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From *Feminist Literary Theory and Criticism: A Reader* (NY: Norton, 2007)

JULIET MITCHELL

b. 1940

Juliet Mitchell was born in New Zealand and in 1944 emigrated to England, where she was educated at Oxford University. She has taught at a number of institutions, including the University of Leeds and the University of Reading, but also worked as a freelance writer and a psychotherapist. Currently a member of the faculty of Social and Political Sciences at Cambridge University, Mitchell has recently published *Siblings: Sex and Violence* (2003) and *Mad Men and Medusas: Reclaiming Hysteria* (2000), as well as such essays as "The Vortex beneath the Story" in *Whose Freud?* (2000) and "Did Oedipus Have a Sister?" (2001). This writing built on such earlier landmark contributions as *Women's Estate* (1971) and *Women, the Longest Revolution* (1984). However, she remains best known for *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974), which questioned feminist attacks on Freud's insistence that anatomy is destiny, and did so by interpreting his theories not as prescriptive but as descriptive. Her view that the Oedipus complex inscribes women into a male-dominated social structure helped feminists deploy Freudian psychoanalytic models to understand the

social construction of femininity. Our selection comes from the introduction to this classic book.

From Psychoanalysis and Feminism

From Introduction

The greater part of the feminist movement has identified Freud as the enemy. It is held that psychoanalysis claims women are inferior and that they can achieve true femininity only as wives and mothers. Psychoanalysis is seen as a justification for the status-quo, bourgeois and patriarchal, and Freud in his own person exemplifies these qualities. I would agree that popularized Freudianism must answer to this description; but the argument of this book is that a rejection of psychoanalysis and of Freud's works is fatal for feminism. However it may have been used, psychoanalysis is not a recommendation for a patriarchal society, but an analysis of one. If we are interested in understanding and challenging the oppression of women, we cannot afford to neglect it.

Where the majority tendency within feminism has denounced Freud's theories of femininity, so, if less deliberately, it has embraced the alternative radical psychologies developed by Wilhelm Reich's work on sexuality and R. D. Laing's on the family. Femininity, sexuality and the family clearly form an important triptych for seeing the position of women. But it seems to me that we have turned things on their head by accepting Reich's and Laing's analyses and repudiating Freud's. This is not to say that I think that there is little of value in Reich's and Laing's work—on the contrary, Reich's political and Laing's sociological observations provide us with a good deal of important material, but I do not believe that we can use these observations until we have freed them from the dubious theoretical and philosophical frameworks in which they are set. Moreover it is these theories and philosophies that have exercised a powerful influence on the women's liberation movement.

This book has a double and criss-cross purpose. Feminist critics of Freud have not only conflated his theories with those of other, often diverging, analysts and with popularizations, but, with more serious consequences still, have extrapolated his ideas about femininity from their context within the larger theories of psychoanalysis. Yet it is only this context that gives meaning to such notorious concepts as say, 'penis-envy'—without their context such notions certainly become either laughable or ideologically dangerous. In the briefest possible terms, we could say that psychoanalysis is about the material reality of ideas both within, and of, man's history; thus in 'penis-envy' we are talking not about an anatomical organ, but about the ideas of it that people hold and live by within the general culture, the order of human society. It is this last factor that also prescribes the reference point of psychoanalysis. The way we live as 'ideas' the necessary laws of human society is not so much conscious as *unconscious*—the particular task of psychoanalysis is to decipher how we acquire our heritage of the ideas and laws of human society within the unconscious mind, or, to put it

another way, the unconscious mind is the way in which we acquire these laws. I have tried to outline the general precepts of psychoanalysis in the first instance and then place the particular discussion of femininity within this framework. This doubtless will make for a feeling of frustration, for although I have selected only those general concepts which I think to be essential, it has to be some time before we get into the 'meat' of the matter—the description of femininity.

* * *

Of course, no more than is any man an island unto himself, is an intellectual production created completely *ex nihilo*. Freud's work both took place within, and took off from, a dialogue with his times. But such a dialogue is never simple. Freud's scientific debts are obvious, his interest in archaeology and literature explicit, yet though he claimed to be congenitally incapable of philosophic thought, we can see that the terms of his defence of the status of science for psychoanalysis and the words he chose for many of the concepts he developed within it are part of an ongoing contemporary argument about the philosophy of science during that period. His linguistic terminology for what has since become known as 'the language of the unconscious' likewise must have borne some relationship to the intense preoccupation with language and communication of that place and epoch. These are just random examples. Since this book went to press an interesting study of Wittgenstein's Vienna (which was also Freud's) has been published.¹ In this it is claimed that if we consider his *Tractatus* in its historical context of Vienna instead of that of Cambridge Philosophy² (the usual practice) we come up with a very different reading. A similar intellectual history of Freud's work, one that did not for example assume that it grew only out of a medical tradition, would be fascinating. But the stress that I am putting here goes the other way—I am interested not in what Freud did, but in what we can get from him, a political rather than an academic exploration.

Certainly, then, psychoanalysis, as any other system of thought, was formed and developed within a particular time and place; that does not invalidate its claim to universal laws, it only means that these laws have to be extracted from their specific problematic—the particular material conditions of their formation. In this connection we need to know of the historical circumstances of their development mainly in order *not* to limit them thereto. Some important factors have clearly changed—sexual mores are different, women *have* gained a degree of emancipation, hysteria is no longer the most prevalent manifestation of neurosis amongst middle-class women—does this or does this not affect the theories? Can the Oedipus complex be kept only as a metaphor for the psychic structure of the bourgeois nuclear family under Viennese capitalism, or is it a law that describes the way in which all culture is acquired by each individual? It is only the general aspects of these questions which I have taken up here. This, of course, gives an unbalanced perspective to the interpretation of the psychological

acquisition of patriarchal laws. Though they seem to be universal, different societies, either contemporary or historical, different classes at the same or different times and situations, will not acquire these laws in an identical manner. The argument here has had to sacrifice diversity to what is held in common. Similarly, this general presentation of the theses of psychoanalysis means that there has been no room or time to pursue the specificities of psychological sexual characteristics of our own society. The material is still inadequate, some of the analytical questions are still unformed, but it seems clear that the psychological behaviour patterns of women, the connection of, say, hysteria and femininity, the different role of romantic love in the lives of the two sexes, women's undue share of 'intuition' and men's of 'rationality' can all find at least a partial explanation within a development of the work of psychoanalysis.

Very recently, there has been growing interest by some feminist groups in Freud's work, but so far there is only one part of the movement that has been trying consistently for some time to turn psychoanalytic theory into political practice—to raise both the general questions of patriarchal ideology and the detailed issues of feminine psychology. The series of groups *Psychanalyse et Politique*, based in Paris, is a Marxist part of the *Mouvement de la Libération des Femmes*,³ and it explicitly opposes what it sees as bourgeois and idealist tendencies within, largely, American radical feminism. It denounces radical feminism's rejection of psychoanalysis, but this does not imply, any more than does this book, an acceptance of the present patriarchal practice of psychoanalysis, nor of the many patriarchal judgements found within Freud's own work. It is the theory, if it is correct, which is to some extent immune from the ideological uses to which it has been put and which, inevitably, surround it, that is being utilized. Influenced, but critically, by the particular interpretation of Freud offered by Jacques Lacan, *Psychanalyse et Politique* would use psychoanalysis for an understanding of the operations of the unconscious. Their concern is to analyse how men and women live as *men and women* within the material conditions of their existence—both general and specific. They argue that psychoanalysis gives us the concepts with which we can comprehend how ideology functions; closely connected with this, it further offers an analysis of the place and meaning of sexuality and of gender differences within society. So where Marxist theory explains the historical and economic situation, psychoanalysis, in conjunction with the notions of ideology already gained by dialectical materialism, is the way into understanding ideology and sexuality. As an English version of the manifesto of *Psychanalyse et Politique* puts it:

In the political, ideological and social struggle the only theoretical discourse that exists these days about class struggle, and proletarian and cultural revolutions, is to be found in the texts on historical and dialectical materialism (Marx, Lenin, Mao).

... In the ideological and sexual fight, the only discourse that exists today on sexuality and the unconscious—that is the discourse of psychoanalysis (Freud, Lacan) and semiology.

1. [Allan] Janik and [Stephen] Toulmin, *Wittgenstein's Vienna*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1973 [Mitchell's note].

2. The Austrian philosopher studied in Cambridge in 1912–13 and returned to the university between 1930 and 1947.

3. Movement for the Liberation of Women (French). '*Psychanalyse et Politique*': Psychoanalysis and Politics.

Reich, among others, made the same suggestion in somewhat different terminology; this neither validates nor invalidates it as a proposition; it is a question of how one uses the concepts to carry out the analysis. And there are two further problems: how adequately does psychoanalysis analyse ideology and sexuality, and if it does so, what is the political practice that follows from this theory? It may be true to assert that the women's struggle is determinately against patriarchal ideology where the class struggle is against bourgeois capitalist economic power, but although both struggles have to take place on the political level, the two situations do not have parity. Marx's analysis of the differing modes of production revealed a history of culminating class struggle, the political practice was part of the theory. It has yet to be seen, by all of us in the women's liberation movement, whether the analysis of ideology is tied as closely to a logic of sexual struggle.

London

July 1973

1974

GAYLE RUBIN

b. 1949

The activism of the feminist anthropologist Gayle Rubin is evident in the role she played in founding Samois, the first S/M organization in the world, and in her essays on the policing of sexuality, on the poetry of the lesbian expatriate Renée Vivien, and on the gay male leather community of San Francisco. Frequently reprinted, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality" (1984), "Of Catamites and Kings: Reflections on Butch, Gender, and Boundaries" (1992), and "Misguided, Dangerous, and Wrong: An Analysis of Anti-Pornography Politics" (1993) elaborate upon the political implications of the "sex/gender system" Rubin first explored in the influential essay "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," which is excerpted here. By juxtaposing Claude Lévi-Strauss's theories of kinship with the Freudian concept of the Oedipus complex, Rubin set the stage for a denaturalizing or de-familiarizing of heterosexuality.

From *The Traffic in Women:* Notes on the "Political Economy" of Sex¹

The literature on women—both feminist and anti-feminist—is a long rumination on the question of the nature and genesis of women's oppression and

social subordination. The question is not a trivial one, since the answers given it determine our visions of the future, and our evaluation of whether or not it is realistic to hope for a sexually egalitarian society. More importantly, the analysis of the causes of women's oppression forms the basis for any assessment of just what would have to be changed in order to achieve a society without gender hierarchy. Thus, if innate male aggression and dominance are at the root of female oppression, then the feminist program would logically require either the extermination of the offending sex, or else a eugenics project to modify its character. If sexism is a by-product of capitalism's relentless appetite for profit, then sexism would wither away in the advent of a successful socialist revolution. If the world historical defeat of women occurred at the hands of an armed patriarchal revolt, then it is time for Amazon guerrillas to start training in the Adirondacks.

It lies outside the scope of this paper to conduct a sustained critique of some of the currently popular explanations of the genesis of sexual inequality—theories such as the popular evolution exemplified by *The Imperial Animal*, the alleged overthrow of prehistoric matriarchies, or the attempt to extract all of the phenomena of social subordination from the first volume of *Capital*. Instead, I want to sketch some elements of an alternate explanation of the problem.

Marx once asked: "What is a Negro slave? A man of the black race. The one explanation is as good as the other. A Negro is a Negro. He only becomes a slave in certain relations. A cotton spinning jenny is a machine for spinning cotton. It becomes *capital* only in certain relations. Torn from these relationships it is no more capital than gold in itself is money or sugar is the price of sugar" (Marx, 1971b:28). One might paraphrase: What is a domesticated woman? A female of the species. The one explanation is as good as the other. A woman is a woman. She only becomes a domestic, a wife, a chattel, a play-boy bunny, a prostitute, or a human dicta-phone in certain relations. Torn from these relationships, she is no more the helpmate of man than gold in itself is money . . . etc. What then are these relationships by which a female becomes an oppressed woman? The place to begin to unravel the system of relationships by which women become the prey of men is in the overlapping works of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Sigmund Freud. The domestication of women, under other names, is discussed at length in both of their *oeuvres*. In reading through these works, one begins to have a sense of a systematic social apparatus which takes up females as raw materials and fashions domesticated women as products. Neither Freud nor Lévi-Strauss sees his work in this light, and certainly neither turns a critical glance upon the processes he describes. Their analyses and descriptions must be read, therefore, in something like the way in which Marx read the classical political economists who preceded him (on this, see Althusser and Balibar, 1970:11–69). Freud and Lévi-Strauss are in some sense analogous to Ricardo and Smith². They see neither the implications of what they are saying, nor the implicit critique which their work can generate when subjected to a feminist eye. Nevertheless, they provide conceptual tools with which one can build descriptions of the part of social life which is the locus of the oppression of women, of sexual minorities, and of certain aspects of human personality within individu-

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2. I.e., the classical economists David Ricardo and Adam Smith [editor's note].