

(RE)PLACING THE FEMININE IN FEMINIST THEORY

One of the key theoretical debates of the 1990s in literary studies is the question of the relationship between the relatively new field of gay and lesbian studies, most specifically queer theory, and feminist theory. The fast-growing discipline of gay and lesbian studies seeks to distinguish itself by claiming its difference from feminism, especially the difference of the object of study.¹ While gender is the domain of feminism, say many gay and lesbian studies scholars, sexuality is the domain of gay and lesbian studies. This critical move has itself received critical attention in articles by Judith Butler and Biddy Martin.² These critics argue that the debt of gay and lesbian studies to feminism is a large one, but more importantly, that there is a distinct danger in severing the relation between sexuality and gender in our critical endeavors.³ How has this divide between feminism and lesbian and gay studies come about in literary theory in the past twenty years? What are the connections between these fields of study? How might we get beyond seeing these fields as divided by reading literary texts by women that engage similar issues? The first chapter of this book attempts to engage in this debate by returning to the work of some of the key figures in these fields, and subsequent chapters do so by turning to literary texts by women in order to see the ways in which gender and sexuality, and what I would argue is their inevitable connection, are similarly explored in literature.

In order to argue for this inevitable connection between gender and sexuality, I will turn first to a selection of texts from the 1970s and 1980s that may be loosely grouped under the heading "deconstructive feminism." I want to compare different placings of the feminine in theoretical discourse in order to show that even

when the feminine seems to be the privileged term of a text, it may be a displacement of the feminine that is operating there. The displacement of the feminine comes about through a failure to acknowledge its specificity, or, to use an Irigarayan metaphor, the failure to unearth the buried feminine upon which masculine discourse is founded. Another aspect of displacement is the male philosopher/theorist's appropriation of the feminine for his own ends, as analyzed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. I will begin with Alice Jardine's model of "gynesis," which attempts to account for the privileging of woman in modernity, but involves a displacement of woman. I will then turn to Jacques Derrida's remarks in interviews on the place of woman in deconstruction and as well as Spivak's reading of Derrida. We need to look first at displacement because it is the impetus for feminism: displacement is the appropriation of woman for masculinist ends. For a model to counter displacement, I will also look briefly at the history of the term "mimesis," which we might call the employment of the feminine for feminist ends. Irigaray's concept of mimesis, a term with a complex and long history within feminism, refocuses attention on the feminine and its potential for subversion.⁴ In Irigaray's writings, the feminine itself possesses textual power; the feminine is not merely "privileged" by the male subject, as in gynesis. Irigaray's feminine stands for the point of impossibility of masculine discourse and the negative image of the male subject, and she draws attention to the spots where masculine discourse must work hard to keep the feminine at bay, due to its disruptive, dismantling power.

The emphasis on play and masquerade in mimesis will serve as a bridge to Judith Butler's theory of performative gender, which shifts the focus from the feminine exclusively to gender more broadly. Performativity and mimesis share much territory, but performativity is not exclusively the property of the feminine as mimesis is, since Butler conceives of masculinity as performative as well. After considering the social constructivist strand in feminist theory represented by Butler's work, I will turn again to Irigaray, in this case her later work (published in France in the mid-1980s but appearing in English translation in the early 1990s). Texts such as *Sexes and Genealogies* and *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* offer ways around the seeming impasse in the debate over

the role of feminist theory in newer discourses of sexuality and gender. In this more recent work, Irigaray develops the concept of the "sensible transcendental." As the name implies, this concept involves a meeting of oppositionally defined terms. The coming together of sensible and transcendental works to heal the split between feminine and masculine, which, for Irigaray, is a restoration of an originary connection. While Irigaray posits this as the path to a true recognition of sexual difference, I would argue that we end up not with true femininity and true masculinity but with a meeting of the genders within each sex. Butler's model of gender performance captures this destabilizing of the masculine/feminine hierarchy. This meeting of the genders within each sex would be the "other sexes" of my title, in which male and female, masculinity and femininity, are both present, and, as a result, genuine sexual difference is fully realized.

Gynesis and Displacement: Configurations of the Feminine

In her 1985 book *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity*, Alice Jardine focuses on representations of the feminine in male-authored poststructuralist, postmodernist writing (which Jardine terms the writing of "modernity"). Jardine's aim is to unearth the importance of the feminine in modernity and to show how the feminine may be the crucial term on which modernity itself depends. Jardine defines "gynesis" as "the putting into discourse of 'woman' as that *process* diagnosed in France as intrinsic to the condition of modernity; indeed, the valorization of the feminine, woman, and her obligatory, that is, historical[,] connotations, as somehow intrinsic to new and necessary modes of thinking, writing, speaking" (25; emphasis in original). Gynesis seems closely related to mimesis, for it involves privileging the feminine's "historical connotations," such as body, nature, passivity, matter, other, etc.⁵ It is precisely these obligatory connotations of the feminine that make the model of gynesis problematic. Other "obligatory . . . historical" connotations of the feminine, such as difference, multiplicity, and excess, are more potentially disruptive and subversive. For this reason, these qualities are suppressed in phallogocentric discourse and they also seem to be suppressed in the texts of modernity

examined by Jardine. Privileging multiplicity, for example, is more potentially disruptive than privileging passivity. Furthermore, to keep insisting on certain defining characteristics of the feminine and the masculine drives home the structure of binary gender rather than challenging it. Only when the end result of privileging the feminine is the questioning of gender norms can such a strategy be considered a feminist one.

Where mimesis and gynesys differ primarily is in application. Jardine studies male-authored texts exclusively, and these texts often involve the male subject usurping the place of woman for his own.⁶ Woman in a sense has no “place” in gynesys. In mimesis, by contrast, the feminine is privileged by and for the feminine. In fact, Jardine writes that she is “more concerned about the *process* of (reading and writing) woman than about examining the representation of women in literature” (19; emphasis in original). This concern may lead her to avoid women in other respects, for example, the work of other women theorists. Anticipating the feminist response to this (why read Derrida and Lacan rather than Irigaray and Cixous?), Jardine explains that the female theorists are “direct disciples of those men” (21). The implication is that she must go to the primary source and thus align herself as a direct disciple of the male theorists, rather than align herself as a disciple of a disciple. So, Irigaray, Cixous, and Julia Kristeva are set up as secondary to the men, as disciples.⁷ A related problem is that the connection between “woman” and women is often severed completely in gynetic texts. Although Jardine expresses concern for maintaining this connection, it is difficult to see this concern played out, given her ambivalent relation to women as theorists and subjects.⁸ Acknowledging this very lack of connection between woman and women, Jardine writes that in gynetic texts, “woman may become intrinsic to entire conceptual systems, without [these systems] being ‘about’ women—much less ‘about’ feminism” (61). Certainly, the fact that these conceptual systems are not “about” women, does not pose a problem when taken at face value. However, these systems use the concept of the feminine or attributes of the feminine in certain strategic ways, for certain nonfeminist aims.⁹ For a feminist, the connection between woman and women, however distant or problematic it is, must be reinstated.

To “privilege woman,” the basis of Jardine’s concept of gynesys,

does not necessarily represent a feminist move, particularly if the concept of woman is disconnected from women in the world. In order to demonstrate this, I will compare the privileging of woman in a text by Derrida with the privileging of woman in the concept of "mimesis" in Irigaray's texts. In the former, the woman is "desexualized," according to Derrida: the hymen of "The Double Session" is a metaphor; the "invagination" of "Living On/Borderlines" is also a metaphor. Desexualized, these terms no longer refer to the system of heterosexual exchange by which women are traded (what Irigaray calls "hom(m)o-sexuality" [*This Sex* 171]), nor do they even refer to female anatomy. In Irigaray's texts, by contrast, a term such as "the lips" is anything but desexualized; we might even say it is hypersexualized. Irigaray takes the fact that the two sets of lips of the female body are unique to it and exploits them for their subversive potential. Derrida, by contrast, appropriates such terms in the sense that he cuts off their connection to femininity (or, at least, he attempts to do so).

Derrida's use of the term "hymen" raises the issue of woman being "intrinsic to entire conceptual systems without [these systems] being 'about' women—much less 'about' feminism" (*Gynesis* 61). It also brings up the woman/women division, which for feminism must be seen instead as a connection. Derrida's remarks on the hymen in "Choreographies," an interview, bear directly on this problem. Christie McDonald, the interviewer, notes that both "hymen" and "invagination" "pertain in their most widely recognized sense to the woman's body" ("Choreographies" 74). Marking her "careful formulation," appropriate because of the rarity of sexualized terms in philosophical discourse, Derrida claims that with these terms, he has deliberately "resexualized" a discourse that has always "neutralized" itself in respect to sexual difference. However, even as Derrida grants that these terms are sexualized, he insists that they cannot be simply attributed to the female body. In this way, he both resexualizes and desexualizes discourse at the same time. Derrida remarks:

"[H]ymen" and "invagination," at least in the context into which those words have been swept, no longer simply designate figures for the feminine body . . . One could say quite accurately that the hymen *does not exist*. Anything constituting the value of existence

is foreign to the "hymen" . . . How can one then attribute the *existence* of the hymen *properly* to woman? Not that it is any more the distinguishing feature of man, or for that matter, of the human creature. (75; emphasis in original)

Just as he does with the trace (*Of Grammatology* 65) and *différance* (*Margins* 6, 14–15), Derrida makes it impossible to attribute femininity to the hymen by stating that the hymen does not exist. According to this logic, woman—or, rather, parts of her dismembered body—is intrinsic to "The Double Session" and to "Living On/Border Lines," yet these texts are not about woman, women, or feminism in any way. Not only are these texts not about women, but the very terms "hymen" and "invagination" cannot be called feminine metaphors according to Derrida's qualifications.

To claim that the hymen "does not exist," in the sense that it does not refer to the body because its referential status is suspended, is a standard Derridean maneuver. In other words, Derrida attempts to recontextualize it so that it refers to a material configuration rather than to a sexed body in the world.¹⁰ If nothing else, necessity dictates this, for the term, like the trace, must be thought outside of metaphysical conceptuality. Nevertheless, "hymen" and "invagination" are not neutral, desexualized terms: they do refer, if only in "their most widely recognized sense," to the female body. Yet if Derrida were to speak of the hymen as pertaining to women, would these texts be equally problematic for feminism? The answer is yes. The hymen links woman to marriage as a system of exchange and to heterosexuality exclusively. Thus, metaphor or not, the hymen is not a likely place from which to launch a feminist discourse. By stating that the hymen does not refer to the female body, Derrida effaces and subsequently appropriates the figure of woman, a move analyzed by Spivak. As in Jardine's study, Spivak's subject in her essay "Displacement and the Discourse of Woman" is the way in which the figure of woman is privileged in Derrida's texts. But Spivak pushes the analysis further, questioning why much of Derrida's work seems to hinge on woman, and how the figure of woman is privileged. Spivak begins with a juxtaposition of Western discourse as a centrism (logo-, phallo-, etc.) and of deconstructive discourse as a displacement, or decentering of this centrism.¹¹ According to Spivak,

Derrida stresses the fact that the subject is “irreducibly displaced”; however, “in a discourse that privileges the center, women alone have been diagnosed as such; correspondingly, he attempts to displace all centrisms, binary oppositions, or centers” (170). Derrida, then, privileges woman because she is displaced from the start: woman has traditionally stood in for the displacement of all subjects. This is another way of saying that woman is other to man’s same, or that woman constitutes sexual difference as such. While the system of deconstruction depends on the figure of woman, woman is also that which the system cannot pin down.

Given that woman is constituted as an originary displacement in phallogentric discourse, what happens to this figure in deconstructive discourse, which attempts to decenter the former? Spivak argues that Derrida’s textual operation displaces the woman yet again, thus reenacting the primary displacement. The opening of *Spurs* provides the model for this double displacement (“Displacement” 171). There Derrida writes, “Woman will be my subject”—“subject here meaning both the topic of discourse and the philosophical “I.” That is, Derrida will both speak of woman and speak from the place (the dis-placed place) of the woman. In Spivak’s words,

[T]he author . . . having stepped into the place of displacement, has displaced the woman-model doubly as shuttling between the author’s subject and object . . . we are already in the circuit of what I call double displacement: in order to secure the gesture of taking the woman as model, the figure of woman must be doubly displaced. (171)

Derrida’s “use” of the hymen operates similarly. He privileges it because two of its attributes—materiality and undecidability—make it a natural choice as a metaphor for Derridean writing. But, at the same time, he severs the connection between hymen and women, that is, the “origin” of the hymen in the female body. Analyzing Derrida’s use of the hymen as metaphor, Spivak first describes the hymen’s figurative and literal status: “‘metaphorically’ it is the ritual celebration of the breaking of the vaginal membrane, and ‘literally’ that membrane remains intact even as it opens up into two lips; second, the walls of the passage that houses the

hymen are both inside and outside the body" (74). The duplicity and undecidability of the hymen make it ripe for Derrida's picking: the hymen is broken, yet intact; one membrane, yet two lips; inside the body, yet outside it as well. In reading the hymen further, Spivak uncovers the implications behind Derrida's choice of female body part. She writes:

Is there not an agenda unwittingly concealed in formulating *virginity* as the property of the sexually undisclosed challenger of the phallus as master of the dialectics of desire? The hymen is of course at once both itself and not-itself, always operated by a calculated dissymmetry rather than a mere contradiction or reconciliation. Yet if the one term of the dissymmetry is virginity, the other term is marriage, legal certification for appropriation in the interest of the passage of property. (74; emphasis in original)

This passage makes it clear that the hymen is anything but an innocent, neutral term signifying "only" a certain material configuration, as Derrida would have us think.¹² If anyone should insist on the multiple meanings that one word may put into play, it should be Derrida, but with the hymen he uncharacteristically limits its signifying capabilities. The hymen is then privileged as a key term in his discourse with the provision that it no longer refers to sexuality or to the female body. That is, the woman is expunged from the scene of writing and only one of her body parts, which is no longer properly hers, remains behind. By eliminating woman through the appropriation of the hymen, Derrida's text remains firmly situated within a phallogocentric economy, since the hymen is the mark of woman as man's property. Once the hymen is broken, a woman's value as property, as goods, diminishes. Moreover, the hymen in Derrida's text is the mark of the feminization of the text, and, thus, of the feminization of the male subject, which is based on the elimination of the woman.

Because this secondary displacement of woman in deconstructive discourse is a reenactment of the primary displacement of woman in phallogocentric discourse, the privileging of woman that goes along with the double displacement must be read especially critically, as Spivak does. She juxtaposes the two displacements in this way:

[T]he deconstructive discourse of man (like the phallogocentric one) can declare its own displacement (as the phallogocentric its placing) by taking the woman as object or figure. When Derrida suggests that Western discourse is caught within the metaphysical or phallogocentric limit, his point is precisely that man can problematize but not fully disown his status as subject. (173)

This passage seems to imply that woman, in comparison to man, is already barred from subjecthood from the start. In Western discourse, according to Spivak and Irigaray, this is the case, since all theories of "the subject" are constructed in reference to the male subject. What is important in Spivak's analysis of Derrida is that she uncovers the connection between the apparent "privileging" of woman in deconstructive discourse and the blatant subordination of woman in phallogocentric discourse. The connection is this: the deconstructive philosopher wants to question or problematize his status as subject, so he must take woman's lack of subjectivity in phallogocentric discourse, claim it as his own, and privilege it. The specific nature of this privileging of the feminine is also examined: not only are certain attributes associated with the feminine now privileged (undecidability, materiality, etc.) but the very place of the woman in conceptual systems is privileged as well. Moreover, this is the nonplace on which the system is built and from which the male philosopher now speaks. Just as woman is the matter upon which Western philosophy is founded (as analyzed in Irigaray's *Speculum*) and the blind spot at which psychoanalysis cannot stop looking in vain (also in *Speculum*), so certain texts in Derrida's corpus (and other modern "gynetic" texts) are erected on the spot where the doubly displaced woman once stood. Following Spivak's line of argument, Derrida's remarks that the hymen must be thought outside of metaphysical conceptuality may be read as an attempt to conceal the double displacement operating here, a fact that is crucial for feminists to understand.

In "Women in the Beehive," a dialogue with students included in *Men in Feminism*, Derrida is asked about the place of woman in his work and seems to give some direct answers to the question. Woman is one of the terms for "originary undecidability" (a term the questioner borrowed from Spivak), because, Derrida says, "the

side of the woman is the side from which you start to dismantle the structure" in the context of European phallogocentrism (194). But using woman in this process of dismantling is only appropriate through the first stage (the stage of reversal), because once that stage has been completed, the opposition no longer applies. Once the opposition has been deconstructed, "you don't need undecidability [or woman] any more" (195). He goes on to explain:

There is one meaning to the word "woman" which is caught in the opposition, in the couple, and to this extent you can use the force of the woman to reverse, to undermine[,] this first stage of opposition. Once you have succeeded, the word "woman" does not have the same meaning. *Perhaps we could not speak of "woman" anymore.* (195; emphasis added)

This is the sort of reasoning that also accounts for his statement in "Choreographies" that the hymen no longer refers to the female body. Although Derrida may not speak of woman anymore, a feminist must continue to do so, and must go on, even, to speak of *women*. If feminists fail to reinstate the connection between woman and women, we will simply be repeating the displacement of woman from discourse. Irigaray, for example, returns to Plato and unearths the *chora* as the very matter, marked feminine, upon which Western philosophy has built itself as system. In the same way, a feminist reader of Derrida's texts, which similarly depend for their very functioning on woman's body, must insist on the existence of woman in the text. And, we must then go on to critically examine the function of woman in the text, and its function depends on its placing. As Spivak writes, "We cannot dismiss our double displacement by saying to ourselves: 'In the discourse of affirmative deconstruction, "we" are a "female element," which does not signify "female person"' ("Displacement" 174). This is an instance where the connection between "woman" and "women" must be reinstated. Just as Derrida, out of necessity, insists that the hymen does not exist, so the feminist reader of Derrida must insist that whether actually or metaphorically, the hymen refers to the female body.

Irigaray's constant questioning of the sexualization of philo-

sophical and psychoanalytic discourse and of the way in which these discourses try to pass themselves off as neutral is quite revealing when one considers Derrida's metaphor of the hymen. The subject—the producer of discourse—is always male, and the object of his discourse is always based on the male subject, and yet both subject and object are presented as universal. Consequently, Irigaray's argument continues, the other—woman—is always suppressed and submitted to the economy of the same, that is, the masculine. Another basic premise of Irigaray's readings is that phallogocentrism operates by exploiting the body-matter of women and woman (*This Sex* 85), and it seems that deconstruction may operate similarly. Although Derrida claims that he resexualizes philosophical discourse with terms such as the hymen, I have shown that he neutralizes it at the same time, by insisting that his terms no longer refer in any way to the female body. What happens if we take this would-be neutral discourse and resexualize it? For if these terms no longer refer to the existential female body, they nevertheless refer to a textual construction of the female sexualized body and point to discourses where this sexualized body is constructed. Derrida's terms have an unmistakable signification in Freud's phallogocentric theory of female sexuality. The hymen functions there as a sign for the value of the female as sexual commodity and the vagina functions there as a hole, a "nothing-to-see" that signifies castration. The vagina is also the privileged sexual organ to the exclusion of the clitoris and the labia, organs that Irigaray privileges and reinscribes metaphorically in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, and *Sexes and Genealogies*. Despite the fact that the hymen and invagination are reinscribed by Derrida as structural metaphors for certain textual structures, they continue to point to the discourses from which they come, perhaps implicating Derrida's text in the systems of both psychoanalysis and metaphysics that his discourse sets itself against. To insert Derrida's terms into the context of psychoanalysis, or "into" the female body, may be to do a certain violence to them. But to do so is only to put them back into the context from which they were initially and violently taken. To do so is to resexualize them, in order to show that they cannot be "desexualized" so easily and are therefore never neutral.

Mimesis: Configuring the Feminine in Irigaray

In an interview in *This Sex*, Irigaray has some cautionary remarks to make about the placing of woman in discourse. When asked about her desire to avoid a naive positioning of "the question of woman," Irigaray states that *Speculum* "is obviously not a book about woman; and it is still less . . . a 'studied gynecocentrism,' a 'place of the monopolization of the symbolic' to the benefit of a woman, or of some women" (*This Sex* 162). Like Derrida insisting that the hymen does not exist, Irigaray wants to avoid perpetuating the pitfalls of metaphysics; however, she does not eradicate the feminine from her discourse as Derrida does. What seems to be at stake here is asking the question of woman in a different way. She alludes to this again in another passage in *This Sex*: "[T]he issue is not one of elaborating a new theory of which woman would be the *subject* or *object*, but of jamming the theoretical machinery itself, of suspending its pretension to the production of a truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal" (78). Where does the feminine enter into this project? The feminine, as represented in discourse, is the very means to this end of jamming the theoretical machinery. Elaborating on the way in which women should undertake to break down the production of theory, Irigaray writes:

They should not put it, then, in the form "What is woman?" but rather, repeating/interpreting the way in which, within discourse, the feminine finds itself defined as lack, deficiency, or as imitation and negative image of the subject, they should signify that with respect to this logic a *disruptive excess* is possible on the feminine side. (78; emphasis in original)

What Irigaray describes here resembles the strategy she elsewhere names "mimesis" (76). Mimesis involves the deliberate donning of the traditional features of femininity: it is a "playful repetition," which brings to light "the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language" (76). Once brought to light through mimesis, the feminine works as a disruptive force that is capable of upsetting the order and unity of phallogocentric discourse. For Irigaray,

mimesis is an indirect and thus more effective response to the need to destroy “the discursive mechanism.” Rather than the “direct feminist challenge” of “demanding to speak as a (masculine) ‘subject’,” which would only “maintain sexual indifference,” Irigaray postulates the more subversive challenge of mimesis. Mimesis involves woman’s acceptance of “‘ideas,’ in particular . . . ideas about herself that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic”; women take on these ideas with the aim of seeking out the way in which the feminine is exploited in discourse (76).

But if women mime the feminine, don’t we risk simply being equated with those ideas about the feminine that we mime? For Irigaray, the answer is no: it is through performance, through assuming femininity as a role, that women signify the incommensurability of the feminine with “femininity” as it is elaborated within, for example, the discourse of psychoanalysis. Here, Irigaray’s “mimesis” and Butler’s “gender performance” have much in common. In other words, to assume femininity as a role signifies that femininity exceeds the “natural” traits that presumably correspond to the female sex. By the same token, femininity also exceeds any performance of femininity, an issue I will take up again in chapter 3 on *Nightwood* in my reading of Matthew O’Connor. On the subject of this excess of the feminine, Irigaray writes:

[I]f women are such good mimics, it is because they are not simply resorbed in this function. *They also remain elsewhere*: another case of the persistence of “matter,” but also of “sexual pleasure.” (76; emphasis in original)

This passage points to the way in which “ideas about women” are capable of causing disruptions in discourse. The hymen in Derrida’s writing works in this way, despite Derrida’s intention to detach it from the woman’s body. The association of woman with matter is partly what allows women to resist absorption into their mimed role. Matter, like sexual pleasure, is in itself excessive with respect to discourse. Since the terms “matter” and “sexual pleasure” are culturally marked as feminine, women, too, are excessive, or “remain elsewhere.”¹³ Mimesis is repetition with a difference, difference through repetition. Compared to gynesis,

which consolidates the male subject in his displacement, the operation of mimesis makes visible the fact that masculine discourse is made possible through the exclusion of the feminine. Or, to invoke another concept of Irigaray's, phallogocentric discourse is founded on the eradication of woman, and mimesis brings this eradication to light.

Naomi Schor elaborates a typology of mimesis in order to distinguish between the generic feminist definition of the term and the radical definition of it in Irigaray's work. According to Schor, feminists interpret Irigarayan mimesis as "a parodic mode of discourse designed to deconstruct the discourse of misogyny through effects of amplification and rearticulation" (47). But Schor sees more radical implications in Irigaray's theory; she sees a more subversive version of mimesis that has been "largely misread, and even repressed" because it involves not a repudiation of misogyny but a reclamation of it (47). Schor describes Irigarayan mimesis as the "transvaluation" of misogynist discourse through the appropriation of misogynist terms: in other words, Irigarayan mimesis involves women identifying as their own those aspects of the feminine that have been used to oppress women (47).¹⁴

Schor is careful to describe precisely the relationship of the feminine to mimesis, focusing particularly on Irigaray's remark that mimesis makes "'visible' . . . the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language" (76). According to Schor, this more subversive type of mimesis will bring about "an emergence of the feminine" that "can only emerge from within or beneath . . . femininity, within which it lies buried" (48). "Femininity" here stands for the culturally constructed subject position of women and it covers up/makes invisible a more genuine aspect of woman, "the feminine." The metaphor of burial or repression seems to imply a feminine that exists prior to culture and discourse—in other words, an essential feminine. The point of Schor's article is to investigate those strands in Irigaray's writing that have led other feminists to label her writing essentialist, that is, writing that posits a natural, precultural femininity, rather than a contingent, cultural one. For Schor, Irigaray is not an essentialist; rather, her materialism has become confused with essentialism, which is often equated with biologism (50). The metaphor of a "buried" feminine that must be brought to light must not be simply equated

with a feminine essence, because this buried feminine is conceived as part of the cultural construction of femininity and yet the buried feminine exceeds dominant representations of femininity. Schor describes the intricate connection of the subversive feminine with dominant femininity in this way:

Irigaray's wager is that difference can be reinvented, that the bogus difference of misogyny can be reclaimed to become a radical new difference that would present the first serious historical threat to the hegemony of the male sex. Irigaray's wager is that there is a (*la/une femme*) woman *in* femininity. (47; emphasis in original)

As Schor clearly states here, the subversive, other feminine is neither before nor beyond femininity (the cultural construct); rather, it is *in* femininity. Thus, the subversive feminine is itself part of culture. By drawing attention to this subversive feminine, Irigaray writes the difference of the feminine, instead of rehearsing the familiar notion of the feminine as difference itself (the opposite of man). It is this notion of the subversive feminine that the models of displacement and mimesis share, strangely enough.

In Spivak's analysis of displacement, she contends that the reason Derrida takes woman as his model is woman's ability to dissimulate or impersonate—in other words, her capacity for masquerade (170, 177). According to Derrida in *Spurs*, it is “because she does not believe in the truth . . . [that] woman remains a model . . . She plays at dissimulation, at ornamentation, deceit, artifice, at an artist's philosophy” (67). The place of woman is ready-made for displacement because woman excels at impersonation and masquerade, that is, mimesis. Another way to say this is that woman's nonidentity makes her a perfect model for deconstructive discourse.¹⁵ Derrida formulates woman's nonidentity in terms of woman's relation to distance: “[T]he <woman> is not a determinable identity . . . Perhaps woman—a non-identity, a non-figure, a simulacrum—is distance's very chasm, the out-distancing of distance, the interval's cadence, distance itself, if we could still say such a thing, distance *itself*” (*Spurs* 49; emphasis in original). Derrida begins by describing woman in by now familiar terms (“a non-identity, a non-figure”), which build into increasingly inflated

and repeated terms (“the out-distancing of distance . . . distance itself . . . distance *itself*”). Over the course of this passage, the distance between women and woman grows exponentially as Derrida allegorizes woman as “distance itself.” Derrida’s formulation of woman begins to sound strangely like Irigaray’s, and if this is the case, Derrida’s woman may mimetically undo his text.

In other words, if women remain always elsewhere in mimesis, as Irigaray writes, and women’s capacity for mimicry is the reason they are displaced, then they also remain elsewhere in displacement.

Elsewhere of “matter”: if women can play with mimesis, it is because they are capable of bringing new nourishment to its operation. Because they have always nourished this operation? Is not the “first” stake in mimesis that of re-producing (from) nature? Of giving it form in order to appropriate it for oneself? As guardians of “nature,” are not women the ones who maintain, thus who make possible, the resource of mimesis for men? (*This Sex* 76–77; emphasis in original)

Here Irigaray refers to the origins of the term mimesis as an imitation of nature, and suggests that women have a fundamental relation to this originary meaning. Women would then, it seems, have a fundamental role in the very operation of representation. But, once again, woman is in excess with respect to her relation to nature as well. Irigaray is careful to write that women are “*guardians* of ‘nature’,” not nature itself. In other words, this is a role that has been assigned to women, and they are not absorbed in this role either: they maintain a distance from it, just as they maintain a distance from any representation. But woman’s nonidentity also allows her to resist appropriation, for it is this distance that makes her a good mimic. If we take this concept of woman and think of displacement in this light, the question arises, can there be appropriation if what is appropriated does not belong to woman, but is instead a mimed role? Does woman truly have “a place” that belongs to her and may be taken from her? If there is no property and no owner, how can we speak of appropriation or displacement? Is it contradictory to use the displacement model in order to critique masculine discourse and, at the same time, to use the

mimesis model in order to show the subversive potential of the feminine, and the performative gender model to show that gender is constructed and not inherent, as I do throughout this study? Mimesis represents a bridge between displacement and performative gender. As such, mimesis is a way of maintaining a connection between feminist discourse and gender studies/queer studies. In the readings of the novels that follow, I trace vestiges of the notion of fundamental gender difference even in contexts where a decidedly performative model of gender seems to operate.¹⁶ It is possible to argue that man cannot speak from the place of woman, as I do in my reading of *Nightwood*, and at the same time to argue that gender is never fixed, but constantly shifting, as I do in my reading of *The Talking Room*. The gender studies notion of the shifting, unstable nature of gender—in other words, the emphasis on performance or construction rather than on essence—is suggested in the work of Irigaray and Spivak that I discuss here. This similarity suggests continuity rather than a vast divide between this strain of feminism and gender studies. Woman's nonidentity—her distance from herself—makes her a desirable model for the deconstructive philosopher, for her place may be easily appropriated, and this notion of woman and identity informs the social constructivist account of gender as well. But woman's nonidentity is also the very thing that provides a tool for the feminist reader who wishes to read such a displacement, or, in general, to read against the grain of misogynist discourse. Displacement and mimesis have much in common because they are both symptoms of the lack of genuine sexual difference, and performative gender is a related symptom. Man needs woman to become a body; women mime femininity because femininity is but a reflection of masculine sameness. Irigaray's concept of the sensible transcendental, which is the focus of the last section of this chapter, is an attempt to overcome the divisions that are at the bottom of this problem.

Feminism and Gender Studies

What does feminist literary criticism stand to gain by focusing on gender construction and gender ambiguity in literary works? I

bring together here the work of both feminist literary critics and theorists and the newer work of gender theorists, such as Judith Butler, in order to argue that these two disciplines must work together despite apparent conflicts. I will be staging a confrontation between feminist studies and gender studies by analyzing Tania Modleski's reading of Judith Butler. Modleski very clearly characterizes feminism and gender studies as divergent, but this position rests on a misreading of the aims of gender studies. Modleski views the advent of gender studies as an offshoot—or, in some cases, a replacement—of feminist studies. As a type of postfeminist criticism, gender studies operates on the assumption that feminism has succeeded in its aims, while at the same time it seeks to "undermin[e] the goals of feminism" (3). In Modleski's critique, Butler stands in not only for the whole field of gender studies but also for antiessentialist feminism (17–18). Modleski's main criticism is that Butler, as an antiessentialist, advocates "moving beyond gender" by means of gay camp parody, in other words, gender performance (157). Butler sees gender as consisting of "a relationship among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire" (*Gender Trouble* 18). Gender is performative in the sense that it "constitut[es] the identity it is purported to be . . . There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (25). According to Modleski, drag, which brings to light the way in which gender is performative in Butler's analysis, is strangely "exempt from the rule" that "systems of revolutionary thought . . . are implicated in, and frequently the effect of, the systems they seek to undermine" (157). In other words, while Butler, as a good deconstructive theorist, finds even oppositional theoretical systems bound up with dominant systems of representation, she conceptualizes drag as a utopian possibility unconstrained by preexisting cultural practices. While Butler does indeed formulate drag as a subversive and therefore revolutionary possibility, drag is also, according to Butler, very much "implicated in" and "the effect of" the systems it seeks to "undermine," which are the binary gender system and the regime of compulsory heterosexuality. Far from signifying the possibility of "moving beyond gender," drag creates more genders, as it were, and it does so by taking up and redeploying the signs of the binary gender system,

that is, the cultural markers of masculinity and femininity. In fact, it is precisely because drag works within our familiar gender scheme and then creates “dissonance” within it that it is potentially subversive.¹⁷ Not only is it impossible to transcend gender, but to transcend a system is to leave it intact rather than to alter it.

To what degree is Modleski’s argument that Butler advocates “moving beyond gender” valid? This is a common critique of the social constructivist theory of gender: Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *Sexchanges*, for example, fault this theory of gender for doing away with the gender of the author and treating it as irrelevant. Butler, however, repeatedly denounces the idea of a state beyond gender, as well as the related idea of a transcendence of any existing power structure. She writes, for example, that her text is

an effort to think through the possibility of subverting and displacing those naturalized and reified notions of gender that support masculine hegemony and heterosexist power, to make gender trouble, not through the strategies that figure a *utopian beyond*, but through the mobilization, subversive confusion, and proliferation of precisely those constitutive categories that seek to keep gender in its place. (33–34; emphasis added)

Gender is troublesome because it displaces those categories—masculine and feminine—“that seek to keep gender in its place.” The leap to the “utopian beyond” is finally not much of a threat, because it leaves systems of power behind, and, thus, intact. One of the essential points of Butler’s work (and in this way she is a descendant of Irigaray and Derrida) is that subversion must come from within.

It is easy to understand Modleski’s criticism that Butler is advocating the transcendence of gender, since Butler’s language sometimes hints at this. But these hints are well qualified and Butler recognizes the impossibility, as well as the undesirability, of this sort of transcendence. Butler seems to invoke transcendence when writing of Monique Wittig’s fictional characters who transgress conventional gender categories. Butler writes that these characters do not represent “a *transcendence* of the binary . . . The force of Wittig’s fiction . . . is to offer an experience beyond the

categories of identity, an erotic struggle to create new categories from the ruins of the old, new ways of being a body within the cultural field, and whole new languages of description" (127).¹⁸ Butler seems both to deny the possibility of transcendence and to invoke it in this passage; yet careful reading shows that Butler describes this "experience *beyond* the categories of identity" as taking place firmly within culture, rather than beyond it. "New categories" are created, yet "from the ruins of the old"; "new ways of being a body" are also created, yet these are located "within the cultural field." And both of these new states are reached only through "struggle." In other words, there is no getting outside culture, or its systems of power, as many deconstructive theorists have noted before Butler. There is, however, a more desirable possibility: transforming culture and power from within. Butler sums up this issue within the specific field of gay and lesbian studies when she writes: "[T]he normative focus of gay and lesbian practice ought to be on the subversive and parodic redeployment of power rather than on the impossible fantasy of its full-scale transcendence" (124). It is clear that we are to understand gender acts as resignifications and realignments of the cultural constructs of masculinity and femininity and thus as cultural constructs themselves. Performative gender does not constitute a state "beyond gender" and hence beyond culture.

Butler neither denies gender nor does away with it as a category of analysis. Women are not irrelevant to Butler, as Modleski suggests. It is indeed possible and necessary to speak of women still; in fact, Butler's theoretical paradigms allow us to speak in a more complex fashion of women, that is, of the constructed nature of womanhood and femininity. To say that my gender is not something that I am, but something that I enact or do, is not to say that I am not a woman. Rather, it is to say that the way in which I am gendered is capable of change and modification, because gender is a process rather than a fixed state. Furthermore, gender studies allows us to see that the two expected answers to the question "What is my gender?" are not enough. What are the words to describe the multiple and discordant gender identities beyond masculine and feminine involving various combinations of sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire, the components of gender identity according to Butler? Our language isn't up to this task. Woolf's