FROM THE AMAZON TO THE *FLÂNEUSE* - WOMEN AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

Ana Gabriela Macedo
Universidade do Minho

In *Sea Changes: Essays on Culture and Feminism* Cora Kaplan argues that the construction of femininity is made in language, language being, as Lacan defines it, a signifying practice in and through which the subject is made into a social being. This accounts for the fact that, as Kaplan writes:

> a very high proportion of women's poems are about the right to speak and write ... To be a woman and a poet presents many women poets with such a profound split between their social, sexual identity (their 'human' identity) and their artistic practice that the split becomes the insistent subject, sometimes overt, often hidden or displaced, of much women's poetry. (Kaplan 1986, 71)

Thus, the construction of femininity in language is inseparable from the cultural construction of gender which, in its turn, associates the idea of social silence to the construction of female identity.

In this context, I intend to investigate why the very concept of women's writing was in itself considered synonymous with 'deviant', i.e., a transgression of 'natural' social and cultural laws (Gilbert 1987).[1]

Through time women writers have toyed with the idea of 'androgyny' as a possible way to get beyond the concept of masculinity as the 'norm' and women as the 'other' of man, meaning the perpetuation of women's subordinate position through a whole set of bipolar opposites, i.e., man - culture, mind; woman - nature, body (see Palmer 1989).

To illustrate this point I will be referring to the writing of Virginia Woolf, in particular the texts of *Orlando* and *A Room of One's Own*; I will then focus on the relation between the concept of a utopia of language and feminist utopias, as embodied in the myth of the Amazon and exemplified in the violent rhetoric of the futurist Mina Loy. Finally, I refer to the work of Angela Carter, particularly her last book, *Wise Children*, which I believe can also be contained in the category of feminist or female utopia.

1- VIRGINIA WOOLF AND THE 'WOMAN'S SENTENCE'

"... The very form of the man's sentence does not fit her: it is too loose, too heavy,

too pompous for a woman's use." Woolf wrote this statement in 1929, in an essay entitled "Women and Fiction". In her review of Dorothy Richardson's *Revolving Lights*, in 1923, she had already attempted a definition of what she termed "the psychological sentence of the feminine gender":

> It is of a more elastic fibre than the old, capable of stretching to the extreme, of suspending the frailest particles, of enveloping the vaguest shapes ... It is a woman's sentence, but only in the sense that it is used to describe a woman's mind by a writer who is neither proud nor afraid of anything she may discover in the psychology of her sex. (T.L.S., 19 May 1923)

Most of Woolf's writing is done in the awareness that 'one is not born but becomes a woman'. This thought is particularly explicit and, I would say, exemplified in *Orlando*, a novel written in 1928, which, as Sandra Gilbert writes, beyond being a fantasy about a utopian linguistic structure - 'a woman's sentence' - is a revision not just of woman's language, but of woman's relation to language (Gilbert 1987, 209). Orlando, a transsexual who travels through English History, negligently exchanging male and female costumes and subsequently assuming the corresponding male or female identities, is, in Woolf's own words, no more than a transvestite who, despite his new-woman outlook, "in every other respect [Orlando] remained precisely as he had been" (Woolf 1983, 87). His change of sex did not alter his identity.

Orlando is a text that allows Woolf to enjoy two attitudes which are intimately linked and which were totally barred to women, 'voyeurism' and *flânerie*, transcending the limitations of culturally assigned and fixed gender roles. As Woolf writes:

> ... she made a point sometimes of passing beneath the windows of a coffee house, where she could see the wits without being seen, and thus could fancy from their gestures what wise, witty, or spiteful things they were saying without hearing a word of them; which was perhaps an advantage; and once she stood half an hour watching three shadows on the blind drinking tea together in a house in Bolt Court ... She was content to gaze and gaze. (Woolf 1983, 183-9)

Orlando is in this respect an experimental text, since it is here that Woolf tries out the thesis she set out in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) about woman's access to the world, combined with woman's mastery of language. *Orlando* is also an allegorical extension of *A Room of One's Own*, articulating the image of sexual autonomy with the concept of linguistic power. As Teresa de Lauretis says, Woolf's obsession with language means that she is aware of the fact that "for a woman to

write is to usurp a place, a discursive position she does not have by nature or by culture (de Lauretis 1987, 80).[2]

Orlando is also profoundly androgynous as a text. This is evident in the alternate genderization which he/she undergoes, and in the process of the narrative, as Sandra Gilbert writes, "is able to enjoy the best of both sexes in a happy multiform which she herself has chosen" (Gilbert 1982, 207).[3] Or, as Woolf describes it: "His form combined in one the strength of a man and a woman's grace" (1983, 86).

Understood simultaneously as a utopia of woman's access to and conquest of the world, and woman's possession of language, *Orlando* is, as Gilbert says, "a revisionary biography of society ... a kind of merry fairy tale ... a fantasy of wishfulfillment which can be explained as a feminist pipe-dream" (Gilbert 1982, 208).

I would like to counterpoint here this vision of *Orlando* as a "fantasy of woman's sentence that clothes a fantasy of a woman who sentences" (Gilbert 1987, 220) to Elaine Showalter's negativist vision of Woolf's androgyny as a "withdrawal", simply "another form of repression, or, at best, self-discipline" (1982, 288). To Showalter, *Orlando* represents Woolf's ambivalent solution to the conflict of wishing to describe female experience at the same time that her life presented paralysing obstacles to such self-expression, for, she adds:

> ... the androgynous vision, in Woolf's terms, is a response to the dilemma of a woman writer embarrassed and alarmed by feelings too hot to handle without risking real rejection by her family, her audience, and her class. (Showalter 1982, 286)

In this same perspective, Showalter claims that *A Room of One's Own* is Woolf's final hide-out: "more than an office with a typewriter, it is a symbol of psychic withdrawal, an escape from the demands of other people" (1982, 286).

In fact, in the writing of *Orlando* and in the creation of a more profound form of androgyny which paradoxically includes but also transcends transvestism, Woolf is questioning the very notion of androgyny, as a romantic nineteenth-century topos which insisted on women as the 'other' of man, a complementary opposite, in itself empty and valueless. This notion of androgyny is however very close to that which Teresa de Lauretis rephrased as "gender asymmetry", meaning that women are not just the other, the complementary opposite of man, voids and fullnesses compenetrating, but in effect different, heterogeneous, not quite comparable (de Lauretis 1987, 80).

In my view, this notion entails a whole new way of understanding social relations. Diane Long Hoeveler in a very interesting book, *Romantic Androgyny: The Women Within*, studies the androgynous myth as a kind of Urmyth, a dream of primordial unification, where the male poets perform a myth of absorption and appropriation of feminine qualities. She argues that:

> Before woman could be accepted as the spiritual equal of man, she had to be (re)defined by the culture. The androgynous fantasy demanded that woman be essentially different from man and therefore a complementary force, that sexual differences institutionalised as gender roles have always been culturally understood as ideologies that justify inequality. (Hoeveler 1990, 5)

Hoeveler relates the nineteenth-century recurrent representation of women, either as androgynes or *femmes fatales*, to the need to objectify the female as other. She connects this fact simultaneously to misogyny and sexual nausea and to what she terms "cultural anxiety" resulting from

> ... the insecurity and the economic dislocation caused by an increasingly feminized literary market place. The Romantics cannibalistically consumed these female characters, shaped them into ideal alter-egos and most of the time destroyed them by the conclusion of the poem ... In the end both women and androgynes become the object of scorn, anger and ridicule. (Hoeveler 1990, 3)

Hoeveler's conclusion is that the ideology of the androgyne required "not only the subjugation of women, but the (de) humanization and eradication of the female representation as well" (1990, 9).

The poetry and essays of Charles Baudelaire can be seen as an embodiment of Hoeveler's reflections. Images of prostitutes, lesbians, widows, old women, are indeed recurrent, but none of them have the status of 'legally inhabiting' the street as the male *flâneur* does. As Janet Wolff states, this has to do with the fact that the literature of modernity describes the experience of men, ("the dandy, the *flâneur*, the hero, the stranger - are invariably male figures"); women are merely "subjects of his gaze, objects of his 'botanising'", only made visible through "his" eyes (Wolff 1990, 41-42). Curiously, as Wolff underlines, the poems known as *Les Fleurs du Mal* had originally been given the title *Les Lesbiènnes*, for the lesbian was for Baudelaire the heroine of Modernism, although "lamentables victimes" bound for hell (Baudelaire 1959, 172), as he writes in the poem "Delphine et Hippolyte":

> Descendez, descendez, lamentables victimes
> Descendez le chemin de l'enfer éternel!
> Jamais vous ne pourrez assouvir votre rage
> Et votre châtiment naîtra de vos plaisirs.

In this context it seems to me important to stress an issue that has recently become a central preoccupation of the feminist critique: the fact that the concepts of *otherness* and *difference* between masculine and feminine spheres, even though

understood in the sense of inequality, might be used to justify 'natural' sex difference. As Deborah Cameron argues, this is "an ancient strategy of the male oppressor; it is the business of feminism to call it into question" (1990, 11). Cameron shows her concern that notions of women's or feminine language might be a hindrance to the progress of the feminist movement itself. In her opinion the main task of feminists is to show how the tenets of male chauvinism are encoded into the semantic and grammatical structure of language, whereby male is positive and female negative.

2. THE MYTH OF THE AMAZON

The issue of the androgyne and transvestism as a search for alterity (a utopian dream, a fantasy of wishfulfilment, or even a prophecy) can, in my opinion, be related to the myth of the Amazon, which has tellingly been recuperated by contemporary fiction, both in feminist utopias (for example, *Herland* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman; *Women on the Edge of Time* by Marge Piercy; and *Les Guerrillières* by Monique Wittig) and by 'nostalgic' male writers' dystopias (Doane and Hodges 1987).[4]

As it is known, the myth of the Amazon flourished in Ancient Greece, particularly the state of Athens, representing the "vanquished opponents of heroes credited with the establishment and protection of the Athenian State".[5]

In Homer's *Iliad* the Amazons already appear with a mythic status: a tribe of women, peers of men and of great heroes. As Mandy Merck notes, the Amazon myth is often associated with images of primitive, chaotic or alien forces - the Centaurs, the Giants, the Trojans and the Persians. Etymologically the name is associated with the warrior women as anti-feminine, self-mutilating, man-hating and technically underdeveloped. Some of the feminist utopias based on the myth retain its martial ideals of epic and warfare, as for instance Wittig's *Les Guerrillières*.

On the other hand, the image of the Amazon in contemporary literature, as a figure of woman's power, autonomy and raw sexuality, often, as Doane and Hodges claim, allied to the image of the Medusa's head,[6] operates in 'nostalgic' male contemporary writing as a symbol that simultaneously provokes and dispels male anxiety, not only on the sexual level, but also on the level of woman's appropriation of language and discourse. As Doane and Hodges have shown, the image of the taming of the Amazon in this 'nostalgic' literature, "seems to be the answer found to tame this threatening, heterogeneous issue of women's desire itself truly incarnated in the image of the Amazon" (Doane and Hodges 1987, 42).[7]

However, this emphasis on the Amazon's destruction and conquest by the male hero is not recent; in fact it links in with the genesis of the written history of the myth, as in the work of Herodotus, whose resolution always showed the Amazons being vanquished by the male warrior, so that the 'natural order' was in the end restored. The myth of the Amazon is thus a complex and ambivalent one, because of the incipient contradiction that it bears, between female power and autonomy and the martial and epic values that it propagates. In the same way as

the image of androgyny, it can be a dangerous one for feminism, by conjuring up a conformist, complementary and unisex vision of the world, the opposite of the concept of 'difference' which contemporary feminism is fighting for.

To illustrate this point, I would like to refer here briefly to the writing of two women who addressed this issue within the context of the literary Avant-garde.

In a rather violent discourse, the public voice of women engaged in the Futurist movement, Valentine de Saint-Point, in the Manifesto of the Futurist Woman she published in 1912, celebrated the androgyne, as well as the Amazon in a rather confused and exalted rhetoric which is clearly a pastiche of Marinetti's own glorification of war, militarism and contempt for women. De Saint-Point exalts virility as a principal virtue of both men and women, celebrating the complete and bestial being, a perfect blend of femininity and masculinity. The "real" women, she claims, are the "Erynnies, the Amazons, the Semiramis, Jeanne d'Arc, the Cleopatre and the Messaline: the women warriors, fiercer than men" (Lista 1973, 329-32; translation mine).

In 1914, another woman member of the European and American Avant-garde, British by birth, her name Mina Loy, wrote a *Feminist Manifesto* which is still very much inspired by the futurist ethics of valorisation of belligerence. However, her tone is defiant and assertive in what concerns women, and, aware of the importance of defining women in total disregard for masculine values, she writes:

> The woman who adapts herself to a theoretical valuation of her sex as a *relative impersonality* is not yet feminine ... Leave off looking to men to find out what you are not. Seek within yourselves to find out what you are. As conditions are at present you have the choice between Parasitism, Prostitution, or Negation. (Loy 1985, 269-71)

3- ANGELA CARTER'S PROPHECY

To conclude, I should like to refer to Angela Carter's last novel before she tragically died, at the apex of her career. *Wise Children* is a prophetic tale about woman's solidarity and victory over the panaceas of the world. It cannot genuinely be considered a post-modernist text, since it does not comply with any notions of decadence, nostalgia or high-brow parody. On the contrary, its humour and *joie de vivre* is whole-heartedly authentic; the lives, thoughts, and emotions it re-enacts are not frivolous or fortuitous, but defiantly bold and determinedly humane.

It is basically a woman's world, and its action is literally and symbolically centred on a stage-world, the main characters all being actresses and actors, often blending stage life with real life.

The twin sisters Dora and Nora, the heroines of this magic tale, are not mythical Amazons but genuinely autonomous women; they are never

self-demeaning nor patronising, they are simply 'in control' of their actions and of their lives, relying on each other's solidarity for love, confiding and encouragement.

The novel is often based on *Commedia dell'Arte* clownesque tricks, since, as twin sisters Nora and Dora are often taken one for the other, which always ends to their advantage and provides much fun for the reader. The twins were brought up and guided in life by a surrogate Grandmother (Grandma Chance) who gave them her name, a home and the wisdom of life. She is a curious carnivalesque figure of maternal love in the character of a retired cabaret artist.

The men here are ambivalent figures. Melchior Hazard, their father, is a popular Shakespearean actor, who is mostly absent from their lives, and the cause of occasional tears for their bastardy. The father figure role is performed by their uncle, Peregrine, a kind of year round Father Christmas and a clownesque figure, for whom they have much love, but no respect.

There is no real central male figure in this novel. Just a celebration of a totally feminine or feminized world, satirical, self-mocking and carnivalesque, but never debased, alienated or nihilistic.

4- CONCLUSION

So, as a conclusion, we could say that in *Wise Children* Angela Carter reaches that utopian feminist dreamland that Woolf had fantasised about, by proposing a new, positive and liberated 'woman's sentence', which stands for a whole new, positive and liberated relation of women to the world.[8]

ENDNOTES

[1] Woman's writing is associated at the turn of the century with the 'voice of evil', a *fin de siècle* male fantasy about female speech - the voice of woman's linguistic desire, and the speech of her mysteriously sexual desire . It translates the articulation of this haunting novelty of women's access to the literary market and sexual deviance, i.e., lesbianism.

[2] This same argument is the core of three articles which bear curiously identical titles: Janet Wolff 1985; Elizabeth Wilson 1992; and Rachel Bowlby 1992.

[3] "Unlike Tiresias, upon whom the worst of both sexes has been inflicted as if to suggest that any departure from the fixity of gender implies disorder and disease" (Gilbert 1982, 207).

[4] In their definition, "nostalgia" means a "retreat to the past", a frightening anti-feminist impulse, "in the face of what a number of writers - most of them male - perceive to be the degeneracy of American culture brought about by the rise of feminist authority" (1987, XIII).

[5] For further information on the sources of the myth see *Vide* Merck 1993.

[6] See for instance this superimposition of images in the film *Fatal Attraction* by Adrian Lyne (USA, 1987).

[7] Amongst these 'nostalgic' male writers the authors mention particularly the following: Thomas Berger's *The Regiment of Women.* (1973); Dan Greenburg's *What do Women Want?* (1982); George Stade's *Confessions of a Lady-Killer* (1979).

[8] This paper was presented at the XIX International Congress of FILM in August 1993, the Proceedings of which are forthcoming.

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