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Melanie Ann Hanson

Decapitation and Disgorgement

The Female Body's Text in Early Modern English Drama and Poetry

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STUDIES IN ENGLISH LITERATURES

Edited by Koray Melikoğlu

Melanie Ann Hanson

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For my parents,
Milford and Florine Hanson

Your abiding love, support, and encouragement
made this book, and many things in my life, possible

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Acknowledgments

INTRODUCTION

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This study continues the work of post-modernist French feminists who interrogate the empowering and disempowering constructs of language, its subtext and meanings, the *entredeux*, or in-between, area between words in binary opposition, and texts that can only be revealed by the female body. The four chapters of this study attempt to explore the portrayal of female characters in Early Modern English drama and poetry; they analyze the work of women writers with the aim of reworking the literary canon, reveal the silencing effects of patriarchal ideology, contribute to a discussion of women's culture and *herstory*, and value women's experiences, thereby emulating aspects of the American feminist project. This work also dialogues with psychoanalytic feminist discourse that concentrates on examining phallogocentric societies and thinking, discovers competing desires of characters, and explores the similarities and differences between female and male characters and female and male authors, in this case, from Early Modern England.

Certain works were paramount to the shaping of this study. Gerda Lerner's article "Veiling the Woman" and Howard Eilberg-Schwartz and Wendy Doniger's *Off With her Head* helped me to pinpoint my definition of figurative decapitation, a consuming of the female head into the female body as just another sexual part. Sandra Bartky's interpretation of Michel Foucault's panopticism, the concept that women have an internal eye of surveillance because they are treated as sexual objects, gave birth to sections of my book on the debilitating aspects of beauty, especially concerning Mariam's relationship to Herod and Whitney's description of London as a fickle suitor who trivializes the narrator in "The Manner of Her Will." Sections of this book also build upon the critical works of Janet Adelman and the relation of men and women to phallogocentric societies and the import

of the mother, and of Trinh Minh-ha and the assertion that women write their whole body and that women's writing resists the body's separation. Pamela Banting's article spoke to me, especially her clear re-interpretation and updating of Hélène Cixous's theories. My book reflects my interest in Susan Gubar's discussion of the power of the pen(is) over woman as blank page and Evelyn Gajowski's application of the blank page to Lavinia. Certain parts of this study, the section of the chapters on "*jouissance* through bisexual discourse" in particular, are influenced by David Willburn's theories concerning somethingness in nothingness. Julie Taymor's film version of *Titus Andronicus* and Lisa Starks's essay on the film that applies Julia Kristeva's idea of the *abject* to Taymor's film adaptation assisted me in my exploration of monstrous and nurturing mothers in chapters 1 and 2.

In particular, the observations of French feminist Hélène Cixous, especially her work from the twentieth century, are instructive when interrogating Early Modern English texts. Cixous applied her theories to a variety of fiction and non-fiction pieces from disparate time periods and societies including the works of Aeschylus, William Shakespeare, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Franz Kafka, Edgar Allan Poe, Søren Kierkegaard, and Sun Tse. In this book, Cixous's ideas are applied to Early Modern texts of Elizabeth Cary, William Shakespeare, John Milton, and Isabella Whitney. Cixous's ideas and semantics are used here as tools for the discernment of women's voices, fictive or real, that have been stifled by those in power and yet despite this obstruction, or maybe because of it, are still recognizable if writers and readers are willing to investigate them. The female body struggling to express text is what first intrigued me about the study of English Renaissance literature.

The idea of the female body, truncated by the oppressive elements in society but continuing to outpour text, is what led me to the writing of Hélène Cixous. In an odd way, wanting to understand Early Modern English drama and poetry, authored by women in particular,

lead me to Cixous, and then reading Cixous led me back to the great richness of female expression in Renaissance England. Cary and Whitney, female writers of this period in England, were, like Cixous, interested in how to express a text despite the restrictions put on women's speech and writing. Notwithstanding the fact that Early Modern Englishwomen's lives were dictated, for the most part, by a society governed by men, there were women born into different classes who tried to convey their situation to others.

They attempted to tell their stories through their writing. They often used the types of writing that were considered appropriate for women to create (private correspondence, poetic translation, the closet drama) as the vehicles for their texts. These female authors undermined the purpose of the kinds of linguistic practices and language constructs that were popular with male writers in their time period; the Petrarchan blazon[1] and Ovidian[2] discourse, apparent in pamphlets and conduct manuals, were used to train men to control and mold female behavior. Women writers reversed the expectations in the literary community concerning these constructs to assist in voicing their desires. Women like Anne Askew, Mary Sidney, Mary Wroth, Amelia Lanyer, and Aphra Behn wanted their voices to go on record concerning the condition of women's lives in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England.

In addition to these women, male writers like Shakespeare exposed the brutality of female oppression through their work. Shakespeare was

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[1] A poetic convention designed to idealize women. The blazon was popularly used in sonnets written in Italy and England during the Renaissance but actually dates back to ancient Sumerian poetry. The convention uses a string of metaphors to compare female body parts to objects in nature, like fruit or the stars, to pay tribute to female beauty. The female body is thus anatomized in poetic form.

[2] A term used to describe writing that denigrates women. Contemporary U.S. feminist academics use the term 'Ovidian discourse' when referring in their research to texts that describe women in an insulting or ridiculing manner. The term 'Ovidian' is due to the patronizing tone towards women in works like Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*.

not alone in his exploration of the female body's text; men like Edmund Spenser, Philip Sidney, John Ford, and John Webster facilitated the release of women's voices through the female characters and narrators depicted in their poetry and drama. Spenser's Britomart in *The Fairie Queene*, Sidney's Philoclea in *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia,* Ford's Penthea in *The Broken Heart*, and Webster's title character in *The Duchess of Malfi* add their perspectives to the dialogue concerning the manipulation of female voice and sexuality.

   Privileging the female body's text and discussing the variety of means used to speak it is a central concern of this study. The body can express text in a variety of ways including writing, speaking, gesturing, and so on. Michel de Montaigne, a contemporary of Shakespeare's, was cognizant of the body's propensity to express text:

> What doe we with our hands? Doe we not sue and entreate, promise and performe, call men unto us, and discharge them, bid them farewell, and be gone, threaten, pray, beseech, deny, refuse, demaund, admire, number, confesse, repent, [. . .] declare silence and astonishment? And what not? With so great variation, and amplifying, as if they would contend with the tongue. And with our head, doe we not envite and call to-us, discharge and send away, avowe, disavowe, be-lie, welcome, honour, worship, disdaine, demaund [. . .]? What do-we with our eye-lids? And with our shoulders? To conclude, there is no motion, nor jesture, that doth not speake, and speakes in language [. . .] common and publicke to all: whereby it followeth (seeing the varieties, and severall use it hath from others) that this must rather be deemed the proper and peculier speech of humane nature. (17)

Montaigne's lengthy, descriptive litany, although intending to privilege the body's text, reveals that words are often privileged over the text of the body. Also, the male body's text in the past has been

privileged over the female body's text. It is the function of this text, however, to discuss and spotlight the latter.

The texts of Early Modern English dramatists and poets use subversive tactics, including merging with accepted authorial practices, to express feelings and to outpour commentary about what the female body's experience was like during this era. A merging with acceptable male texts, a bisexual discourse, is not suppression and is not submission. Instead, bisexual discourse is a means to display generosity, which is the point of writing. Writing is a giving, not a taking. Women writers in Early Modern England did not submit; they manipulated their positions in society, the roles of the obedient, kind, faithful, chaste, silent female, as a method to create voice.

The project of this book is to illustrate how, using Cixous's psychoanalytic theories, the application of notions like decapitation, disgorgement, *jouissance*, and *entredeux* can bring the lives of Early Modern English women and their writings into a fresh perspective for a contemporary audience. What is of import here is the connection between silencing and expression that brings about a subversion of discourse through generosity rather than hostility. My project emphasizes bisexual discourse as a means to develop a unique female expression rather than the use of rancor or subterfuge to create a rebellious stance. The expression of text through the development of voice in the characters of Mariam, Lavinia, Eve, and Whitney's narrator is ultimately subversive and not marginalized. Ironically, this is engineered by blending their text with what is stereotypically called male discourse.

I wish to ponder the question that Elaine Showalter and Annette Kolodny have raised: if women become writers and speakers and use language to express their texts, are these texts that are dominated by male control of language then diminished, creating a divided consciousness? I feel that using language as a translating medium enhances the female body's text. I agree with Pamela Banting's assessment of Cixous's theory that women use patriarchal discourse as

a source language to translate the female body's text, a source language that women dislocate, explode, contain, and translate (235). My research dialogues with other feminist writers who are interested in ways the female body *speaks* its text.

In this book, I examine how Lavinia's repeated presence on stage reveals her character as absent signifier in *Titus Andronicus*, and I apply this idea to how Herod's wives are characterized as absent signifiers in *The Tragedy of Mariam*, how Milton reveals Eve to be an absent signifier in *Paradise Lost*, and how women of the gentry like Whitney were treated as absent signifiers by members of the aristocracy. These four female characters use the body to express their text despite all obstacles.

It would be difficult, if not impossible, to read this book without an orientation to the theoretical framework and terminology that inspired it. Cixous defines decapitation as a figurative beheading by which a patriarchal society manipulates and controls a woman's voice and her sexuality ("Castration" 163). Since men feel figuratively castrated by what they define as female chaos, according to Sigmund Freud, they feel they must restore and maintain order via the figurative decapitation of women. I view decapitation as an envisioning of the woman as blank page, an entity to be composed by men, applying here the work of Susan Gubar (295). Men in a patriarchy re-inscribe the female body with their own meanings, thus decapitating the woman and rewriting her text. I concur with Howard Eilberg-Schwartz and Wendy Doniger, who argue that eroticizing the female head identifies it as another part of the sexualized female body, the female as all flesh (1). Therefore, the female face, eyes, voice, mouth, hair are all part of the erotic experience. The head becomes submerged; it disappears into the body. Veiling the head is just another form of figurative decapitation in the respect that the head disappears, and as it vanishes, it is further eroticized as a symbol of desire submerged into the body (Eilberg-Schwartz and Doniger 2). Makeup and corrective surgery hide and eroticize the real face and are yet other forms of figurative

decapitation. I also agree with Eilberg-Schwartz and Doniger that figurative decapitation insures that the female body is blind, voiceless, and invisible (15).

Men cut away aspects of femininity they feel they cannot control, replacing these with constructs of what it is to be female according to men. A body that is segmented is not whole. I see figurative decapitation as a segmenting of each woman's body as well as of the female communal body. A female cut away from the feminine community has no support group or role models; she is isolated and alone. Women in past centuries were expected to stay at home to cook, clean, and tend children. These women were often alienated from their peer group. The figuratively decapitated woman is organized and compartmentalized by the patriarchy; she is told who she is and how she should behave because she is headless. Women should be wives, mothers, sisters, daughters, mistresses, housekeepers, seamstresses, but they should not be subjects. Not only are the roles of the decapitated female defined, but her sexuality is controlled by the patriarchy as well. Therefore, women are beheaded in more than one way. The beheading of women's sexuality puts all forms of female birthing and creativity under the control of men. Women in past eras were passed from father to husband as property in arranged marriage. Therefore, decapitation can be viewed as figurative rape, a violation of the female body and its text. If a woman does not surrender to the patriarchal conditioning, she will experience psychological and physical violence to bring her under control. However, this does not mean that women in abusive cultures are completely powerless. Those in authority just think they are.

Women have no access to language and law, because language and law are part of the masculine domain. Therefore, to communicate, women in repressive cultures find means to use their figurative decapitation to their own advantage. Language is used to control women. Petrarchan and Ovidian discourse re-inscribe the female body. Petrarchan discourse refers to language that idealizes women as do the

sonnets of Francesco Petrarch. Petrarchan poetic conventions were adapted by English writers during the English Renaissance. Petrarchan discourse figuratively decapitates women by turning real women into the idealistic creation of the male imagination. Ovidian discourse is being used in a specific context in this project that differs slightly from ordinary scholarly usage. I use the term 'Ovidian' to allude to Ovid's treatment of women, particularly in *Ars amatoria,* where the author gives young men in his society advice on how to woo and entrap women, constructing women as mere sex objects. Because of its more explicit concern with seduction, Ovidian discourse also figuratively decapitates.

The archetype of the beheaded female is Medusa from mythology. Men see her as monstrous, but Cixous reworks the Medusa figure. In the essay "The Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous characterizes femaleness independent of male mythologies. Cixous' Medusa "breaks the codes that negate her" (879). "[Medusa is] beautiful and she's laughing" (885). In this way, Cixous characterizes an *entredeux* discourse for women. The male myth of Medusa as monstrous is deconstructed by *l'écriture féminine*.

All women are like the beheaded Medusa. Men have defined the parameters of what it is to be female; the stereotype is nurturing and accepting. Cixous embraces this marginalized position as well, because women can use the stereotype (woman as body in juxtaposition to man as head) to their advantage. Since "women are body" ("Laugh" 886), they can use the body as text. A woman who creates *l'écriture féminine* by using the body as text is "ceasing to support with her body [. . .] the general cultural heterosocial establishment in which man's reign is held to be proper [. . .] the 'proper' is property" ("Castration" 171). A woman's body is disorder, passions, creativity – this is her text. Medusa's laughter disrupts. The male myth of Medusa as monstrous is deconstructed by *l'écriture feminine*.

Medusa has much in common with the female characters discussed in this book. Lavinia, like Medusa, is a maid at the opening of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* who is transformed, through her encounter with the characters Demetrius and Chiron, into a monster. Lavinia and Medusa are not only physically monstrous; they also represent patriarchal fear of repressed secret emotions and repressed rage and pain. In Ovid's version of the story of Medusa, the beauty of Medusa's hair and body as a maiden are described, but her face is not delineated. Therefore, Ovid figuratively beheads and objectifies Medusa. Lavinia, like Medusa, is the object of the male gaze, but we see very little of her interior self. Lavinia and Medusa are speechless throughout most of the text and we do not hear their reaction to their physical transformation (Walker 50). Both have jealous suitors who rival for their attention. They are victimized by their rapists, and Tamora, like Athena, turns a blind eye to the rape. Tamora and Athena enable the oppression of their rivals.

Poseidon transformed himself into a stallion and the beautiful Medusa into a mare so that he might ravage her. In Julie Taymor's film version of *Titus Andronicus*, Lavinia appears transformed, like Medusa in the legend, with the head of a doe as Tamora's sons rape her in the guise of raging tigers (Starks 8). Medusa was the daughter of Phorcys, a lesser god who as the son of earth and sea was linked to Poseidon, Medusa's rapist. Medusa's beauty is blamed for the rape (Valentis and Devane 43). Demetrius and Chiron are enticed by Lavinia's beauty and innocence as well. Raping Lavinia will make her ugly; it will turn Lavinia into the monstrous mother. Medusa's gaze turned men to stone; in other words, men were sexually excited and at the same time terrified of Medusa.

Demetrius and Chiron see Lavinia and Tamora, their mother, in this same regard. In Lavinia's case, Demetrius and Chiron are sexually aroused by her but know that possessing her will be risky. The risk is also part of the attraction. They rape Lavinia as a substitute for the mother they want to possess and conquer. Perseus and Tamora's sons