

Laughing Medusa: Feminist Intellectuals at the Millennium

When one is propagating truths deeply radical and desperately unpalatable one cannot expect an eager and convinced audience.

—Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 1897

Is the Feminist Intellectual Dead?

Twelve years ago Isobel Armstrong invited me to a conference on sexual difference in Southampton. Much has changed from 1986, taking us from sexual difference to gender, from an uproarious confrontation between feminists and gay men to the more sedate cohabitation of today. The very term ‘sexual difference’ is now suspect, since it implies something real; as Steven Pinker remarks in *How the Mind Works*: ‘in modern academic life, “essentialist” is just about the worst thing you can call someone.’¹ Nonetheless, the non-essentialist terminology of gender continues to obscure the reality of sexual difference. While I’m nominally speaking about gender and the intellectual, I’m really concerned with the feminist intellectual, who might be a man or a woman, but historically has been a woman who belongs as much to the history of feminism as to the history of intellectuals.

Women rarely come up in the current heated debates on the role or dilemma of the intellectual in society, discussions which have been particularly intense in the 1990s. Whether the issue is the Gramscian universal intellectual, the Foucaultian specific intellectual, the overall decline of the public intellectual or the rise of a new intellectual professional managerial class, feminists are excluded from consideration. A 1998 French study, *Le Siècle des intellectuels*, includes no women at all. Bruce Robbins points out that in American society ‘the subject of intellectuals has been about as gender-neutral as pro football.’²

Ironically, many men today feel that the intellectual is a dead or dying species. In Paris, Pierre-André Taguieff, a philosopher and historian at the

1 Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works*, New York: Norton & Co., 1997, p. 325.

2 Bruce Robbins (ed.), *Intellectuals: Aesthetics, Politics, Academics*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990, p. xv.

National Centre for Scientific Research, blames the American model of celebrity. 'There is a constant fight for survival, for visibility among certain intellectuals,' he says. 'You have to be beautiful, famous, and culturally successful. There is competition for visibility, respect, and prestige, and it becomes a vicious circle.'³ (Naturally, Taguieff believes this kind of competition has never existed before in France.) In London, Michael Ignatieff deplores 'the death of the intellectual' which 'has left a void in public life. In place of thought we have journalism; in place of polemic we have personality profiles.'⁴

Perhaps for these men the intellectual seems to have vanished or become invisible because they cannot see women playing the role. The female intellectual is far from dying, but she is camouflaged by her gender. Indeed, the category of the intellectual has been almost as invisible to feminists as to male theorists. The women's movement tends to be embarrassed and defensive about its intellectuals, whether because of the activist values and anti-elitist pressures of feminist thought or because discussions of intellectuals have been so sterile, dispassionate and disembodied. In her study of nineteenth-century American feminist intellectuals, Susan P. Conrad points out that

two common assumptions—that every feminist is an intellectual and that every woman intellectual is a feminist (or thinks only in terms of women's rights, roles, etc.)—have hopelessly obscured the accomplishments of women and arbitrarily restricted the range of their interests. A feminist intellectual makes contributions to feminist thought, without necessarily adopting an activist stance. Most feminists are not intellectuals, they are engaged in distributing and applying the theories of others to specific social problems.⁵

On the other hand, many feminists make a clear and invidious distinction between theory and practice, the intellectual and the activist. Barbara Ehrenreich gives this distinction another twist when she mourns the 'academization of feminism', which for her 'has meant the end of the exciting feminist intellectual milieu I once moved in.'⁶

It might also be that definitions of the intellectual have been problematic for women. Bruce Robbins argues that abstract theories of intellectual responsibility have failed to attract the interest of feminist thinkers:

if women have not been invited into the conversation about intellectuals, they have also had good cause to feel that the conversation had nothing to offer them. A discussion centered on the ideal of universality without ties, on intellectuals as unattached and disembodied . . . could easily appear to occupy a realm of male fantasy. To begin on the other hand with the grounding of intellectuals, with a recognition of ties, bodies,

3 Quoted in Barbara Giudice, 'An Era of Soul-Searching for France's Intellectuals', *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 13 June 1997, p. A41.

4 Michael Ignatieff, 'Where Are They Now?', *Prospect*, August/September 1997, p. 8.

5 Susan P. Conrad, *Perish the Thought: Intellectual Women in Romantic America, 1830-60*, Secaucus, NJ: The Citadel Press, 1987, p. 7.

6 Barbara Ehrenreich, 'The Professional-Managerial Class Revisited', in Robbins (ed.), p. 176.

situations, is thus a necessary step toward the demasculinizing of the discourse about intellectuals, the creation of a conversation that women might have a motive for joining.⁷

Women in academia may also be wary of the conditions imposed by male public intellectuals like Edward Said, who insists that the intellectual must take a public position:

At bottom, the intellectual in my sense of the word, is neither a pacifier nor a consensus-builder; but someone whose whole being is staked on a critical sense, a sense of being unwilling to accept ready-made formulas or ready-made clichés; or the smooth, ever-so-accommodating confirmations of what the powerful or conventional have to say, and what they do. Not just passively, unwillingly, but someone actively willing to say so in public.

Moreover, the intellectual must not speak or write a specialized language:

You try . . . to cultivate . . . a kind of healthy scepticism for what the authorities say. And here it seems to me that clear language and irony are centrally important, not to take refuge . . . in woolly generalization or jargon or anything that one can hide behind as a way of avoiding a decision and taking a position.⁸

Not because they are women, but because they are academics, some feminists have trouble abandoning the shield of jargon and accepting controversy.

Indeed, the poststructuralist historian Joan W. Scott, a certified intellectual who is a member of the prestigious Institute for Advanced Study, prefers to rule out an interest in feminist intellectuals as individuals. She declares that she does not

think of these women as exemplary heroines. Instead I think of them as sites—historical locations or markers—where critical political and cultural contests are enacted and can be examined in some detail. To figure a person—in this case a woman—is not to deny her humanity; it is rather to recognize the many factors that constitute her agency, the complex and multiple ways in which she is constructed as a historical actor.⁹

I do want to discuss feminist intellectuals as exemplary heroines, rather than as sites or markers, because I think we need exemplary heroines, and to look at the experience of women who wished to live a full, serious and meaningful woman's life. And I want particularly to talk about the situation of the feminist intellectual at the *fin de siècle*, as her role is mutating and taking us into the future.

7 Robbins (ed.), p. xviii.

8 Edward Said, 'On Defiance and Taking Positions', *ACLS Occasional Paper* 31, 1995, 30.

9 Joan W. Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996, p. 16.

Cassandra

Even in the 1990s feminist intellectuals turn for inspiration and even self-definition to myth, religion and literature; and many of these myths are unhappy. Cassandra—the prophetess cursed with disbelief—is among the most important of our tragic sexual personae. Margaret Fuller mentioned Cassandra in her treatise *Women in the Nineteenth Century* as a troubled woman; Cassandras, she declared, ‘are very commonly unhappy at present’, because their intellectual style does not fit into the expectations of the masculine world.¹⁰ Florence Nightingale often called herself ‘poor Cassandra’ in her journals and letters to describe her own sense of intellectual frustration and futility. Just as Cassandra, having rejected the love of Apollo, was doomed to utter true prophecies without being believed, Nightingale believed that she herself, having rejected marriage and motherhood for career, had doomed herself to madness and isolation. In her autobiographical essay ‘Cassandra’, written in the 1840s, Nightingale’s Cassandra dies ‘withered, paralysed, extinguished’ at the age of thirty, asking why women have ‘passion, intellect, and moral activity’, and lead social lives in which ‘no one of the three can be exercised’. Woman in the nineteenth century, Nightingale thought, ‘has an immense provision of wings, which seems as if they would bear her over earth and heaven; but when she tries to use them, she is petrified into stone, her feet are grown into the earth, chained to the bronze pedestal.’¹¹

In our century, the East German novelist Christa Wolf has written *Cassandra: A Novel and Four Essays* about the nearly suicidal despair of the feminist intellectual trying to invent new artistic forms: ‘Any woman in this century . . . who has ventured into male-dominated institutions—literature and aesthetics are such institutions—must have experienced the desire for self-destruction.’ Asking ‘How old was Cassandra when she died?’ Wolf wonders whether she came ‘to feel she had survived a lot, too much.’¹²

Even in the 1997 parody slasher film *Scream 2*, the heroine Sydney is a strong courageous kickboxer, a young feminist student of the 1990s who majors in drama and plays Cassandra in her university production of *The Trojan Women*. ‘You’re a lot like her’ her British director tells Sydney. ‘Use your pain.’ Without giving away the plot, suffice it to say that, at the end of the movie, on the theatre stage Sydney uses the props and her martial arts skills to destroy an enemy who looks uncannily like Camille Paglia.

The Feminist Messiah

Another important model has been the feminist Messiah, the exceptional female saviour who would sacrifice herself to change women’s lives, but who

10 Margaret Fuller,
*Women in the
Nineteenth Century*,
New York: W. W.
Norton & Co., 1971,
p. 105.

11 Florence Nightingale,
Cassandra, ed. Myra
Stark, Old Westbury,
NY: The Feminist
Press, 1979, p. 23.

12 Christa Wolf,
*Cassandra: A Novel
and Four Essays*, trans.
Jan van Heurck, New
York: Farrar, Strauss,
Giroux, 1984, p. 157.

also has to be superior to them. Margaret Fuller, for example, wrote that she felt 'chosen among women', and sometimes saw herself as immune from the ordinary sexual needs and emotional yearnings of her sisters. Fuller's Transcendentalist contemporaries also shared the vision of this saviour: Hawthorne, for example, wrote in *The Scarlet Letter* of the 'destined prophetess' whose coming would reveal 'a new truth' between men and women; but 'the angle and apostle' must be 'lofty, pure and beautiful' as well as wise; Elizabeth Cady Stanton called for 'a new evangel of women'. Florence Nightingale too described a woman who 'will resume in her soul, all the sufferings of her race', and described a series of mystical visions in which God appeared and called her to his service.¹³ Perhaps because both Fuller and Nightingale believed themselves to be the feminist Messiah, when they actually met they did not get along.

The 1890s were in many respects a renaissance for women, a decade of excitement and renovation, of feminist idealists and Utopian visionaries. Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, the British suffragette who was part of this generation, recalled:

It was a wonderful thing at that period to be young among young comrades, for the ninth decade of the last century was a time of expansion and vision. In spite of sordidness and insecurity in the lives of the poor, everything was on the upgrade . . . It was an era of religion and faith, and at the same time of intellectual challenge. We read, discussed, debated, and experimented and felt that all life lay before us to be changed and moulded by our vision and desire.¹⁴

Rita Felski describes the last *fin de siècle* as marked

by the rhetoric of novelty, innovation, and futurity. The sense of an ending . . . also brought with it the consciousness of a new beginning; motifs of degeneration and decadence were often juxtaposed to appeals to the future and indications of a radiant new dawn . . . in England the idea of the new conveyed a similar sense of urgency and heightened expectancy, of being poised on an epochal threshold. The New Theatre, the New Art, the New Psychology, the New Politics, the New Fiction, the New Woman, the New Spirit; these and similar terms were regularly deployed to signal an exhilarating sense of liberation from the tyranny of the past, a leaving behind of outmoded and irrelevant values and traditions through the espousal of a radical modernity.¹⁵

British feminists saw themselves as saviours not only of women but also of the human race, roles the suffragettes, especially the Pankhursts, would turn to political use. Feminists in turn-of-the-century Austria also believed they were taking culture to a higher level.

13 Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1978, p. 185; Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *The Woman's Bible*, Salem, NH: Ayer Co., 1986, p. 124; Nightingale, p. 50.

14 Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, *My Part in a Changing World*, London: Victor Gollancz, 1938, p. 88.

15 Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995, p. 146.

They shared the analysis of their critics that modern culture was in need of regeneration; they agreed with the conservatives that the modern age was marked by egoism and a lack of leading ideals. But they differed crucially in their conceptions of that longed-for regeneration. And on this essential point, the feminists themselves parted ways.¹⁶

Yet many of these dreams ended in futility, with Olive Schreiner, Eleanor Marx and many others seeing themselves as a tragic generation of feminist intellectuals who had to sacrifice love for work so that future generations of women would not have to choose. Today, the messiah figures in our own millennium are female leaders of apocalyptic cults: in Russia, Maria Devi Khristos, a self-declared messiah who predicted the world would end in 1993; in China, Ching Hai, who predicted world destruction in 1997; in South Korea, Park Soon Ja; in California, the male and female leaders of the Heaven's Gate cult. Often they prophesy the coming paradise of sexual equality, an image an anthropologist calls 'the feminization of the millennium'.¹⁷

The Dark Lady

The dominant myth of this century has been that of the Dark Lady, the token woman or exceptional intellectual in a community of men. The title was first used to describe the token women of the New York Intellectuals—Mary McCarthy, and then Susan Sontag. It could also be used to describe a figure like Simone de Beauvoir, who idealized Sartre and only came to feminism late in her career. Defining 'intellectual woman' as 'any woman who has ever taken herself seriously as a thinker, particularly in an educational context', Toril Moi makes a number of helpful biographical generalizations based on her study of de Beauvoir. She observes that it is not unusual for intellectual women 'to have a difficult time with their mothers, or to develop . . . "erotic-theoretical transference relations" with male intellectual figures'.¹⁸ She talks about the division in French intellectual thought between professor and creators, philosophers and novelists, which de Beauvoir, like many other intellectual women from Wollstonecraft on, had internalized and gendered. She documents de Beauvoir's tendency to overrate her degrees and underrate her books, out of insecurity, while Sartre, the 'consecrated genius . . . [did] not need to justify himself in such petty ways'. 'In a patriarchal intellectual field, the female intellectual will never be able perfectly to display the cavalier disdain of the dandy; she is doomed to lose out in the game of distinction.'¹⁹ Most important, she discusses intellectual women's fears of love and sexuality.

Deploring a pernicious imagery of ugly bluestockings and dried-up spinsters, patriarchal ideology seeks to enforce the split between body

16 Harriet Anderson, *Utopian Feminism: Women's Movements in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992, p. 10.

17 Susan J. Palmer, 'Woman as World Saviour', in Thomas Robbins and Susan J. Palmer (eds), *Millennium, Messiahs, and Mayhem: Contemporary Apocalyptic Movements*, New York: Routledge, 1997, pp. 159–74.

18 Toril Moi, *Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual Woman*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1994, p. 3.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

and mind with particular rigour in the case of intellectual women. More than any other category of women they have been enjoined to choose between their thoughts and their wish for emotional and sexual happiness.²⁰

The idea of the Dark Lady as the only girl in the gang, fighting off competition from her rivals, is now being preserved by Camille Paglia, who has compared her 'hot eye' to Mary McCarthy's cold one, and gone after Sontag in a 'one-sided feud'.²¹ Paglia has bought totally into the idea of the female superstar worshipped by all women, the feminist intellectual as Madonna. In Paglia's view, she herself is now the world's 'greatest woman intellectual'. When 'people look back at the 20th century, at nonfiction books by women,' she told a reporter, 'it's going to be Jane Harrison, Simone de Beauvoir, and Paglia . . . Susan Sontag will be a footnote.'²² As she boasted to another journalist, Paglia is convinced that she has replaced Sontag as a new Dark Lady: 'I've been chasing that bitch for twenty-five years,' she told *Vanity Fair*, 'and at last I've passed her.'²³

Feminist Intellectuals at the Millennium

The current myth for the feminist intellectual is connected with popular culture, with daring, youth and successful defiance. It is pluralistic and pragmatic rather than individualistic and idealistic (Spice Girls, riot girls), and comic rather than tragic. Arguing that 'the women's movement was weakened by its excessive attachment to a politically correct idealism', Natasha Walter's *The New Feminism* (1998) praises Margaret Thatcher as 'the great unsung heroine of British feminism', a woman who 'normalised female success', a statement alone worth the price of the book.²⁴ In my view, it's about time that a young British feminist stood up for Thatcher and acknowledged that a female prime minister, whatever her policies or image, had permanently altered people's sense of woman's capacity for political power. Walter's defiant comments about women embracing power and realizing 'how many good things can be built with dirty hands, covered with the grit of determination and the oil of money' should be written in the skies above Oxbridge and London.²⁵

In many ways, Walter's call to arms uncannily echoes the feminism of the last *fin de siècle*, with its excitement about new beginnings and its Utopian zeal. She celebrates 'a new dawn' shining into women's faces. She calls for an undoing of the link between women's personal and political lives. She defends fashion, beauty, self-decoration and the delight of dressing up. She supports a variety of sexual personae as role models, from supermodels to the sexually active woman to 'glitzy, fun-loving lesbians'. She stresses the

20 Ibid., p. 256.

21 *Vanity Fair* 55/9, September 1992, p. 300.

22 Carlin Romano, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 13 November 1990.

23 *Vanity Fair*, p. 303.

24 Natasha Walter, *The New Feminism*, London: Little Brown, 1998, p. 176.

25 Ibid.

achievements of British feminism, from the Spice Girls to Clare Short, and urges women in Britain to 'reclaim the history of feminism' as a 'mainstream, majority movement'. She looks across classes, speaking to cleaners and students, actresses and immigrants, MPs and homeworkers, environmentalists and managers. She welcomes men to feminism. Finally she outlines a five-part agenda for the new feminism: a new balance between work and home; a national childcare network; shared domestic responsibility between men and women; moving women out of poverty; and protection and support for women facing violence.²⁶

Elizabeth Wurtzel's *Bitch* (1998) is a manifesto for women behaving badly—that is, resisting pressures to be little, nice and safe: 'I intend to do what I want to do and be who I want to be and answer only to myself: that is, quite simply, the bitch philosophy, and it seems particularly refreshing in the face of all the contortions women are taught to put themselves through.'²⁷ Wurtzel also insists that women take responsibility for their actions and desires.

I come from a different generation than these young women and, according to some, I should be gnashing my remaining teeth over my critical superannuation, and going through the five stages of intellectual obsolescence—anger, denial, bargaining, grieving, acceptance. In *Feminist Literary History*, Janet Todd has analysed what she calls 'a rather bizarre characteristic' of my criticism, my

habit of arguing through metaphor and simile. It is a ubiquitous tendency, perhaps a reminder of the oral nature of many of the articles she prints, the relics of many American and British academic conferences that require an established and reliable feminist speaker. Often they have the ring of oral closure, the demand for a burst of laughter which will dispel anything disturbing that might have been implied or said.²⁸

Oh, how guilty I plead to this charge! And how much I am enjoying my post-paradigmatic life in which metaphor, simile and humour, rather than insults, jargon and despair, need not require apology. I share the exhilaration of the millennial movement, and its opportunities for renewal, and I have a feminist myth of my own which I find inspiring. Among the many stirring manifestos of feminist thought in our own time, I've particularly loved 'The Laugh of the Medusa'. Hélène Cixous says that it's only superstition that has made the Medusa—the feminist intellectual—into a mythical monster who turns men to stone. 'If you look straight at her', writes Cixous, 'you see that she's beautiful and she's laughing'.²⁹ Laughing Medusa—in my head, the words are an anthem, like *Waltzing Matilda*. 'Women have wept a great deal,' writes Cixous, 'but once the tears are shed, there will be endless laughter instead . . . And her first laugh is at herself.'³⁰

26 *Ibid.*, pp. 221–3.

27 Elizabeth Wurtzel, *Bitch*, London: Chatto, 1998, p. 30.

28 Janet Todd, *Feminist Literary History*, New York: Routledge, 1988, p. 45.

29 Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', *SIGNS: The Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1/4, summer 1976, 885.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 886.