

GENDER CRISIS IN THE NOVELS OF MARILYN FRENCH

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INTRODUCTION

'Gender crisis' (Showalter 1990, 8) is a notion which characterises European and American culture in this *fin de siècle*, just as it did one hundred years ago. In the words of British novelist George Gissing, the 1880s and 1890s were decades of "sexual anarchy" when all the laws that governed sexual identity and behaviour seemed to be breaking down. In *Sexual Anarchy. Gender and Culture and the fin de siècle* (1990), American feminist critic Elaine Showalter establishes a series of parallels between sexual crises in Victorian England and those affecting us today in Europe and, especially, America.

At the end of the last century, scandals concerning brothels and child prostitution increased public awareness about sexuality and gave rise to social purity campaigns, demands for restrictive legislation and censorship, and an emphasis on the family as the bulwark against sexual decadence. Scandals involving homosexuals, such as the Oscar Wilde trial (1895), were signs of a dangerous immorality which threatened English civilisation itself. Public furore over prostitution, homosexuality and the syphilis epidemic changed the discourse of sexuality in important ways. The words *feminism* and *homosexuality* came into use as *odd women*, *new women*, *new men* and male aesthetes redefined the meanings of femininity and masculinity.¹

In our time, concern about the sexual abuse of children and the frequency and violence of rape has focused on censoring art and banning pornography. The women's liberation and gay rights movements have engendered anxiety about the breakdown of the family, while fears about women's changing sexual choices have fueled an often violent anti-abortion campaign. The AIDS epidemic has provoked a homophobic response and an emphasis on celibacy and monogamy. Supporters of the men's movement have joined feminists, gay rights activists and scholars connected with women's and gender studies departments in an exciting and sometimes disturbing reflection on femininity, masculinity and sexuality.

Such gender 'disorder' finds expression in the culture of each period. The similarities between the two times serve as a backdrop for Elaine Showalter's discussion of their various respective cultural manifestations. The reactions of many nineteenth-century male writers to the changing face and place of women are compared with examples of today's backlash literature. The debates of the last century on sexuality and gender are examined alongside this century's, which Showalter interprets as the "embryonic stirrings of a new order" (Showalter 1990, 18).

The anxiety which may accompany such moments of cultural evolution intensifies the desire among many for clear definitions of gender, race, class and nationality. Crises take on another dimension when invested with the metaphors of life and death that we project onto the final decades of a century. Of our own time Showalter writes:

If the different races can be kept in their places, if the various classes can be held in their proper districts of the city, and if men and women can be fixed in their separate spheres, many hope, apocalypse can be prevented and we can preserve a comforting sense of identity and permanence in the face of that relentless spectre of millennial change. (Showalter 1990, 4)

Similar words appear in a 1975 essay by Marilyn French:

[W]henever humans find themselves shaken in their moral standards, they return to the past, to tradition for guidance. They return to a time they call 'closer to nature'. And they unfailingly find there the hierarchical relation between men and women. (French 1975, 56)

In these and other passages, Elaine Showalter and Marilyn French confront the fears associated with the loss of conventional definitions of femininity and masculinity by reminding us that gender is socially constructed and mutable. And, grounding their work in modern moral and sexual ambiguity, they each point to a tenuous future of gender equality. It is in this way that Elaine Showalter's *Sexual Anarchy* provides an interesting interpretative framework for an analysis of gender crisis in Marilyn French's novels.

French's *fin de siècle* texts include *odd and new women*, as well as *new men*, all of which constitute responses to the constraints of traditional notions of femininity and masculinity. In her first three novels, *The Women's Room*, *The Bleeding Heart*, and *Her Mother's Daughter*, published between 1977 and 1987, French represents traditional gender categories as sources of malaise.² She develops a repertoire of physical, psychological and social manifestations of this malaise, as well as an iconography of metaphorical manifestations. The themes of sexual transgression and inversion, or homosexuality, surface in her depictions of women and men today and in the strategies they employ to deal with "gender trouble" (Butler 1990, vii).

Marilyn French's non-fictional works, whether literary criticism or sociological essay, furnish an intellectual counterpoint to the novels. Her voluminous *Beyond Power: On Women, Men and Morals* (1985) is of particular interest. In it, French retraces the development of patriarchy, focusing primarily on the rise of values which were to become dominant with the rise of capitalism and which, in her view, are leading us to some form of apocalypse. *Beyond Power* closes with her vision of a more harmonious future, possible only through a "moral revolution" in which men and women would

adopt what are referred to as "feminine" values (i.e. favouring life through an ethic of care). These ideas recall those espoused by many turn-of-the-century feminists for whom such Victorian notions as the moral superiority of women and of "feminine" or "domestic" values became part of a political agenda (Showalter 1977, 184).

My discussion of gender crisis in the novels of Marilyn French is organised around two points: the author's critique of traditional concepts of femininity and masculinity and the strategies envisioned in an effort to 'opt out' of or subvert such patriarchal constructs. Her fictional portrait of contemporary gender trouble is compared with her non-fictional thought so as to elaborate a larger 'cross-genre' picture of one modern feminist's work on the question.

I

The concept of feminine malaise acts as a vehicle for Marilyn French's critique of the traditional feminine role. In her revision of the Victorian association of femininity and illness, French denounces the conventional conception of womanhood by showing it to be sickness-inducing.³ The acquisition of traditional femininity is portrayed as "unnatural" and troubled. Conforming to the role requires the sacrifice of individual development and ultimately the suppression of the self. In this sense, French's novels may be read as fictional versions of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and, more generally, as contemporary postfaces to many nineteenth-century women's texts as read by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979).

The making of a woman is a process of "dwindling down": Mira of *The Women's Room* (1977) feels "strangled", "stifled" by her parents' idea of what she should do (French 1978, 21). Marriage is equated with "retreat" from life, "defeat" (French 1978, 54-5); pregnancy with alienation and complete loss of autonomy, as analysed by Simone de Beauvoir in *Le deuxième sexe* (1949). French denounces the patriarchal construct of the female body by portraying the reproductive cycle as a source of physical and psychological disorder, turning the misogynous tradition on its head: Mira's first menstrual period signals "corruption" and "decay" with its "disgusting", "contaminating" "poisons" (French 1978, 25, 34). In French's metaphorical system, the uterine space is likened to a "rank cave", "dark and smelly", a powerful symbol for women's condition in the author's denunciation of "biological femininity" (French 1978, 291).

The Women's Room reads like a portrait gallery of feminine malaise, as each heroine inhabiting the post-war suburb of Meyersville suffers alone from the collective "problem that has no name" (Friedan 1963). Mira's recurrent "nagging feeling", pursed lips and "frigidity", Nathalie's drinking and endless household projects, Adele's clenched white fists, forced laugh and edgy voice, Lily's elliptical conversation, stomach ulcers and "madness" are but a few examples. Even French's younger generation of privileged women students inhabiting Cambridge in the late sixties and early seventies remain vulnerable to feminine malaise despite feminist awareness. Kyla's frantic schedule, bloody bitten lips, drinking and uncontrollable sobbing attest to the persistence of sexual inequality, discrimination and misogyny, whether at home or on campus. Moreover, the novel's conclusion suggests that any transgression of sickening

femininity, of woman's very restricted place, will be punished.⁴

Marilyn French's second novel focuses on a sickness which is both the result of the demands of the role assigned to women and a strategy to deal with those demands. Dolores of *The Bleeding Heart* (1980) has become an *odd woman* in her celibacy; seeking no match, her strategy is one of repression of her sexual self. Her feelings have "dried up", her vagina too; she has become a "dry well" (French 1987, 4-5). Similarly, she has resigned from her role as mother, leaving her rebellious teenage daughter to fend for herself (French 1987, 311). She is described as a "pillar of salt" like Lot's wife, "a rock like Niobe", and as Hecuba, all images of maternal pain (French 1987, 315).⁵

Dolores's renunciation of the traditional roles of wife and mother has resulted in a sterile withdrawal into a withered self, her loss of emotion implying a form of death, but also a form of masculinisation, the two being equated in French's fictional world. The author suggests, however, that Dolores's strategy of repression is an impasse. For if in her celibacy Dolores is *odd* and in her emotional petrification unfeminine, she nevertheless can be read as remaining within the boundaries of traditional female suffering. In a climactic scene, Dolores "gives birth" to her dead teenage daughter and is driven "mad" by her perceived failure as a mother.

In *Her Mother's Daughter* (1987), French considers the process of masculinisation that represents another strategy in the rejection of the conventional feminine role. Anastasia transgresses the boundaries of this role in her gender ambiguity, "psychic doubling" and gradual sexual "inversion". Embodying nineteenth-century warnings against such transgression, Anastasia becomes a sort of hermaphrodite in her taking on of masculine characteristics.⁶ Her imitation of men and masculine dress evoke a lesbian identity as first defined by Krafft-Ebing a century ago⁷ and foreshadow her decision to take a female lover. More than any other heroine described by French, Anastasia embodies the difficulty of inventing a new feminine paradigm.

Anastasia's adoption of masculine dress and behaviour is initially a form of opposition to her mother, a strategy chosen in an effort to establish her own separate identity. The heroine plays with traditional gender categories and cultivates sexual ambiguity: "I was not going to be a woman, I had decided that. Since I clearly was not a man, my only alternative was to be beyond sex, or at least gender" (French 1987, 425). The limits of this strategy are already apparent when an unexpected pregnancy forces her to acknowledge her true sex and an unwanted marriage her assigned gender. The tension which results accentuates the split in her identity: her "Pollyana" behaviour masks a "Medea", Anastasia's psychic double who "has no language to express (her) knowledge" and is thus silenced (French 1988, 839, 203).⁸

Nevertheless, once divorced, the heroine takes her place in the masculine *World*,⁹ travelling the globe as a professional photographer and taking lovers as she pleases. Her success in this sphere results from her ability to suppress all traces of traditional femininity: "I gradually trained myself not to show my feelings, and because feelings kept in are terribly painful, ... I also trained myself not to feel them" (French 1988, 552). Her "feminine" self is finally stifled by the parasitic development of her masculine persona (French 1988, 425).

Unlike French's previous heroines, however, Anastasia, whose name means

"resurrected" in Greek,¹⁰ will be healed, her identity reconstructed in a feminist revision of femininity. The birth metaphor reappears to describe the mid-life awakening of her new feminine self, triggered by her observations of feminists in action (Houston conference, Nov. 1977). But in her use of the metaphor, the author focuses on the "turning over" of the foetus as Anastasia's embryonic self begins its process of sexual "inversion". Her "insides" invert completely and she wakes up to a sudden awareness of the value of "women's work". Morally and sexually reborn, Anastasia focuses her feminist lens on this work and, once reconciled with her "estranged" children and mother, recovers her capacity to love, choosing a lesbian partner. These conclusions exemplify the rehabilitation of qualities traditionally associated with women, already apparent in *The Women's Room*,¹¹ and discussed in *Beyond Power*.

II

Just as French's depiction of feminine malaise exposed the darker side of suburban female experience, her portrayal of masculine monstrosity reveals another dimension of 'normal' male experience. In a *jeu de miroir* reminiscent of Victorian literature, the author uncovers the Mr. Hyde side of Dr. Jekyll, and accuses patriarchy's male keepers of the worst crimes. Masculine behaviour at home is part and parcel of patriarchal oppression of women in the world, an idea French develops in *Beyond Power* and *The War Against Women* (1992). Jack the Ripper continues to strike, although his methods have changed and his victims are now common housewives.

If the female characters of *The Women's Room* are infected by imposed passivity and dependence, the novel's male characters are deformed by a gender role anchored in egotism and violence. As fathers, men are reduced to figures of authority who agree, by and large, that the best way to keep children in line is to beat them. Wives, too, may be "kept in line" this way by men who still adhere to the "old ways", like Tom, who keeps his wife Sandra "under lock and key" (French 1978, 243). In a society impregnated with a tradition of misogyny, where sadistic treatment of women appears on cheap paperbacks and in the private fantasies of suburban husbands, the rapport between Tom and Sandra is seen to represent the "concrete form of their relations with their husbands" (French 1978, 251). Mira thinks "(t)his Tom may be a barbarian, but there (is) something clean and clear about his way of proceeding" (French 1978, 250).¹²

This association of masculinity and violence evolves in the course of *The Women's Room*, finally centring on the act of rape. Appearing as masculine fantasy or sexual impulse in the first part of the novel, rape comes to symbolise the ultimate masculine act in the second part. Val, in the aftermath of her daughter Chris's rape, confides in Mira:

And it became absolute truth for me. Whatever they may be in public life, whatever their relations with men, in their relations with women, all men are rapists, and that's all they are. They rape us with their eyes, their laws, their codes. (French 1978, 629-30)

Val's indictment of the male sex stands as one of the novel's truths, understood by the narrator Mira, who seems to speak for the author.¹³

In French's first novel, then, the worst aspects of masculine gender identity seem distilled for the purposes of denunciation.¹⁴ Elisabeth Badinter's hypervirile and aggressive *hard male* dominates here and women suffer the consequences of his behaviour.¹⁵ In *The Bleeding Heart*, French considers the implications of this behaviour for the male protagonist himself and introduces a *wounded man* in the character of Victor. A transitional male figure, he foreshadows the appearance of the 'feminine' or *soft male* of the third novel, one who has abandoned the privileges of his sex.

Like so many of French's female characters, Victor's face reveals the traces of his pain (French 1987, 13). The source of his suffering is his success as a man, for in his role as ambitious businessman, absent father and unfaithful husband, Victor pushes his wife Edith to the breaking point, provoking her nearly fatal car accident. She becomes paralysed and is confined to a wheelchair and Victor finds himself in the moral obligation of caring for her as for a child. Edith succeeds in forcing him to acknowledge the monstrosity of his former behaviour, and to take on a nurturing role.

Victor comes to represent a "feminised" male in his woundedness and in his role as caretaker. His feminist lover, Dolores, is impressed with his apparent change. And yet, Victor wavers, deciding to leave his crippled wife for her. Thus, despite his capacity for nurturance, he continues to adhere to a masculine value system, as described in Carol Gilligan's *In A Different Voice*,¹⁶ and so falls short of French's ideal of a truly "feminised" man, as sketched out in *Beyond Power*. It is no doubt for this reason that the passionate meeting of the embattled sexes, imagined here in the rapport between Victor and Dolores is a short-lived, and very polemical one.

In *Her Mother's Daughter*, a *soft male* appears in the character of Toni, Anastasia's young second husband who opts out of the traditional male role of breadwinner in order to write. The themes of sexual transgression and gender ambiguity, developed in the author's rendering of Anastasia, reappear in this contemporary version of the past century's utopian *new man*. Toni initially chooses to adopt a nurturing role when confronted with his grandmother's placement in a home for the elderly: he decides to live with and care for her, supported financially by his father and uncles, who only agree to his "emasculatation" in order to free themselves from caring for her. His decision is presented as an act of revolt "against the world of men" (French 1988, 771), and specifically against his violent and abusive father.

His subsequent marriage to Anastasia is characterised by an exchange of traditional gender roles: she is the provider, he the housekeeper and caretaker of their three children. The "exchange" is of course unequal and negative. Like the author's suburban heroines, Toni is hurt by Anastasia's infidelity, belittled by his economic dependence, and confined by the children. Hence, his sudden but long-awaited success as a writer triggers a traditionally masculine response: he abandons his feminine role and youngest daughter almost overnight, buys a sports car and moves to California (French 1988, 770-71). For, unlike Anastasia, who succeeds in a man's world and is able to share in certain masculine privileges, Toni suffers from both the confinement and tedium of the feminine role itself and from a subtle but real social ostracism:

We live in a world that requires something other of men than that they raise a family and love a woman and write sensitive delicate prose in a small back room of the house ... whatever either of us might think or feel privately, we could not escape the world's judgement. (French 1978, 771-2)

Toni's failure as a "woman" implies his success as a man: his renouncement of his femininity and attachments represents a symbolic step into male adulthood and maturity.¹⁷ The protagonist joins the ranks of the other absent fathers, like Anastasia's first husband who abandoned his children in a similar fashion. If rape stands as the ultimate masculine act in *The Women's Room*, paternal abandonment of children stands out as the major masculine flaw in this third novel. The concepts of the *soft male* or feminised *new man* return to the domain of feminist utopia.¹⁸ For, through Tony, French stresses the necessity of a fundamental revision of society's values in order for new models of masculinity to take shape.

III

A discussion of gender crisis in the novels of Marilyn French would be incomplete without a consideration of her portrayal of lesbian characters. Lesbians appear in each of the author's novels, their fictional position reflecting their real-life one as a marginal but vital force in contemporary feminist culture. They function in the narrative as supportive of a potentially subversive feminine subculture, recalling the one which flourished at the close of the last century.¹⁹

Lesbians are portrayed by French as marginalised by their sexuality, beginning with Isolde in *The Women's Room* who explains to her heterosexual women friends:

I've spent my life, sort of a beggar, standing outside the restaurant, waiting for table scraps ... What is considered the good life, the right life, the fulfilling life - that's always been out of the question for me ... It's a major difference, it changes the way you see everything (French 1978, 658-59).

At the same time, this marginal position frees them from the constraints of the heterosexual gender order. Unattached and somehow pure in her difference, Isolde is more truly herself. She quite naturally becomes the confidante of her married friends Kyla and Clarissa in their flight from their husbands' oppressive behaviour. And when the group of friends threatens to disintegrate, Isolde represents a cohesive power that continues to bind them despite their conflicts.

Lesbianism may also be associated with a rejection of men or masculine behaviour in French's novels, thus constituting a critique of both conventional femininity and masculinity. This is already apparent in *The Women's Room* when Kyla and Clarissa take up with Isolde temporarily in the process of leaving their husbands. In *The Bleeding Heart*, Dolores's daughter Sydney becomes a lesbian as a result of her father's

unstable behaviour, and Clara of *Her Mother's Daughter* expresses an explicitly anti-male ideology. Anastasia's choice of Clara as lover can be interpreted as originating in her rejection of masculine values and behaviour, especially since Clara is the voice of a radical lesbianism.

But, however marginalised sexually or anti-male ideologically, the lesbian functions primarily as a healing force in French's work. The "feminine subculture" that forms spontaneously among the suburban housewives of Meyersville in the first part of *The Women's Room* paves the way for the lesbian love that emerges in the predominately female student group at Cambridge in the second part, Isolde at its centre. Lesbian love heals abused wives as Isolde and provides shelter and compassion to her married friends, who become her lovers. In *Her Mother's Daughter*, Clara provides Anastasia with loving support, a critical ear, and healing words.

But where Isolde remains essentially isolated in her sexuality, a springboard for women in the process of finding themselves, Clara is portrayed as the final feminist response to patriarchal culture. Anastasia's decision to love Clara comes slowly and is only possible when she is fully well. Lesbianism thus comes to represent not only a valid alternative to the traditional heterosexual arrangement, but a means by which to reconstitute a fragmented feminine identity and a road to female empowerment. It appears as one element or step in French's program to revalorise feminine qualities.

CONCLUSION

As a participant in the twentieth-century feminist literary enterprise, Marilyn French continues the quest, begun in the last century, for a new feminine identity. In addition, she calls for a new definition of masculinity which would incorporate traits traditionally associated with women. Indeed, her feminist project to "feminise" society hinges on the transformation of masculine values and male behaviour.

But the formulation of these new gender identities is a complex and difficult task, as French's *mise en scène* makes clear. For if traditional gender roles make women ill and render men monstrous, the strategies envisioned by the author in these texts in order to 'opt out' of or subvert these roles generally fail. The repression of traditional femininity and the imitation of conventional masculinity by women lead to emotional death. Male appropriation of the assigned feminine role proves impossible due to the persistence of the masculine value system, society's judgement or the constraints of the role itself.

In both cases however, the gender role copied is limited to its negative aspects. Rather than breaking free from ancient concepts of masculinity and femininity, both sexes remain, for the most part, trapped in the tension of their traditional opposition. And although their failure does reinforce the author's call for new definitions of these identities, French does not envision any.²⁰

Indeed, the only viable option presented is that of lesbianism. This 'resolution' of the gender crisis is reinforced by the notion of gender separatism which haunts the conclusion of each of the novels discussed here. Heterosexual couples separate, each sex returning to his or her own camp, unable to harmonise their respective lives. The conclusion of *The Women's Room* finds Mira wandering the beach alone, like some *fin*

de siècle heroine.²¹ In *Her Mother's Daughter*, Toni's retreat to traditional male values and the American West rings of late nineteenth-century masculine subculture, albeit less misogynous and without the homosexual overtones. Anastasia's relative isolation in a "feminine subculture" is reminiscent of many *new women* and recalls Val's move to an all-female community in *The Women's Room*. The implications are that a new feminine identity can only take shape in an exclusively female space and that a new masculinity simply cannot take shape given patriarchy's dependence upon male compliance to its values and expectations.²²

If the current gender crisis represents, in the words of Elaine Showalter, the "embryonic stirrings of a new order" (Showalter 1990, 18), Marilyn French's fiction implies that that order remains confined to the realm of feminist utopia. For if in *Beyond Power* we can glimpse the outlines of a more open society, in the author's novels we remain hungry for a more complete picture.²³ The gender question becomes one of *genre*, for French seems able to provide a blueprint for an equality whose exact contours she can't yet imagine.

ENDNOTES

¹ The term *odd women* recalls the George Gissing novel of the same title (1891), a label for the increasingly large population of unmarried and celibate women of his period. *New women* were sexually independent, university-educated, and critical of marriage as woman's only existential option; their male companions were *new men*, often artists or writers, envisioned in utopian *new woman* fiction of the period. The celibacy of *Odd Women* and the refusal of the sexually-liberated *New Women* to marry and bear children raised fears about the future of British family structure and inspired a conservative backlash.

² A fourth novel, *Our Father*, appeared in 1994, several months after this talk was given. In it, French continues her reflection on gender, malaise and the role of feminism. Although its conclusion does imply an evolution over the novels that preceded it in that there occurs a significant and durable healing on the part of the heroines, the overriding continuity of the work, concerning gender crisis in particular, convinced us that it was not necessary to rewrite the entire article. We have chosen to limit any discussion of *Our Father* to the footnotes.

³ The Victorian era and the post-war period described by French are comparable in their confinement of women to the domestic realm, in their idealisation of motherhood, and in their reduction of women to their sexual role. The affluent woman of the last century was understood to be inherently sick since all female functions were regarded as pathological. Hysteria, the epitome of the "cult of female invalidism", was assumed to have its source in the uterus (Ehrenreich and English 1973, 17). Freud's rereading of the disease as mental illness did nothing to change women's lot, and the vulgarisation in post-war America of Freud's ideas on women through works like *Modern Woman. The Lost Sex* (1947) by Ferdinand Lundberg and Marynia Farnham provided a scientific rationale for confining them to home and family. The response of psychoanalysts of this period to the complaints of suburban housewives was to blame their education for not preparing them for their feminine role (Friedan 1963, 20). Experts enjoined women to accept and adapt to their role, reminding them of how lucky they really were.

⁴ We refer to several incidents described in the last part of the novel: Chris's rape, Val's murder, and Mira's loneliness.

⁵ Lot's wife was transformed into a pillar of salt because she disobeyed God/her husband and dared to look back at her city in flames, where her daughters and grandchildren remained to die. Niobe turned into rock upon witnessing the death of her children under the arrows of Apollo and Artemis. Hecuba threw herself into the Hellespont after the deaths of her husband, daughter and grandson.

⁶ See Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's *Disorderly Conduct*, p. 260. Nineteenth-century warnings focused on the development of masculine physical traits. Anastasia's "hermaphroditism" has an important psychological dimension.

⁷ See Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct*, pp. 271-2. Richard von Krafft-Ebing's early definition of lesbianism was based on dress, appearance and behaviour rather than sexual preference.

⁸ The use of the double is frequent in male homosexual literature of the *fin de siècle* (Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890)), the mad double recurrent in women's literature (Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847)). French plays on both traditions in her illustration of Anastasia's split self. In addition, Anastasia's feminine and masculine selves recall cases of multiple personality disorder, whether *fin de siècle* (Dr. Morton Prince of Boston and his patient Miss Beauchamp/"B.C.A.") or more recent (The Three Faces of Eve (1957), Sybil). See Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*, pp. 118-126.

⁹ *World* is the name given to the magazine Anastasia works for, styled after *Life*.

¹⁰ In an interview with Barbara Lovenheim, French states that Anastasia is the resurrection of her mother, Belle, who would have lived a similar life, made similar choices, had she been permitted to. See *The New York Times Book Review*, 25 Oct. 1987, p. 7.

¹¹ We refer to Mira's post-partum awakening to the value of the daily activities of the young mothers around her.

¹² In *Beyond Power*, French writes that sado-masochism "is the paradigm of heterosexual sex in the Western world ... not a challenge to the culture but a realisation of its underlying principle" (p. 571).

¹³ French discusses the question of rape in *The War Against Women*, pp. 193-7. She examines the cultural view of rape as legitimate in certain circumstances (on dates, in marriage, woman out alone, dressed in a certain way ...), male justification of the act, and feminist critiques of rape by Pauline Bart and Susan Brownmiller. French denounces society's refusal to hold men responsible for rape.

¹⁴ Her depiction is, however, faithful to several psychological studies of masculinity and its disorders. According to these studies, which French feminist Elisabeth Badinter summarises in *XY. De l'identité masculine* (1992), male gender identity is defined "negatively", that is in opposition to the mother, her "femininity", and infantile passivity. The essential developmental theme is separation: differentiation from the maternal and individuation as an autonomous male. American feminist theorists Dorothy Dinnerstein, Nancy Chodorow and others have stressed the negative effects of confiding total parental responsibility in the mother, among them a fear or hatred of women, and feelings of guilt or aggression toward them. Misogyny and homophobia result as two sides of the same coin, their common ground a hatred of traditional feminine traits. The absence of the father creates a vacuum: cultural representations of masculinity substitute for the lack of positive male models of identification.

¹⁵ In *XY. De l'identité masculine*, Elisabeth Badinter describes two products of the current masculine identity crisis, two wounded men: the *hard male* and the *soft male*. The first is characterised by his hypervirility and aggressivity, the second by his femininity and passivity. Badinter borrows the term *soft male* from Canadian poet and activist Robert Bly who also employs *lovely boy* in his work *Iron John*. See *XY. De l'identité masculine*, p. 220.

¹⁶ In chapter 2 of *In a Different Voice*, "Images of Relationship", Carol Gilligan analyses masculine and feminine responses to moral dilemmas which contrast in the male emphasis on individual right and the female emphasis on responsibility to others.

¹⁷ See Carol Gilligan's discussion of developmental theories in *In a Different Voice*, especially chapter 6, "Visions of Maturity".

¹⁸ Elaine Showalter discusses these feminist utopian writings in *Sexual Anarchy*, referring to Jane Hume Clapperton's *Margaret Dunmore, or a Socialist Home* (1885), to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915), to Sarah Grand's depiction of a *new man* in her *The Beth Book*, and to Olive Schreiner's description of a Darwinian "sexual evolution" in *Woman and Labor* (1911). Fundamentally egalitarian, these writings are "more concerned with practical matters, with the division of Labour and the care of children, than with anarchy, revolt or matriarchal rule" (Showalter 1990, 45). Marilyn French's *Beyond Power* is in line with the theories outlined in these works.

¹⁹ Although the Victorian Age saw the emergence and development of a secret and subversive male homosexual culture, lesbianism, as we define it today, remained extremely marginal (Weeks 1981, 115). A feminine subculture, however, began to flourish as female professors of the new women's colleges and social reformers created separatist organisations and a network of supportive relationships. Some women friends "married" for life, replacing the patriarchal family with female love and family (Smith-Rosenberg 1985, 253-5). They, too, remained marginal figures, "always outside of the existing social structure and with no way of coming in" (Smith-Rosenberg 1985, 257). Similarly, in the twentieth century, lesbianism remains less visible than male homosexuality, somewhat marginalised at the frontiers between the gay rights and women's

liberation movements. But, as was the case with late nineteenth century male homosexual culture, a lesbian identity and culture has developed and flourishes today.

²⁰ Our criticism of French is in line with Rosemarie Bank's review of French's *Shakespeare's Division of Experience*. Bank accuses the author of perpetuating the very stereotypes of masculinity and femininity she questions, since she uses these concepts as interpretative filters in her reading of his drama. See *Theatre Review* 35 (1983), p. 131. Deconstructionist critics would probably come to similar conclusions.

²¹ We are of course referring to Edna Pontellier of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899).

²² This is in fact confirmed in French's fourth novel, *Our Father*. Essentially the tale of four estranged sisters who learn to unite against a common oppressor, they do so in the exclusively female space they create within the confines of their father's house. Stronger in the identities they forge there together, they return to their respective lives changed, with new personal agendas. The few male characters that appear in the text remain somehow impotent or at its margins (the comatose father on his deathbed, his lawyer, and Elizabeth's potential lover, a homosexual). French seems here to have altogether abandoned the project of elaborating a new masculinity.

²³ In *Beyond Power*, French addresses the question of gender separatism and suggests it is only a temporary answer. Detecting a "tendency toward totalitarianism in some separatists", French argues for feminism as a "human movement". She writes that "(r)epudiation of the male world may be a principled and felicitous position for the short term, but it is not enough for the long term" since "the future of all of us - girls, women, boys and men - depends upon our all comprehending and realising feminist principles" (French 1985, 483-4).

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