

EDITORIAL – SEXING THE TEXT

Published September 2008 “Sexing the Text” (Editorial) *Journal of Literature & Theology*, vol. 22/3: pp. 259-264.

Alison Jasper

Our recent promotion to an “A” rated journal in the European Research Index for the Humanities is one indication of the strength of *Literature and Theology* as a peer-reviewed journal in a lively interdisciplinary field. Our distinguished editorial colleagues in the UK and North America continue to be tireless and rigorous in the processes of review and editing. Yet, having been for some years members of the editorial committee of *Literature and Theology*, Heather Walton and I began to think that an attentive reader might well wonder whether some of the urgent political and intellectual issues which have rocked western cultures – especially those challenging the established religious and literary canons – have received as much attention as they deserve.

The particular issue addressed in this special issue on ‘Sexing the Text’ is gender. As feminist academics, one of our primary interests is how women have fared in the fields of literature, theology, religions and cultural theory. Gender is not a new issue. Forms of gender analysis shaped by feminist and queer theories have marked and continue to challenge our academic, literary and artistic worlds. Second and third wave feminist theories go back forty or fifty years and the influence of first wave feminism on ‘gender’ in literary theory and theology goes back even further - at least to Simone de Beauvoir’s formative work, *The Second Sex*, first published in French in 1949 (See review by Fiona Darroch of *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir in the reviews section of this edition).

An intuitive sense of the continuing imbalance in matters of gender, in spite of this substantial history, led us to reopen the issue in the present special edition of *Literature and Theology*. Our initial intuition is supported by Walton’s survey of submissions to this journal in 1997-2003 (See *Imagining Theology*. By Heather Walton. London: T & T Clark, 2008. pp. 18-33.). A cursory glance at the articles submitted since 2003 indicates that the picture has not changed substantially; there are some very distinguished women amongst the contributors, authors and subjects of our journal, but there are still more male contributors than female and their subject matter is still dominated by the names of male authors, artists and theorists.

What are some possible explanations for this resistance to change on matters of gender? Inevitably, *Literature & Theology*, like any other A-rated academic journal, is subject to a deliberate, if subtle, branding that makes it appealing to a traditional academic community in which, as a matter of fact, men still predominate. In a related sense, the imbalance could also be due to the perception that *Literature and Theology* explores abstract and intellectual theory, associated with a privileged male approach and would therefore be less sympathetic to formats, styles or concerns favoured by less ‘academic’ women, radical feminists or gender theorists. The explanation could be simply that men and women write differently, whether we argue that this is a matter of the gender of the author or has more to do with the context of writing. It could be, for example, that the imbalance of male and female contributors

and subjects relates to the fact that women and men ask, in the present context, for a different kind of reader's commitment and view writing in a different light or for a different purpose.

Alternatively, there are deeper, social reasons to do with gender. It could be that, as Pamela Sue Anderson has argued, gender has an impact on how and to what extent people acquire and express confidence ('Gendered Confidence and the Lived Body', unpublished plenary lecture given at 'Transcendence Incarnate', Continental Philosophy of Religion conference, Somerville College, Oxford, 10 September 2007). Potential contributors may have decided that their work was somehow insufficient, just as de Beauvoir did in 1929, after her philosophical debate with Jean-Paul Sartre by the Medici Fountain in Paris, when she concluded that the ideas contained in her own theory would never measure up to the standard of 'the Philosopher': Sartre. Yet, with hindsight, it seems patently obvious to us that de Beauvoir's writings are no less significant philosophically than Sartre's; and she was arguably the better writer; a keen author for 'sexing the text' (See review by Marije Altorf of *Hipparchia's Choice: An Essay Concerning Women Philosophy, etc.*, by Michèle Le Doeuff, in the review section of this edition)!

In response to these thoughts and observations, we wanted to showcase issues of sex and gender: to make clear that the 'sex of the text' remains an important interdisciplinary focus for readers of *Literature and Theology*. This is something to be recognized practically and to be theorised explicitly and implicitly in future issues of *Literature and Theology*. To this end we organised a day conference in Glasgow in December 2007, called 'Sexing the Text', aiming to interest academics, especially a higher proportion of women and to explore the different strategies that are being brought to bear on the question of textuality. The call for papers raised a number of questions as topics:

- Do texts (religious and others) have a sex?
- Are there ethical reasons why men shouldn't write as women (and vice versa)?
- Is feminist writing about literature and religion for women only?
- How is gender read/written in non-western texts?
- What does queer theory contribute to our understanding of reading and writing theology and literature as gendered practice?
- What strategies are employed when writers shift gender?
- What are the pleasures to be experienced in textual cross dressing?
- How is the gendered author constructed in literature and theology?

The majority of pieces submitted came from women. This raised further questions for us: Do male academics feel that they will be unwelcome or unable to write in this area? In a more sinister sense, have women been discouraging rather than discouraged? Do male authors who write on gender or sex risk a loss of reputation for exactly the sort of serious academic work for which *Literature and Theology* prides itself? Do male (heterosexual) academics assume that an interest in these issues may even compromise some prized form of masculinity? It would certainly appear that writing or thinking about gender is itself a gendered activity.

It is significant in the light of these reflections that our plenary session was addressed by Björn Krondorfer who has built his academic reputation over the last fifteen years in the area of religion, culture and masculinity. His piece on confessional writing, published in this edition ('Textual Male Intimacy and the Religious Imagination: Men Giving Testimony to Themselves'), highlights the

growth of men's studies in religion as a conscious and conscientious exercise in thinking through the ways in which gender plays a role in the writing of men under the erasures of patriarchal societies. Even in extreme circumstances – such as the death camps of the Holocaust in Nazi Germany – he argues that the *genre* demonstrates gender privileges and dictates a distinctively masculine writing praxis. Krondorfer even proposes that men's confessional writing indicates a prevalent male anxiety about intimacy. The confessional *genre* is surprisingly revealed as a substitution for rather than an expression of the desire to communicate intimately with others.

Of course envisioning themes or trends on the wider scale cannot be done on the basis of such a small sample as papers submitted to a single edition of one academic journal. However, there are some conclusions to be drawn. In reviewing papers submitted and given and papers selected for publication, it was good, if also troubling, to find younger men and women 'dipping their toes' into feminist issues for the very first time having apparently managed to bypass or avoid the field up until now. It was also encouraging to find, alongside men exploring masculinity, women writing on the work of men who consciously challenge crude stereotypes of either women or men, for example, British playwright, Martin Crimp and South African Nobel prize winner J. M. Coetzee (See 'Staging John Coetzee/Elizabeth Costello' by Heather Walton, published in this edition). Matthew Bennett's piece ('Beyond the Veil: A Woman Named Truth and the Truth of Woman') examines Nietzsche's configurations of women as a metaphor for the ineffability of truth, revealing a predictably subtle discussion of truth and a perhaps unexpectedly nuanced treatment of women which, once again, resists stereotyping.

None of the women who contributed to the conference or to this edition, ventured into 'men's studies' in a literary, theoretical or theological sense, suggesting perhaps a certain resistance as well as a reluctance to trespass. However, some papers did examine cases of women who, in an earlier age, 'claimed masculinity' in the form of published speech or writing in their own names, a privilege normally denied them but paradoxically permitted in extreme circumstances such as in the anticipation of death in childbirth on the scaffold (See 'Now farewell to the Lawe, too long have I been in thy subjection: early modern murder, Calvinism and female spiritual authority' by Lynn Robson, published in this edition). Collectively these forms of literary and theological cross dressing fascinate, while still prompting us to ask whether, in fact, they consolidate conformity to normative patterns of gender rather than incite resistance against them and this is a central issue addressed by Walton in her piece on J. M. Coetzee's unsettling relationship with literary persona, Elizabeth Costello. A number of people certainly continue to be interested in the possibilities of androgyny or of transcending gender altogether. For some – especially those with a strong investment in Christian theological structures – this latter is a strategy with distinct attractions today when gender and sexuality are frequently viewed as a grounds for fragmentation and polarisation within Church or theological communities. It is, even so, difficult to see in practice how the persistently patriarchal nature of so much Christian symbolism and theology can be completely discounted without radically challenging the nature of the existing gendered tradition.

What was generally less encouraging about the response to our call for papers, was the very small number of submissions from academics either coming from or working on nonEuropean or North American writers and artists. This is another one of the issues to which *Literature & Theology* and its editorial staff need to return.

Only three submissions focussed at all on issues of gender beyond the European and North Atlantic context. Heather Walton's piece on J. M. Coetzee, makes reference to the South African author's inextricable involvement with the literature of apartheid and touches on the work of Afrikaner poet, Breyten Breytenbach in the context of reflections on female gender as in some ways emblematic of a much larger range of marginalities and vulnerabilities. Another paper, given at the conference in December, looked at the work of the Jamaican-American novelist, Michelle Cliff. The third submission was concerned with the indigenous film industry of Northern Pakistan. Sadly, these last two authors were unable to contribute to the final 'special edition'.

As editors we have to admit that in spite of the substantial number of papers submitted by women, female subjects still do not achieve parity. In spite of my hope that contributors might want to explore what Julia Kristeva has called 'female genius'ⁱ, the creativity shown by women who have crafted, tailored or brought to birth work to suit their singular circumstances as artists, writers, theologians or theorists, are still underrepresented; male philosophers, academics and creative writers continue to fare better in the final collection of papers. Having said this, our male contributors are not afraid to apply a gendered critique and Krondorfer's treatment of St Augustine and Cael Perechodnik is perhaps the most pointed - and poignant - critical voice raised against masculinist or androcentric attitudes in the collection. In a somewhat critical vein Gretchen Bartels' article, reveals C. S. Lewis' inability, or refusal, to allow his respect and admiration for highly able and empathetic women to challenge the rigid hierarchies of his gendered theological structures. A number of papers at the conference - as already noted - focussed on women 'adopting masculinity' and it is Elizabeth Anderson's evocation of poet HD and dancer and dance theorist Isadora Duncan which presents us with what is perhaps the most explicit illustration of women's contribution to the discussion of 'sexing the text' in terms of their embodied spirituality.

In the end, are there answers to questions we set ourselves and our contributors? In one sense, specific answers to the open ended questions in our call for papers would defeat a key object of the exercise for us which was to generate further interdisciplinary discussion and to get people together to talk and exchange ideas. In relation to this specific aim, the editorial committee of *Literature and Theology* has lent its support and we would want potential contributors, to find encouragement in this; this journal is interested both in gender issues and in 'sexing the text'; that is to say we are interested in understanding how writers, artists and theorists use and analyse gender in their work and we are interested in addressing the political question of who gets to write and on what subjects in the academy as a whole. The question of whether sex and gender are important constitutive factors in the interdisciplinary study of literature, theology and theory in broader terms, is most emphatically answered in the affirmation: the ability of scholars within these subject areas to generate fertile and imaginative writing in the future, crucially depends upon an ongoing critical engagement. A successful academic journal must have its constituency but its continuing success will always depend upon its ability to generate lively debate which goes a little beyond its own comfort zone.

University of Stirling
a.e.jasper@stir.ac.uk

ⁱ Julia Kristeva develops the idea of ‘female genius’ in her trilogy of books on Hannah Arendt, Melanie Klein and Colette published in 1999, 2000 and 2002. ‘Female genius’ reconnects creativity (formerly identified exclusively with the ‘spark’ of divine, disembodied, masculine creative genius) with the materiality and embodiment of ‘the maternal position’, by virtue of which *all* human beings become ‘speaking beings’ capable of poetic work that overcomes limitations (for example, patriarchal contexts) and brings life and thought, just as much as bodies, to birth.