

Introduction

CORAL LANSBURY

From the beginning of time, marriage of one kind or another has been seen as the natural condition of humankind. In the bleak terminology of the law, it exists for the protection of children and the preservation of property, but in literature it sets forth the arena where the most violent emotions contend for authority. Greek tragedy recorded every perturbation of the soul and convulsion of passion within the bounds of marriage: sons murder or marry their mothers, mothers destroy their children, husbands and wives betray each other. Yet the bloody catalog of domestic passion distinguishes one terrible crime from all the others: the murder of a man by his wife. The bed bond, as Aeschylus' Apollo proclaims in the *Oresteia*, is more sacred than the bonds of blood between a son and his mother. The dragon's teeth are sown in the marriage bed, giving birth to monsters of implacable rage that lay waste to the generations of humankind. Menelaus' wrath when his wife Helen is abducted by Paris leads to war and the fall of Troy in a torrent of fire.

Comedy provides the reverse, with wanton wives cuckolding frantic husbands who look under the bed and in closets for the artful lover. Every cliché is written in letters of fire across the bridal chamber and the jokes are the same from Aristophanes to Plautus, from Goldoni to Neil Simon. Neat critical divisions could always be drawn between genres by setting marriage as closure or commencement: comedies end in marriage—where the tragedy begins. In the 1970s Rebecca West called an essay on contemporary women

novelists "And They All Lived Unhappily Ever After," for such novelists, from Rosamond Lehmann to Margaret Drabble and Gillian Tindall, were all taking as their theme the dingy infidelities and blighted hopes of marriage that clattered along like broken carts behind the brokenwinded steeds of romance.

Marriage is an institution, the standup comic tells us, and who wants to live in an institution? Animals mate according to instinct and nature, but the sexuality of men and women is fraught with perils both metaphysical and social when it is confined by the marital bond. Romance seldom survives the honeymoon, and lovers in literature generally die before they dwindle down to the indifference of marriage. Even science-fiction writers, as Patricia Monk assures us in "The Future Imperfect of Conjugation," cannot predict any change in the social form of marriage, or "gamos" as it is called, without envisioning some radical change in humankind itself. Marriage would seem to be the original dead sea apple, rosy and glowing on the outside and desired by everyone, but with a very bitter heart. Patricia Monk concludes that a shared pessimism is common to both the radical and conservative writers of science fiction when they choose to contemplate the state of marriage, even when it is predicated for alien worlds beyond the bounds of this universe.

If marriage has become the source of our deepest suffering, it also stands as the icon of the greatest happiness attainable on this earth, a prefiguration of the soul's eventual union with God. Ovid retold the old legend of Baucis and Philemon who lived together in such harmony in a tumbledown cottage that when they died Jupiter changed them into two mighty oaks with entwining branches. But if this isolated image of marital and spiritual union was the ideal, it was painfully fractured in the general mirror of literature. And why should marriage be seen as a source of unalloyed joy when it existed only as the flawed image of spiritual union in a sinful world?

Samuel Richardson never saw marriage as a happy ending but as the beginning of a painful anxiety alloyed with a little pleasure. And he was prepared to defend this conviction on the evidence of his own experience. Two happy marriages, as he assured his friend Lady Bradshaigh, had so affected his nerves that he had been forced to "go into a Regimen, not a Cure to be expected, but merely as a Palliative." *Pamela* reflected his vision of an inherently defective human institution: "I had given in the story of Pamela what is called a happy Issue. It was, however, owing to her implicit submission to a lordly and imperious Husband, who hardly deserved her, that she was happy; a submission which every woman could not have shewn."

The angelic Clarissa was not to be condemned to the servitude of an earthly marriage: for her, Richardson prepared a triumph, a marriage to the one suitor worthy of her hand, and a mansion in the Celestial City that is paved with gold and walled with jasper, brilliant beyond all human imagination. Lovelace, the baffled suitor, has just dreamed that he is about to clasp Clarissa in his arms when he has a vision of her being claimed by another bridegroom: "Immediately the most angelic form I had ever beheld, all clad in transparent

white, descended in a cloud which, opening, discovered a firmament above it, crowded with golden Cherubs and glittering Seraphs, all addressing her with, Welcome, welcome, welcome! and, encircling my charmer, ascended with her to the region of Seraphims; and instantly, the opening cloud closing, I lost sight of her, and of the bright form together...." The only perfect marriage in Richardson's opinion was made in heaven—and it remained there.

Heaven and Hell can be found on a mattress, and tragedy and comedy take turns to tell the story of the marriage. A number of essays in the first part of this remarkable collection trace the sad bickering over the responsibility for marital discord. Was it Eve who allied herself with the serpent and tried to usurp the natural and God-given authority of man, or was discord the fruit of that original sin common to all humankind? No matter which way writers argued the toss, woman's guilt for man's fallen state was determined by degrees and the angel in the house revered by the Victorians was subject to as many constraints as the devil in petticoats abhorred by the Puritans of the seventeenth century.

When it was no longer fashionable to invoke God as the architect of marriage and the creator of those laws that made a woman subservient to her husband, literature flung open the doors of the bedroom and relegated Mrs. Grundy to the broom cupboard. Pauline Réage described in terrifying symbols the woman who chose man as her master and ended as a cypher in *Histoire d'O*: an automaton wearing a labial ring and rejoicing in her slavery. Increasingly, women writers found that it was not simply marriage which had oppressed women, but language itself. Lorna Irvine, in "Politicizing the Private: Sylvia Fraser's *Pandora*," shows how the narrator of the novel tries to undermine language with laughter: "Language also becomes Pandora's, and the narrator's tool for rebellion, a direct extension of the psyche: 'Room 3 ripples with silent hysteria: Fear, embarrassment, shame, mingle with the high-tension pitchpipe notes *quivering, quivering, quivering*, against the windows like supersonic sound trapped in crystal, leaping from nerve-ending to nerve-ending, tightening, twisting, turning the cords of each nervous system into an instrument of unbearable sensitivity' (p. 88). Such emphasis on sound finally draws attention to Pandora's voice. She will not become a silent woman, nor a cowed one. We hear her voice throughout."

Nonetheless, as Marthe Rosenfeld demonstrates in "The Linguistic Aspect of Sexual Conflict: Monique Wittig's *Le Corps lesbien*," the sexual conflict for women writers cannot be confined to the subject or content of fiction. "Rather, the sexual conflict is a linguistic one, and involves the difficulty of articulating female perceptions in a male-structured medium." For a number of French feminist critics, the question has become one of speech or silence, and the refusal to articulate the language of male discourse may leave the writer outside the historical process, unable to effect change.

Slowly, women are beginning to appreciate that although they may have had a literature of their own, in Elaine Showalter's terms, that literature was written in a language foreign to their own emotions. Silence is clearly not an

adequate response; the alternative is perilous but inevitable. The essays in the later part of this collection all point to one goal: a discourse of words that women can recognize as the true signs of their sexuality.

My own appreciation of this need came from a cloacal area of literature: in the course of research for my last book—*The Old Brown Dog: Women, Workers and Vivisection in Edwardian England* (1985)—I found myself led, against taste and inclination, into the wasteland of Victorian pornography. The monotonously savage tropes of male sexuality were disturbing to decipher, since, far from being erotic or sexually titillating, they carried messages of suffering and submission. There is only one subject in all these works and that is the maintenance of power and authority through sexual cruelty. The protagonist is generally a surgeon, or a “riding master,” like Jack in John Farmer’s *The Way of a Man with a Maid* (1896) who states that his pleasures are the pleasures of cruelty, and it is not a lust for women that obsesses him, but hatred. Enraged when Alice sensibly refuses to marry him, Jack states: “I, the Man, will not take up the time of readers by detailing the circumstances under which Alice, the Maid, roused in me the desire for vengeance which resulted in the Way I adopted and which I am about to relate. Suffice it then to say that Alice cruelly and unjustifiably jilted me! In my bitterness of spirit, I swore that if ever I had an opportunity of getting hold of her, I would make her voluptuous person recompense me for my disappointment and that I would snatch from her by force the bridegroom’s privileges that I so ardently coveted.”

Rather than being concerned with latent homosexuality, as Steven Marcus has maintained in *The Other Victorians* (1966), the Victorian pornographic novel has one narrative theme iterated continually—a young woman is seized, flogged, beaten, sodomized and seduced until that moment when she is transformed, not simply into the “grateful victim,” but into something far more horrifying—the surrogate man. These are the women who take a whip in their hands and go forth to dominate their own sex in the name of men. Like Pauline Réage’s O, or Dracula’s vampire women, these creatures are more cruel and tyrannical than the actual gaolers. Embodiments of male will, they are the product of sexual authority, often wearing with pride a labial ring or those leather collars which proclaim them to be a man’s property. Once it was possible to sanction this authority by appeal to divine writ that demanded the unequivocal obedience of wives to their husbands. And it was not uncommon to find clerics insisting that women, Satan’s special minions, should worship God only through the medium of their husbands.

In the seventeenth century, as Jan de Bruyn records, we find the following injunction to men: “Obserue my English Gentleman, that blowes haue a wonderfull prerogatiue in the feminine sex; for if shee be a bad woman, there is no more proper plaister to mend them then this: but if (which is a rare chance) she be good, to dust her often, hath in it, a singular, vnknowne, and as it were an inscrutable vertue to make her much better: and to reduce her, if possible to perfection.” Even in a modern world where divine authority

was increasingly questioned or ignored, male power remained supreme. Women may have won the right to vote for men, and to enter male professions, but in their minds and hearts they still wore the chains of a male sexual language.

One required dialogic passage in the pornographic novels of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries relates the means by which a man teaches his victim to use this particular language. Some unfortunate young woman has been flogged and seduced, and then she is made to kneel and ask for sex using the now familiar four letter words. It is important to remember that these so-called “classic” pornographic novels were written at a time when women’s language was defined by reticence and evasion. Liza Dolittle was not the only working girl who yearned to speak like a lady, and in their recent and excellent *Language and the Sexes* (1985), Francine Frank and Frank Ashen assure us that the linguistic expectation that men are free to swear while ladies don’t, is still the norm today.

Throughout the late Victorian and Edwardian period women used coded terms to refer to all aspects of sexuality. The sexual organs were always referred to as the “private parts”; any ailment below the waist and above the thighs was “trouble below decks,” or “downstairs,” and pregnancy was always “in the family way,” “in the pudding club” in lower-class circles, or “enceinte” for the middle class. In this context of euphemism, the insistence of the male protagonist of pornography that women use the “cuntcockfuckclit” terms becomes doubly oppressive. The whole sexual realm was linguistically determined by men, and the pornographic novels relate at length the initial reluctance of women, and their final acceptance of these terms.

One mark of radical feminism during the cultural revolution of the 1960s was seen as the access to, and appropriation of, this male language of sexuality. No liberated feminist thought twice about referring to fucking or screwing; indeed, the use of such words became almost obligatory. As Frank and Ashen note: “If men curse, but ladies don’t, then the women would curse.” Yet, these ambivalent words of abuse or desire are no more effective in describing women’s sexual experience than the polite euphemisms of the Edwardians. Ruth Nadelhaft, in “Domestic Violence in Literature,” perceptively observes how sparse the literature is that describes domestic violence, even though “students of domestic violence agree that our culture tolerates, if it does not actively encourage, violence against women.” Similarly, in literature, a woman’s response to the sexual act is either ignored or gratifyingly described in male terms.

There have been few women who have deliberately set out to write the kind of works that can be loosely categorized as erotica. When they did, they found themselves caged in a mesh of language that removed them from the actuality of their own experience. Anaïs Nin reached more closely to the heart of female sexuality in her own writing than any other woman of her day, but when she was forced to write pornography she found herself in a linguistic void. As she records in *Delta of Venus* (1977):

Today I received a telephone call. A voice said, "It is fine. But leave out the poetry and descriptions of anything but sex. Concentrate on sex."

So I began to write tongue-in-cheek, to become outlandish, inventive, and so exaggerated that I thought he would realize I was caricaturing sexuality. But there was no protest. I spent days in the library studying the *Kama Sutra*, listened to friends' most extreme adventures.

"Less poetry," said the voice over the telephone. "Be specific."

But did anyone ever experience pleasure from reading a clinical description?

Nin was oppressed by these male demands for explicit language and tormented by her desire for the reality of her own emotional responses which she chose to call "poetry." Nonetheless, when she described genitalia she slipped easily into a mode familiar to any Edwardian lady and decorously referred to the "sex." Inventive and original as she was in so many of her fictive approaches to experience, Nin was not a creator of language, even though she had located and defined the source of the malaise.

Instead, the feminist novel increasingly came to be characterized by a form of male language, whether from Erica Jong on the commercial right of fiction, or Kathy Acker on the radical and political left. Indeed, there are passages of Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School Plus Two* (1984) which could have been directly transposed from David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1982). And what can we say about the latter work?

Glengarry Glen Ross is the quintessential expression of the male experience related in male language. The play describes a small community of men in a Chicago realtor's office who scheme, argue, deliberately betray each other, and who are prepared to commit theft and arson to attain the award of top salesman of the year. There are no women in the play: when they are mentioned in passing they are the bitch-wives who impede a sale. It is a competitive, aggressive, violent world characterized by locker-room language, which is also, of course, the current language of love.

When feminists accepted this language as their own, they felt themselves to be liberated, but in my opinion, they were simply accepting the stereotypic forms of an assumed superior linguistic mode. There is another step to be taken, as Lorna Irvine, Marthe Rosenfeld and Ruth Nadelhaft have intimated in their essays: women must now create their own language. Ashen and Frank's *Language and the Sexes* ends with a series of proscribed terms: "chick," "honey," "babe," etc., are all words to be avoided when addressing or referring to women these days, but the effect of this is consistently negative. As women, we may dictate what must not be said, but not what should be spoken. In many ways women writers are still imitating men or standing shoulder to shoulder with their Victorian forebears who laid down the rules for polite discourse and insisted on being called ladies at all times. We need a new language, and particularly a language of sexuality. I have always felt it offensive when men used locker-room language, and unnatural when women voiced the same terms. My reaction was not determined by taste or any sense of decorum, but essentially because what I was expected to say did not in any

way describe what I felt or did. I certainly felt reluctant to take refuge in euphemism or some coyly private word.

The necessity for a new language was made very clear to me when I was writing about pornography—the term "rape" was simply not strong enough to characterize those incidents in the pornographic novel where a woman is beaten into grateful submission. I needed something stronger, for, unfortunately, rape is now so familiar a social incident that the word has become trivialized by constant usage. After the fashion of many word-makers before me, I went back to the Latin and fashioned a new term that spoke directly to what was happening in these novels. The phrase I coined was *coitus atrox*—"atrox" from "*atrocitas*," with its modern sense of "atrocious," "brutal," "savagely," with no discernible overtones of sexuality. "Rape" still carries with it those memories of "The Rape of Lucrece," and "The Rape of the Lock," whereas I wanted a term that defined an act of intercourse devoid of any aspect of love or romantic passion. *Coitus atrox* said what I meant, and I was satisfied with this small linguistic sign, but all the time I knew I was playing an old game, and one that was essentially negative in its effect. As Robert Collins makes clear in "Beyond Argument: Post-Marital Man in John Cheever's Later Fiction," it is not language that oppresses Lemuel Sears in *Oh What a Paradise It Seems* but society, and once he can come to terms with himself and accept his natural instincts he can find peace. For women the quest for meaning is blocked by language as well as by society. Sears experiences heterosexual and homosexual love and finds no problem in translating feeling into words—for women that linguistic bridge is missing.

Women are searching for the words of affirmative female sexuality. It has been easy enough to locate the proscriptive words, but where are those linguistic signs that arise from actual sexual experience? I read Erica Jong's last novel *Parachutes and Kisses* (1983), and it seemed to me as though some being from Mars had taken a crash course in English scatology, assuming the identity of Isadora Wing and recording her amatory and marital adventures. There is nothing particularly disturbing about Jong's novel, the incidents are often funny and occasionally mucky; but the problem was now with me as reader, for I continually had the sensation that I was reading an inept and clumsy translation. Somewhere the original language had been obscured or lost and what I was now reading was less than the approximate rendition of imaginable incidents. Of course, this is what a great many women, including the writers of several essays in this collection, are beginning to understand. When we speak and write we are like resident aliens in a male world, forced to use a language that is not our own.

Women have not been alone in recognizing this dislocation. When John Cleland wrote *Fanny Hill—Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* in 1749, he dictated his narrative through the persona of a young woman of wit and feeling who found herself subject to a monotonous and unresponsive linguistic code. Fanny eschewed the "revoltingness of gross, rank and vulgar expressions, and the ridicule of mincing metaphors and affected circumstances," and

found herself in consequence confined to a “repetition of near the same images, the same figures, the same expressions,” which “lose much of their due spirit and energy by the frequency they indispensably recur with.” Cleland appreciated that there was no language to convey the range of Fanny’s feeling and sexual experiences, and since she refused “the rank and vulgar expressions” that constituted the linguistic male code of sexuality she was condemning herself to silence. Perhaps it was because of this frustrating encounter with language in *Fanny Hill* that Cleland became an impassioned student of philology and one whose hobbyhorse was a universal language. In 1766 Cleland published his *The Way to Things with Words, and to Words by Things...*, and two years later the very curious *Specimen of an Etymological Dictionary...*

Recently, a number of women writers have become aware of their linguistic chains and are calling for a new language, but all too often this takes the form of Aileen La Tourette in *Nuns and Mothers* (1984), where Helena and her love, Georgia, seek a lesbian language. But La Tourette’s language is a secret mode of communication, and again, we find ourselves taking refuge with evasion and reticence, and with words that may be spoken in the bedroom but not beyond. Marthe Rosenfeld writes at the conclusion of her essay on Monique Wittig that “just as violence must be done to the sexist grammar, so too must the female body, fragmented, fetishized and traded under the patriarchy, be created anew.” But again, this language is not human in a general sense, but exclusively female.

Far more hopeful is Mary Daly’s exciting and turbulent new study *Pure Lust, Elemental Feminist Philosophy* (1984) which charts the be-witching and the lust for metamorphosis by women in a cockographic sadostate:

Such, then, are the rulers/snoolders of snooldom, the place/time where the air is filled with the crowing of cocks, the joking of jocks, the droning of clones, the sniveling of snookers and snudges, the noisy parades and processions of prickers. Such is the cockocracy/jockocracy, the State of supranational, supernatural erections. This is the world made to the image of its makers, a chip off the old block/cocks, who are worshipped by the fraternal faithless as god the flasher, god the stud, and god the wholly hoax. Wayward, Wanton women, having been warned of the foolish snares, proceed forthwith on our Wonderlusting/Wisdom-weaving quest.

Daly writes theology like a poet, and philosophy like one who has seen a new heaven and a different earth, but even in her complex and subtle index of new words, I cannot find what I want: terms for women’s sexual experience that will replace and perhaps complement the male sexual act. Anaïs Nin’s “poetry” is missing in Daly, and yet it is that poetry which a number of critics in this collection have seen as the missing key in the literary expression of marriage. Moreover, the very mode of discourse in Daly’s book inevitably recalls the formulaic tropes of James Joyce: the linguistic affinities in her work are not to women’s experience but to *Finnegans Wake*. Nonetheless, Daly is enthralling with her reach and exuberance, and I feel churlish not to

be swept along with her; and yet I can’t accept her sensory Utopia until I am certain that the frontier defining women’s sexuality has been crossed. It will be time for a new politics of language when women have displaced terms like “fuck,” “screw” and “cunt.”

No lexicon of new words can be culled from these essays, but a sense of what it will be is apparent in Sylvia Fraser’s *Pandora*. The language of affirmative sexuality will not be patched together out of Latin terms, nor will it be quite so sibylline and spiritual as Mary Daly’s *weltanschauung*. It must be spontaneous and trans-sexual, for I believe that there are men who would gladly exchange the code words of aggression for words of reciprocity and sharing. Scholars may be able to give directions and point the way, but I doubt if they will be able to transform sexual experience into words, and if they do, those words will mean well but not feel right. Pandora’s box will not fly open to unleash every human woe upon the world, but from it will pour fresh sensation and bright visions: “Pandora steals downstairs, outside, into the balmy night. She runs barefoot, through the squishy-grass. She drinks rain-splash from the throat of the lily. She dances, white nightie, under the rain-splayed stars, following the fireflies as they make fire-love, in checkmarks, to her mother’s mimosa; seeing them illumine her father’s cabbages to at least the status of pumpkins.” A poet or novelist like Sylvia Fraser will refuse to pick up the old linguistic clothes and instead will fashion a new garment that we will all of us admire and wish to wear. To paraphrase Keats, that which is creative must be capable of creating itself, and women must now assume the power of the divine and male and become creators of language, even as they have been the creators of children.

CORAL LANSBURY is Graduate Dean and Distinguished Professor of English at Rutgers University, Camden College. In addition to numerous interdisciplinary articles on eighteenth-century and Victorian culture, biography and literary theory, she is the author of two books on Elizabeth Gaskell, plus *Arcady in Australia* and *The Reasonable Man: Trollope’s Legal Fiction*. Most recently, she has published *The Old Brown Dog: Women, Workers, and Vivisection*. A novelist as well as critic, she is also the author of *Ringara* and has forthcoming *Sweet Alice*.