

Breaking the Chain
Women, Theory, and French Realist Fiction

GENDER AND CULTURE
Carolyn G. Heilbrun and Nancy K. Miller, Editors

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*Women, Theory, and
French Realist Fiction*

NAOMI SCHOR

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Preface

The writing of *Breaking the Chain* spans eight years (1975–1983) which witnessed a number of significant developments in the fields of literary theory and criticism, notably the passing of structuralism and the rise in its wake of two equally powerful movements: feminism and deconstruction. These essays are the product of this age of transition and liberation and in preparing them for publication in book form, I have resisted the impulse to idealization through the erasure of all marks of time. Nor could I erase them if I wanted to. My debt to structuralism and its poetics is immense and woven into the very fabric of my texts: it is most apparent in my overriding and abiding concern with what is known in structuralism as the “literariness” of the text, that is, in this instance, with what is *specifically literary* about the representation of woman in nineteenth-century French fiction, with the *poetics of representation* of the female protagonist in the realist novel. If, however, structuralism provided me with invaluable tools for studying the functioning of the feminocentric text, it also placed in my path (and not only mine, of course) sizable stumbling blocks which made it impossible, indeed unthinkable, for me to write *as a woman* until the critique of structuralism undertaken by those theoreticians known loosely as post-structuralists, Jacques Derrida in particular, was well under way.

It is difficult but I think important—if only to “bear witness”—to communicate to younger critics, especially the feminist, who have come of age in the relatively permissive intellectual climate of post-structuralism, the subtle oppression exercised by structuralism at its least self-critical and most doctrinaire on a reader who bridled at bracketing herself, who felt stifled in a conceptual universe organized into the neat paradigms of binary logic, and who ultimately found it impossible to accept the claims to universality of models of intelligibility elaborated without taking gender into account. It was not then until Derrida began to deconstruct the

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major paradigms/hierarchies of Western metaphysics at their linguistic foundations that feminist criticism became possible in the context of departments of *French* in American universities. The fact that, as is becoming increasingly obvious, the relationship of deconstruction and feminism is complex and fraught with controversy, should not obscure the immense significance of early Derrida for French neo-feminisms and, by the same token, their American spin-offs: when the writings of such influential figures as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray were imported to the United States, they brought along with them Derrida's critique of phallogocentrism, as well as deconstructive reading strategies.

Because deconstruction can intersect with feminism at different levels—now enhancing difference, now interrogating the very categories of gender—caution dictates that one define as clearly as possible how one views that articulation. I see it as double: there is first and foremost deconstruction's undoing of the man/woman hierarchy with its concomitant valorization of the previously devalORIZED term. So far as my own reading practice is concerned, however, the uses of deconstruction for feminism are not limited to the still timely inversion of the paradigm of sexual difference, they consist also in the homologous inversion of what I would call the paradigm of significance: essential/accessory. In other words, these essays are written in the space opened up by the valorization of woman *and* the detail deconstruction entails. This is not to say that I believe that woman as writer or reader possesses an inborn affinity for details, an essentialist argument I regard as dangerous for the elaboration of both a feminist poetics and aesthetics. What I do believe is that a pronounced attention to details has traditionally been connoted as feminine and hence devalORIZED. And, further, that it is in textual details either overlooked or misprized by male critics that something crucial about woman's stake in representation is to be found. These details refer to the female body, in particular the synecdochic axis so highly prized by the fetishist linking woman's sexual organs to her foot. *Refetishizing the fetish* may well be a necessary step in understanding the function of the female protagonist in realism, for finally my concern is not so much with the *representation of woman* as with the relationship between *woman and representation*.

Feminist criticism has amply demonstrated the remarkable consistency with which representational fiction has from its origins figured the particularly inexorable repression to which female desire is subject under

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bourgeois patriarchy. *Breaking the Chain* can be seen as part of a series of critical studies concerned with mapping the strategies deployed in representation to contain female libido, works that have often resorted to striking spatial metaphors to lend a sensory immediacy to the fate of the female protagonist: the attic (Gilbert and Gubar) and, at the other end of the vertical axis, the crypt (Kamuf). Implicit in my readings of some of the major as well as "minor" novels written in France in the nineteenth century is the conviction I share with Nina Auerbach—who in *Woman and the Demon* has shown that the familiar images of mutilated and infantilized womanhood so widespread in Victorian literature are the obverse side of a vision of woman as a demonic figure of terrifying power and irrepressible mobility—that the apparent victimage of nineteenth-century female protagonists testifies to a perception of femininity as anything but passive and pathetic. The French tradition cannot, of course, be simply assimilated to the English, not only because it is caught up in a different intertextual network and embedded in a different historical context, but also because our access to these national traditions, our constructions and reconstructions are filtered through a different set of lenses: where Auerbach sees a Demon, I see a figure in the image of my own "continental" preoccupations, woman as orgasmic mother (Kristeva) and possessor of the Logos (Cixous). Ultimately for me the question becomes not how but why. What function, if any, is served by the repression of female libido within the economy of the realist text? By focusing on the detail of the foot, chained and/or unchained, I am led to conclude that the binding of female energy is one of (if not) the enabling conditions of the forward movement of the "classical text." Realism is that paradoxical moment in Western literature when representation can neither accommodate the Otherness of Woman nor exist without it.

With the sole exception of the final essay, which serves as a general theoretical statement, I have left the essays in the order in which they were written, an order which quite obviously violates the chronology of literary history, but is consonant with another logic, that of the unconscious. The five essays I have grouped together under the rubric, "Reading (for) the Feminine" mime the process referred to in psychoanalytic terms as "working through." Working through is the long haul of the psychoanalytic treatment during which resistance is slowly overcome. At stake in these essays is the female critic's insertion into patriarchal theoretical discourse. This process has often—aptly I think—been described

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in playful terms, as a form of either playacting (Irigaray's "mimeticism") or playing around (Kolodny's "playful pluralism"). Because the discourse woman mimes or appropriates is almost always the father's, I prefer to call this process *patriody*, a term I have borrowed from Joyce to translate my French coinage, "pèrodié." Patriody names a linguistic act of repetition and difference which hovers between parody and parricide. What I have in mind here is neither Gilbert and Gubar's feminization of Bloomian "anxiety of influence," nor Gallop's allegorization of feminism's relationship to psychoanalysis as the mutual seduction of father and daughter. In the first instance the recoded oedipal scenario concerns the relationship of women writers to their *female* predecessors, in the second, it involves the relationship of the daughter to a *single* body of patriarchal theory: psychoanalysis. Patriody as it is practiced in "Reading (for) the Feminine" links woman as theorist to a number of symbolic fathers through language. My use of the word *patriody*, which may irritate some readers, is meant to body forth the inherently linguistic nature of woman's playful relationship to paternal theoretical discourse.

Nowhere in this volume is the transition between structuralism—with its emphasis on literary texts as allegories of structural linguistics—and poststructuralism—with its deconstruction of the basic dichotomies of structuralist linguistics—more tangible than in "For a Restricted Thematics: Writing, Speech, and Difference in *Madame Bovary*." As long as Emma is apprehended within the confines of the binary logic that opposes speech to writing, the longheld masculinist view of her as a "foolish woman" (Lubbock) prevails. As soon as one becomes aware of the split within writing itself, on the other hand, another aspect of Emma comes into view: she appears as the figure of a writer whose relationship to writing approximates Flaubert's and is opposed to that of Homais, that representative of representation. The difference *within* writing is then coextensive with the difference *between* the sexes, as it is bodied forth by the Emma/Homais couple.

In "Smiles of the Sphinx: Zola and the Riddle of Femininity," another structuralist paradigm is deconstructed in the light of sexual difference. My concern here is with one of the most celebrated models of intelligibility proposed by Roland Barthes, the Hermeneutic Code. Applying this code to two novels by Zola and one by Balzac, I show that the implicit claims to universality made for this code are shattered when it is brought to bear on feminocentric texts grounded in the representation of woman

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as enigma. Unlike the oedipal text Barthes takes as his model, the pre-oedipal text is marked by the nonsynchronicity of closure and the exhaustion of the riddle. The smiles of the Sphinx allegorizes by its insistent plural the feminocentric text's, but also the female reader's resistance to closure and resolution.

The essay on Maupassant, which while centered on *Une Vie* takes into account his entire fictional oeuvre, examines the validity for feminocentric texts of another supposedly universal law: the primordial role of the paternal signifier in the formation of the speaking subject according to Jacques Lacan. Read with the heightened attention to the signifier and its insistence Lacanism requires, Maupassant's texts appear to be informed by the anagrammatization of the name not of his father but of his mother.

René Girard's sacrificial scenario—yet another genderless cultural model with sweeping claims to universality—is the focus of the essay on Barbey d'Aurevilly's *L'Ensorcelée*. Reading Girard against himself, I look at the ways the sacrificial syntax misfires in a novel whose female protagonist is “scandalized.”

In the last essay in this section, “*Eugénie Grandet*: Mirrors and Melancholia,” I return to Lacan, more specifically to some of the uses to which his notions of the Imaginary and the Symbolic have been put by male critics working on phallogocentric texts. These applications are doubly problematic: they implicitly devalorize the Imaginary as the realm of the maternal, while glossing over what Luce Irigaray has shown to be the phallogentrism built in to the very notion of the mirror stage. The feminist revalorization of the Imaginary is inseparable from its critique.

What emerges at the end of “Reading (for) the Feminine” is a developmental model at odds with the one derived from Lacan, which calls for the mediation of the mother-child dyad by the paternal instance: in order for the feminist critic to break her illusory mirror relationship with her symbolic father or fathers, the intervention of a maternal instance is necessary. Thus, in “*Salammô Bound*,” two contrasting and even conflicting accounts of Freud's essay on fetishism, Derrida's and Kristeva's, are brought into play to read a novel in which the chain that impedes woman's progress in nineteenth-century French fiction is explicitly thematized and fleetingly broken. By focusing on the detail of the chain and its vicissitudes in masculinist readings of Flaubert's *Salammô*, I want to propose a poetics of reading which not only takes over details referring

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to woman's body, but also breaks the linearity of the signifying chain, in order to privilege what Roman Jakobson calls "concurrence" over "concatenation."

Throughout "Breaking the Chain" my concern is with the function of woman in some of the dominant modes of representation in the latter half of nineteenth-century France: realism, naturalism, and the decadent style I prefer to call ornamentalism. "Naturalizing Woman: *Germinie Lacerteux*" examines the process whereby woman is inducted into naturalism in the light of a minor passage in Barthes' *S/Z*, while in "Unwriting *Lam-iel*," I consider the implications for the relationship of woman and realism of Stendhal's unwriting of one of the most remarkable feminocentric texts of the nineteenth century.

The heterogeneity of these texts is flagrant: some were originally written in French, others in English; some are quite long, others very brief; some make use of the metalanguages of structuralism, others eschew metalanguage altogether. I hope that these differences in tone and texture will be regarded as adding to rather than detracting from the volume's interest.

I am pleased to thank those who helped me bring this manuscript into being: first and foremost my friend and colleague Karen Newman, who initiated me into the wonders of the computer, and Tracy Clark, Ann Murphy, and Ted Hopton who helped input large sections of the manuscript with cheerful expertise. I owe a special debt of gratitude to Elisabeth Weed who kindly accepted to read my manuscript and most of whose helpful suggestions have been incorporated in the final text.

Though largely unthematized, the mother-daughter relationship features prominently in several of these texts; it seems only fitting then for me to express my deepest gratitude for her unwavering support to my mother, Resia Schor, maker and breaker of chains.

I
READING (FOR) THE
FEMININE

I

For a Restricted Thematics: Writing, Speech, and Difference in *Madame Bovary*

It is time to say out loud what has been whispered for some time: thematic criticism, which was given a first-class funeral a few years ago, is not dead. Like a repressed desire that insists on returning to consciousness, like a guilty pleasure that resists all threat of castration, thematic criticism is coming out from the shadows. This new thematic criticism is not, however, a nostalgic textual practice, a “retro” criticism, a regression to the styles (of reading) of the 1950s. Just as hyperrealism in painting is a return to the figurative passed through a minimalist grid, neothe-matism is a thematism passed through the filter of structuralist criticism. One could even argue that a certain structuralism, namely structural semantics, was in fact never anything but a recuperation of thematism, a structuralist neothe-matism.

But it is not our purpose to study the persistence of thematics; the point is not, within the narrow framework of our study, to anticipate a history of contemporary criticism which is yet to be written.¹ Rather it is a question of opening an inquiry into the continuity that links thematics, structural semantics, and even “poststructuralism.” This very undertaking, this implicit valorization of continuity, is precisely what to our eyes constitutes thematics’ characteristic, distinctive feature: I shall term thematic all textual practices that suffer from what might be called, in the manner of Bachelard, an Ariadne complex, all readings that cling to the Ariadne’s thread (“fil conducteur”), whether it be the “synonymic chains” of Barthes, the “chain of supplements” of Derrida, or the “series” of Deleuze.² Be it

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vertical, horizontal, or transversal, the Ariadne's thread haunts the texts of Barthes, Derrida, and Deleuze, not in the typically structuralist form—that is, metalinguistic—of the Greimasian isotope, but in a poetic form: the thread (“fil”) has become an extended metaphor. As Deleuze’s “spider web,” Barthes’ “braid,” and Derrida’s texture indicate,³ the relationship between the “textural” and the textile is on its way to becoming one of the obsessive metaphors of current criticism.⁴ How are we to explain this obsession common to thinkers otherwise so different? One seductive hypothesis is that they all draw from the same source, namely Proust’s metaphoric repertory. The following quotations from Richard (on Proust), Derrida (on Plato), and Barthes (on the pleasure of the text) substantiate this notion:

Thematization thus clearly resembles weaving. The interweaving of all thematic series assumes in the Proustian daydream the form of a net in which the matter of the work is caught, or that of a network, both innervational and cybernetic, that enables us to circulate in it from link to link, knot to knot, “star” to “star” with the utmost freedom; because “between the least significant point in our past and all the others there exists a rich network of memories offering a plethora of communications.”⁵

The dissimulation of the woven texture can in any case take centuries to undo its web: a web that envelops a web, undoing the web for centuries; reconstituting it too as an organism, indefinitely regenerating its own tissue behind the cutting trace, the decision of each reading. There is always a surprise in store for the anatomy or physiology of a critique that might think it had mastered the game, surveyed all the threads at once, a critique that deludes itself too, in wanting to look at the text without touching it, without laying a hand on the “object,” without risking—which is the sole chance of entering into the game by getting a few fingers caught—the addition of some new thread. Adding, here, is nothing other than giving to read. One must manage to think this out: that it is not a question of embroidering upon a text, unless one considers that to know how to embroider is still to take heed to follow the given thread. That is, if you follow me, the hidden thread.⁶

While taking the opposite view from Derrida insofar as hidden meaning is concerned, Barthes adopts his textile metaphor; Derrida’s *istós* becomes Barthes’ *hyphos*:

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Text means *Tissue*; but whereas hitherto we have always taken this tissue as a product, a ready-made veil, behind which lies, more or less hidden, meaning (truth) we are now emphasizing, in the tissue, the generative idea that the text is made, is worked out in a perpetual interweaving; lost in this tissue—this texture—the subject unmakes himself, like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of its web. Were we fond of neologisms, we might define the theory of the text as an *hyphology* (*hyphos* is the tissue and the spider's web).⁷

The metaphors that these authors weave again and again are extremely significant, since according to Freud the only contribution of women "to the discoveries and inventions in the history of civilization" is a "technique," "that of plaiting and weaving."⁸ The thread unraveled by Ariadne, cut by the Fates, woven by Penelope, is a peculiarly feminine attribute, a metonym for femininity. There is thus cause to speculate about the relations (necessarily hypothetical at the current stage of our knowledge) between a thematic reading and a feminine reading, by which I certainly do not mean that reading practiced uniquely by women. If my hypothesis concerning the femininity of thematism were justified, this would explain its culpabilization on the one hand and, paradoxically, its masculine recuperation on the other. This hypothesis presupposes a question: does reading have a sex? And this question in turn brings up another: does writing have a sex? It is, as we will attempt to demonstrate, precisely this question of the sex of writing that underlies *Madame Bovary*. We can no longer read *Madame Bovary* outside of the "sexual problematic" that Sartre analyzed in its author,⁹ but we must no longer separate the sexual problematic from the scriptural problematic, as did Baudelaire, who was the first to qualify Emma Bovary as a "strange androgynous creature."¹⁰

Let us note at the close, in order to weave the many threads of our introduction, that there exists in *Madame Bovary* the description of an object which can be readily inscribed in the line of thought that we have just evoked. I am referring to the green silk cigar case that Charles picks up when leaving la Vaubyessard and that Emma so preciously keeps. Read, or reread, in light of the preceding remarks, this passage seems to assume a new meaning: the green silk cigar case becomes the emblem of the imbrication of weaving, the text, and femininity. *Madame Bovary* thus con-

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tains not only an objective correlative of its production, but a protocol for its interpretation as well:

It had been embroidered on some rosewood frame, a pretty piece of furniture, hidden from all eyes, that had occupied many hours, and over which had fallen the soft curls of the pensive worker. A breath of love had passed over the stitches on the canvas; each prick of the needle had fixed there a hope or a memory, and all those interwoven threads of silk were but the continued extension of the same silent passion.¹¹

On avait brodé cela sur quelque métier de palissandre, meuble mignon que l'on cachait à tous les yeux, qui avait occupé bien des heures et où s'étaient penchées les boucles molles de la travailleuse pensive. Un souffle d'amour avait passé parmi les mailles du canevas; chaque coup d'aiguille avait fixé là une espérance ou un souvenir, et tous ces fils de soie entrelacés n'étaient que la continuité de la même passion silencieuse.¹²

To conclude these prolegomena, I would like to put to the test a new thematics that I propose to call a "restricted thematics" because, if the definition of the field of possible themes must henceforth answer to the call for literary specificity, the reciprocal play of speech and writing will replace the time/space paradigm privileged since Proust, with speech occupying the field of time, and writing inscribed in that of space. Unlike the "general" thematic reading which always tends toward "an infinite reading,"¹³ which exists, that is, in an anamorphic relationship with the text, restricted thematics would be the equivalent of an anastomosis, sectioning the text in order to bring together binary opposites (on the semantic plane), doubles (on the actantial plane), and repeated sequences (on the evenemential plane).

En somme, cette femme est vraiment grande, elle est surtout pitoyable, et malgré la dureté systématique de l'auteur, qui a fait tous ses efforts pour être absent de son œuvre et pour jouer la fonction d'un montreur de marionnettes, toutes les femmes *intellectuelles* lui sauront gré d'avoir élevé la femelle à une si haute puissance, si loin de l'animal pur et si près de l'homme idéal.

Baudelaire

As a starting-point for our reflection, let us recall René Girard's statement concerning Flaubert's "grotesque antitheses": "As Flaubert's nov-

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elistic genius ripens his oppositions become more futile; the identity of the contraries is drawn more clearly.”¹⁴ If—as we are firmly convinced—this breakdown of opposites is manifest at all levels of the Flaubertian text and along its entire diachronic course, how does it apply to the writing/speech opposition, explicitly thematized by Flaubert in *L’Education sentimentale* during a conversation between Frédéric and Madame Arnoux: “She admired orators; he preferred a writer’s fame.”¹⁵ Does this orators/writers opposition also participate in the obsessional tyranny of the identity of the contraries, in this system of growing in-differentiation?

The speech axis permits a first division of the characters in *Madame Bovary* into two large categories: those who are adept at speaking, such as Rodolphe and Homais, and those who are not, such as Charles and Emma. But the insufficiency of this first distribution is instantly apparent since certain characters adept at speaking are not good listeners. The speech axis must be subordinated to the communication axis, a bipolar axis with at one end an encoder/emitter, at the other a decoder/receiver. Depending on whether or not a character exhibits the aptitudes for encoding and decoding, we can foresee four combinations:

(1) *encoding* + (2) *encoding* – (3) *encoding* + (4) *encoding* –
decoding + decoding – decoding – decoding +

If we examine the characters named above in light of these *roles*,¹⁶ certain aspects of the speech problematic in *Madame Bovary* emerge. From his first appearance, Charles reveals himself to be an impotent speaker:

The new boy then took a supreme resolution, opened an inordinately large mouth, and shouted at the top of his voice as if calling some one, the word “Charbovari.”

Le *nouveau*, prenant alors une résolution extrême, ouvrit une bouche démesurée et lança à pleins poumons, comme pour appeler quelqu’un, ce mot: *Charbovari*. (p. 3/38)

Incapable of articulating the syllables of his name, Charles can but repeat the words of others:

Charles’ conversation was commonplace as a street pavement, and every one’s ideas trooped through it in their everyday garb, without exciting emotion, laughter, or thought.

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La conversation de Charles était plate comme un trottoir de rue, et les idées de tout le monde y défilaient, dans leur costume ordinaire, sans exciter d'émotion, de rire ou de rêverie. (p. 29/76)

What distinguishes Charles' conversation from that of the glib speaker is not so much its painful banality, but its neutrality. His is an inefficient speech, lacking resonance, a speech in which nothing is transmitted from the enunciator to his interlocutor. Nevertheless, it must be noted that this "zero" on the encoding plane will have a great word, his last:

He even made a phrase, the only one he'd ever made:
"Fate willed it this way."

Il ajouta même un grand mot, le seul qu'il ait jamais dit:
—C'est la faute de la fatalité. (pp. 254–255/366)

The effect of this grandiloquent sentence is, however, doubly subverted by its receptor, Rodolphe:

Rodolphe, who had been the agent of this fate, thought him very meek for a man in his situation, comic even and slightly despicable.

Rodolphe, qui avait conduit cette fatalité, le trouva bien débonnaire pour un homme dans sa situation, comique même, et un peu vil. (*Ibid.*)

First irony: the receptor is, in fact, the encoder. It is Rodolphe who was the first to put the word "fate" into circulation in the novel when he composed his letter breaking with Emma:

Why were you so beautiful? Is it my fault? God, no! only fate is to blame!

"That's a word that always helps," he said to himself.

Pourquoi étiez-vous si belle? Est-ce ma faute? O mon Dieu! non, non, n'en accusez que la fatalité!

—Voilà un mot qui fait toujours de l'effet, se dit-il. (p. 146/230)

And Charles reads this letter (pp. 249–50/360). As we will see below, once launched, this word will continually reappear. In using it in talking to Rodolphe, Charles only completes the series, closes the circuit: Ro-