and writing such a marginal topic in feminist theory today? The decline of interest in literature is all the more striking given its central importance in the early years of feminist theory. Although I shall only speak about literature, I think it is likely that the loss of interest in literature is symptomatic of a more wide-ranging loss of interest in questions relating to women and aesthetics and women and creativity within feminist theory. I shall begin by discussing some of the *theoretical* reasons why the topic fell out of favour. When did it happen? What are the theoretical reasons for the feminist disinvestment in aesthetic questions? In this way, I hope to show that there actually is a theoretical problem here, and one that it is well worth working on. I then begin the theoretical work required to refocus the question. In this paper, I shall begin by analysing the situation of the woman writer in society. I think of this as a kind of speech act analysis. Why are some women writers reluctant to acknowledge that they are women writers? How are we to take the claim "I am not a woman writer"? To help me analyse this question, I shall draw on Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. I shall also show that Beauvoir's analysis helps us to understand how Virginia Woolf thinks about the question of women and writing. I shall end by saying something about why literature matters. My few remarks on that topic are simply intended as a starting point for further analysis.

### **History: diagnosing a problem**

In the decade from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, women's writing and *écriture féminine* were hugely popular, inside and outside of academia. Books with titles like *A Literature of Their Own* (Showalter, 1977), *Women Writing and Writing about Women* (Jacobus, 1979), or, in a different vein, *Fictions of Feminine Desire* (Kamuf, 1982) and *The Poetics of Gender* (Miller, 1986) were rolling off the presses. To those of us who were young and impressionable at that time, this was exciting, challenging, and *theoretically significant* stuff. In the 1980s, feminist theory was hugely preoccupied with questions relating to women and creativity, women and writing, women and the production of art.

At the time, women's writing was often defined as writing by women, about women, and for women. The concept of *écriture féminine*, championed in France by writers and psychoanalysts such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, was a parallel development, more intimately bound to psychoanalytical ideas of femininity. *Écriture féminine* promoted writing marked by femininity, which in general meant writing by women, although it was acknowledged that femininity could occasionally be found in men's texts, too.

For many women writers, this wave of interest in women's writing was pure liberation: the previous decades had been more than usually rich in macho depictions of women. In the introduction she wrote in 1971 to her 1962 novel *The Golden Notebook*, Doris Lessing reminded her readers that:

ten, or even five years ago... novels and plays were being plentifully written by men furiously critical of women — particularly from the States but also in this country — portrayed as bullies and betrayers, but particularly as underminers and sappers. But these attitudes in male writers were taken for granted, accepted as sound philosophical bases, as quite normal, certainly not as womanhating, aggressive or neurotic. (Lessing, 1999: xiv)

Lessing had in mind not just American writers such as Norman Mailer and Henry Miller, roundly denounced by Kate Millett in her epochal book *Sexual Politics* (1969), but the whole generation of "angry young men" in Britain, led by Kingsley Amis and John Osborne, who came into their own in the 1950s (Millett, 1970).

Set against such a background, the passionate interest in women's writing that exploded in the 1970s appears entirely justified. Finally, women writers were going to fully express their own passions and desires in writing; finally, women readers would find their own passions reflected in books written with women in mind.

No wonder, then, that many women writers flourished in this period. To other women writers, however, the constant harping on femininity and gender differences was simply irritating: "When I write, I am neither man nor woman, nor dog nor cat, I am not me, I am no longer anything", Nathalie Sarraute snarled in a 1984 interview: "There is no such thing as *écriture féminine*, I have never seen it", she added for good measure.<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere, she declared that she found talk of "feminine or masculine writing (*écriture féminine ou masculine*)" completely meaningless.<sup>2</sup>

The author of *The Golden Notebook*, the epochal 1962 novel that quickly became a veritable bible for feminists all over the Western world, was quick to deny that her great novel was about sex differences. On the contrary, Lessing claimed, it was about the detrimental effects of differences: "Yet the essence of the book, the organization of it, everything in it, says implicitly and explicitly, that we must not divide things off, must not compartmentalize" (1999: xiv–xv). Towards the end of the novel, when the two characters Saul and Anna suffer a nervous breakdown, their distinct personalities disappear: "In the inner Golden Notebook, which is written by both of them", Lessing comments, "you can no longer distinguish between what is Saul and what is Anna, and between them and the other people in the book" (p. xii).

Already in the glory days of women's writing, then, dissenting voices could be heard. Who was right and who was wrong? Why did some brilliant women writers feel so exasperated at the very thought that their own work was defined by or marked by the fact that they were women? Today, cutting edge feminist theory can give us no answer, for it is no longer concerned with women and writing. We need to ask why feminist theory stopped being concerned with women and writing.

### **Clash with poststructuralist theories about authors and writing**

The first reason why feminist theory fell silent on the question of women and writing is the rise of poststructuralism. In the late 1970s, Roland Barthes's (1977) essay "The Death of the Author" was beginning to be quoted everywhere. Equally influential was Jacques Derrida's (1988) systematic attempt to show that literary texts are just texts, that is to say a system of signs where meaning (signification) arises through the play of the signifiers, without any reference to a speaking subject, and Michel Foucault's (1977) radical anti-humanism.

In the 1980s, such theories started to conflict seriously with the interest in women's writing. Feminists who wanted to work on women writers at the same time as they were convinced that Barthes, Derrida and Foucault were right, began to wonder whether it really mattered whether the author was a woman. In the United States, the tensions involved in this position were expressed in a landmark debate between Peggy Kamuf and Nancy Miller about the status of the female author. This debate has two acts, the first consisting in two essays from 1981, the second in an exchange of letters from 1989. Read together, the two exchanges sharply register the evolution of the theoretical climate in the intervening decade.

Already in 1980, Kamuf had objected to the feminist "reduction of the literary work to the signature" (Kamuf, 1980: 285). In 1981 she claimed that the interest in women writers was simply a feminist version of the traditional, liberal humanism that Foucault had long since dismantled.<sup>3</sup> Miller, on the other hand, thought that regardless of what Kamuf might consider to be theoretically correct, feminists still needed to work on behalf of women writers, otherwise these women would soon be forgotten, lost to history. To ignore the woman writer was to play directly into the hands of the sexist tradition.<sup>4</sup> Their arguments read like ships passing in the night: Kamuf presents a theory that Miller never attacks; Miller stresses a political purpose that Kamuf never challenges.

When they returned to the issue eight or nine years later, the tone was different. Kamuf, who was now writing in a kind of incantatory high deconstructionist style, declared that she no longer wanted to call herself a feminist, since the word necessarily establishes a "closed system", which inevitably would end up deconstructing itself.<sup>5</sup> Miller, on the other hand, still thought that feminism was politically necessary, yet her text no longer has the fire, energy and optimism of the essay from 1981: "But... the moment of a certain jubilation about 'identity politics' has passed. Where we are to go *from here*, and *in what language*, however, is a lot less clear".<sup>6</sup>

In 1981 the question of what the sex or gender of the author really has to do with literature remained unanswered. Kamuf did not even want to speak about authors, while Miller claimed — correctly, as far as I am concerned — that feminists at the very least have a *political* duty to be interested in women

writers. If there were good *theoretical* arguments to be found against Kamuf's principled rejection of the metaphysics of writing, however, they were not expressed in Miller's essay.

In 1984 Gayatri Spivak tried to untie the knot by launching the concept of "strategic essentialism", which she discussed in terms of "privileging practice over theory".<sup>7</sup> This corresponds to Nancy Miller's position: when the theory does not work in practice, we should give priority to political practice. Yet such declarations do not do any theoretical work: the theoretical problem that gave rise to them in the first place remains unresolved. In 1989, Kamuf and Miller never even got to the question of the woman writer. As for Spivak, in 1989, she declared that she had "reconsidered this argument about the strategic use of essentialism", and now felt that it was providing a "certain alibi to essentialism", thus leaving the question entirely up in the air (Spivak, 1989: 127, 128).<sup>8</sup> As far as I know, we have not had any influential new theories about women, writing and literature after the debate between Kamuf and Miller. The question of how to understand the importance — or lack of it — of the gender or sex of the author remains just as unresolved as it was twenty years ago.

### **Judith Butler's Gender Trouble: neither women nor literature**

The second reason why the question of women and writing was left behind by theorists was the influence of Judith Butler. Only one year after Kamuf and Miller completed their somewhat downcast, almost postfeminist dialogue, Butler (1990) published her hugely influential *Gender Trouble*. Challenging the very category of "woman", Butler argued that we ought to speak about gender instead. Gender, moreover, was a performative effect of heterosexist and heteronormative power structures.

*Gender Trouble* created an intellectual climate in which the very fact of using the words "woman" and "man" was taken as conclusive evidence that the unfortunate speaker had not understood that there are human beings in the world that do not fit into conventional, stereotypical categories of femininity and masculinity.<sup>9</sup>

By claiming that gender is performative, Butler basically meant to say that we create our gender by doing gendered things. Our behaviour either cements or undermines social gender norms. This view has a lot in common with Simone de Beauvoir's "One is not born a woman, but rather one becomes one", since Beauvoir too thinks that human beings make themselves what they are through their actions in the world. Both Butler and Beauvoir, moreover, are anti-essentialists, who — in very different ways — believe that gender is produced in society and that it therefore also can be changed in society. On the other hand, Butler and Beauvoir have completely different views on the importance of the body and on the question of agency: Beauvoir believes that human beings are embodied subjects who act and make choices; Butler thinks of bodies as an effect of a discursive "process of materialization" and adamantly denies that there is a "doer behind the deed" (Butler, 1993: 9).

However different they may otherwise be, all such theories of gender are *theories of origins*. Both Butler and Beauvoir try to answer the question of *how gender is created or comes into being*. No specific political or ethical conclusions follow from such theories. *Theories of origins simply do not tell us what we ought to do once gender has come into being*. If I want to justify my view of women's situation in society, or on the rights of gays and lesbians, I

can not do this simply by explaining how these phenomena have come into being. I need, rather, to set out my principles for a just and equitable society, or for how people ought to treat one another, or explain why I think freedom is the highest personal and political value.

With *Gender Trouble* the vanguard of feminist theory shifted away from literature and literary criticism. Butler is a philosopher who with a couple of minor exceptions has never discussed literature. In the course of the 1990s, feminist theorists became far less invested in discussing aesthetic questions. At the same time it became difficult to speak of "women" except in inverted commas. By the end of the decade, the very foundation for developing a theory about women and writing had disappeared.

## Today

In 2008 brilliant literary critics still work on women writers. The intellectual level of the books in the field is high, and the achievements in the field are recognized in the academy in general. In 2006, for example, Paula Backscheider's (2005) big book about eighteenth-century British women poets won the MLA's (Modern Language Association's) James Russell Lowell prize. Since the 1980s, moreover, a whole new generation of women writers has emerged, and many literary critics feel it is an urgent task to create an intellectual space for discussion of their struggle to be taken seriously. In *Figuring the Woman Author in Contemporary Fiction*, Mary Eagleton (2005) stresses that feminism always has been concerned with women's struggle for *authorship* and *authority*. She shows that the figure of the artist or writer has remained deeply important in writing by women in English since the 1970s. Mary Eagleton has also co-founded a new journal, *Contemporary Women's Writing*, devoted to literature by women after 1975.

Today, then, theory and practice appear to be just as out of synch as they were by the end of the 1980s. The result is a kind of intellectual schizophrenia, in which one half of the brain continues to read women writers while the other continues to think that the author is dead, and that the very word "woman" is theoretically dodgy. No wonder, then, that so many books and essays on women writers begin with a series of apologies. Usually, the writer begins by assuring us that she really does not have anything against Barthes or Foucault; or that she is not really writing about real, living authors, but only about the figure of the author in the literary text; or that when she writes woman, she really means "woman", and so on. Such formulations are symptoms of a theoretical malaise. Instead of supporting women interested in investigating women's writing, our current theories appear to make them feel guilty, or — even worse — scare them away from working on women and writing altogether. This is one of the rare situations today in which I would argue that there actually is a need for *more* theory (or more philosophy, if you prefer). We actually need to be able to justify theoretically a kind of work that many women and men clearly think is important, and that has no problem at all justifying itself politically.

## I am not a woman writer: Beauvoir's dilemma

At the beginning of *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir shows that in a sexist society, man is the universal and woman is the particular; he is the One, she is the Other. This is Beauvoir's definition of sexism, and it underpins everything she writes in *The Second Sex*. This analysis is so simple that it is easy to overlook how brilliant it actually is, and how much work it will still do for us.

Beauvoir arrives at this conclusion by telling a story about a conversation:

I have sometimes been annoyed, in the middle of an abstract discussion, at hearing men say to me: "You think this or that because you are a woman"; but I knew that my only defence would be to reply: "I think it because it is true," thereby removing [*éliminant*] my subjectivity. It would be out of the question to retort: "And you think the contrary because you are a man", for it is understood that the fact of being a man is no peculiarity. A man is in the right in being a man; it is the woman who is in the wrong. In fact, just as for the ancients there was an absolute vertical with reference to which the oblique was defined, there is an absolute human type, namely the male. Woman has ovaries, a uterus; there we have [*voilà*] the particular circumstances that imprison her [*l'enferment*] in her subjectivity; one often says that she thinks with her glands. In his grandiosity man forgets that his anatomy also includes hormones, and testicles. He thinks of his body as a direct and normal connection [*relation*] with the world which he believes that he apprehends objectively, while he considers the woman's body to be weighed down by everything specific to it: an obstacle, a prison. (Beauvoir, 1984: xxi–xxii, translation amended)<sup>10</sup>

We note that Beauvoir feels obliged to eliminate her subjectivity in response to a hostile remark. We also note that Beauvoir sets up a crucial contrast between forced elimination of her gendered subjectivity and forced imprisonment in it. For Beauvoir, this is the philosophical essence of sexism.

Here is one example from contemporary life that shows that this sexist logic is still at work. In February 2007, Drew Faust was named the first female president of Harvard in history. In the media, the emphasis on her gender was so intense that it was easy to get the impression that this was the major reason why she got the job:

On Sunday, Harvard University named Faust the first female president in the school's 371-year history.

"I hope that my own appointment can be one symbol of an opening of opportunities that would have been inconceivable even a generation ago," Faust said. But she also added, "I'm not the woman president of Harvard, I'm the president of Harvard."<sup>11</sup>

I think Faust handled the situation as well as she possibly could have: she acknowledged that she was a woman, and insisted on the importance of that fact, *before* stressing that she did not want to be perceived as the *woman* president of Harvard. But she should not have had to do this. No male president of Harvard has ever been placed in a situation where he had to deny that he was the *male* president of Harvard.

To understand what is going on here, it is helpful to consider the kind of speech act "I am not a woman writer" actually is. (J. L. Austin (1975: 73) calls this asking about the *force* of an utterance, that is to say, asking "how... it is to be taken".) First of all, when a woman finds that she has to say "I am not a woman writer" or "I am not the woman president of Harvard", it is never a

general claim, never a philosophical maxim. (If it were, the statement would be patently absurd.) It is always in *response* to a provocation, usually to someone who has tried to use her sex or gender against her. Such statements, in short, are a specific kind of *defensive* speech act: when we hear such words, therefore, we should look for the provocation.

Not long ago, I heard a radio show in which a caller (a man) claimed that all the talk about race and gender in the Democratic primaries was absolutely irrelevant: "We are choosing a president", he said, "not a race or a gender". The lesson we should learn from Beauvoir is that in a sexist (or racist) society, the result of such well-intentioned claims is to force women and blacks, and other raced minorities, to "eliminate" their gendered (or raced) subjectivity, or in other words to masquerade as some kind of generic universal human being, in ways that devalue their actual experiences as embodied human beings in the world. The option, which is to run for office as the "black" or the "woman" candidate, will cut them off from what Beauvoir calls the "universal", the general category, and hence imprison them in their gender (or race).

If I try to imagine a situation in which a man might say "I am a writer, not a man writer", I can only think of it as a response to some kind of provocation from a feminist. Even when they work in a profession dominated by women, men do not appear to feel compelled to deny their sex or gender. In the USA, I have discovered, a man trained as a nurse is called a "male nurse". There is even a Web publication called *Male Nurse Magazine*.<sup>12</sup> Judging from its website, male nurses are quite easy about their access to the universal: they speak of themselves as nurses, male nurses, or as men in nursing, without any sense of strain, even when they complain that male nurses suffer discrimination from female nurses. There seems to be no situation in which a male nurse would feel compelled to say: "I am not a male nurse, but a nurse". This goes to show that in a sexist society, one can not belittle a man by reminding him of his gender. (This is a hypothesis, so far.) The male or the masculine is still the norm, the female or feminine remains the deviation.

For writers who are women, it can be incredibly frustrating to be told that they have to write as a woman or like a woman. For what is this supposed to mean? That she has to conform to some stereotypical norm for feminine writing? This is surely what Sarraute thinks, and why she gets rather aggressive at the very thought of *écriture féminine*. On the other hand, it can be just as frustrating for a woman writer to feel that she has to write as a generic human being, since this opens up an alienating split between her gender and her humanity. This, I should point out, is the side of the dilemma that Sarraute never mentions. But even if a writer like Sarraute thrives on impersonality, it does not follow that every other woman writer feels the same way.

There is no correct solution to this dilemma. All we can do is to hope that we have the presence of mind to look for the provocation, to show others that there was a provocation, which means pointing out that we have just been placed in a quintessentially sexist dilemma, and then — as far as possible — refuse to choose between two equally hopeless options, which is precisely what Drew Faust did.<sup>13</sup>

At this point, someone might want to exclaim: "But what about performativity?" Am I not taking the category "woman" entirely for granted? How can I be so sure that I know who is a woman writer and who is not? But this would be to miss the point. Beauvoir's analysis of sexism only applies *once somebody has been taken to be a woman*. It has nothing to say about

epistemology, or about truth or essences. In the kind of situation I am discussing here, theories of how gender is produced, constructed or performed, in short, theories of how gender comes into being, are irrelevant. The woman in my examples might very well be transsexual or intersexed, a lesbian or a man taken to be a woman. This argument does not prevent us from believing that we "do our gender", either in the sense Beauvoir would have given to that sentence, or in the sense Butler would have given it. All it takes for Beauvoir's dilemma to get going is that the person in question has been taken to be a woman by someone else

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- <sup>1</sup> I first found this quote in Ann Jefferson (2000: 96). Jefferson quotes from Sonia Rykiel's interview with Sarraute; I am quoting a little more from the same interview (Sarraute, 1984: 40).
- <sup>2</sup> See Jefferson (2000: 97). Jefferson's reference is to Michèle Gazier (1984) "Nathalie Sarraute et son 'il'", *Télérama* July, pp. 38–9 (p. 38).
- <sup>3</sup> "[I]f feminist theory lets itself be guided by questions such as what is women's language, literature, style, or experience from where does it get its faith in the form of these questions to get at truth, if not from the same central store that supplies humanism with its faith in the universal truth of man?" (Kamuf, 1990: 108).
- <sup>4</sup> "I will speak as one who believes that 'we women' must continue to work for the woman who has been writing, because not to do so will reauthorize our oblivion" (p. 113) [...] "[I]f Women's Studies becomes gender studies, the *real* end of women in the institution will not be far off" (p. 118, original emphasis) (Miller, 1990).
- <sup>5</sup> Kamuf's contribution to Kamuf and Miller (1990: 132).
- <sup>6</sup> Miller's contribution to Kamuf and Miller (1990: 124, original emphases).
- <sup>7</sup> "I think it's absolutely on target to take a stand against the discourses of essentialism... But *strategically* we cannot. Even as we talk about *feminist* practice, or privileging practice over theory, we are universalizing — not only generalizing but universalizing" (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 1990a: 166, original emphases). This 1984 interview was also reprinted in *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues* (Spivak, 1990b).
- <sup>8</sup> This interview can also be found in Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (1993b). Spivak reinforced her criticism of "strategic essentialism" in "An Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: With Sara Danius and Stefan Jonsson" (Spivak, 1993a).
- <sup>9</sup> Elsewhere I have argued that it simply is wrong to believe that the word "woman" always and without exception has the same, conventional, conservative meaning, regardless of who is speaking and in what context, but I am not going to say more about that here. See "What is a Woman?" in Toril Moi (2005).
- <sup>10</sup> The original text can be found in Beauvoir (1986: 14–15). I discuss this passage at length in my essay "I Am a Woman: The Personal and the Philosophical" (Moi, 2005, particularly pp. 201–26).
- <sup>11</sup> "Harvard Names First Female President", by the Associated Press published in *The New York Times*, 12 February 2007. URL: [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)
- <sup>12</sup> See [www.malenursemagazine.com](http://www.malenursemagazine.com)
- <sup>13</sup> The consequences of this analysis for the feminist debate about the relationship between equality and difference will have to be developed elsewhere.

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