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# Playing Heads or Tails with My Diaphragm: Drinking Lattés with H  l  ne Cixous

Rebecca L. McCarthy

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*While sitting through endless political speeches and pundit commentary this election cycle, one would be hard pressed to miss the continuous expressions of careless racism and sexism that is an under-theme to this presidential election. Moreover, with the Republican nomination of Sarah Palin for McCain's VP, I find myself in awe over the assumption that the simple election of a woman to an office of power equates the breaking of the glass ceiling. As such, I felt compelled to revisit H  l  ne Cixous' suggestion that we need a new feminine language to combat both institutionalized and careless sexism. But what would this language look like today? "Playing Heads or Tails with My Diaphragm" comically and poetically explores this question. From mythological goddesses to Rousseau, the Mona Lisa, and John McCain's fascination with my diaphragm, my conversation with Cixous leads me to form my own rhetoric, while reclaiming my diaphragm from a "Viagracentric" obsessed language and culture.*

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"And so it still goes . . ." I sighed, while sipping my double-shot latt  .

"What still goes?" said John McCain coming up behind me—grinning brightly, and sandwiching my hand between his.

"Politics as usual. Empty rhetoric. Careless sexism."

"My, my dear girl!" Pat, pat, pat came his hand on mine. "It can't be as bad as all that!"

"Can't it? You who champions Viagra over birth control (Parker), stagnate, "calm" courts over equal pay for women (Quaid). 'My, my dear man,' can you smell the patronizing?"

"Don't you mean patriotism!"

"Hum . . . Yes, presently they do smell the same."

"So then," he said grinning once again—his shark tooth smile reflecting the sun, "I can count on your vote?"

"I'll tell you what, let's play heads or tails with my diaphragm and leave it up to chance. Can you guess which side is heads . . . is tails?"

"Why the part that sticks up like a dome or a head."

"Ah yes, I thought you'd say as much, no more Viagra for you."

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And so I say . . . yes, it still goes. Even today, Lilith, Biblical Adam's first wife, would be forced to leave Eden in protest . . . in defense of her gender.<sup>[1]</sup> Tossed as she was out of the garden—refusing to be the bottom half of a gendered binary. The phallus, hiding behind his savior Viagra, fears Lilith. She will seduce the phallus. She will walk right up to it, take it, and then destroy it. What use has she ever had for rules? That is the fear, is it not? She will become the Medusa, as I take the place of Lilith, both of us a Mona Lisa and a modern day 'Fatal Attraction' bitch (Akers par. 1), whose "claws come out" to tear down order (Anburajan par. 6). Yet what is wrong with chaos? Lilith is growth if she is chaos. There is, after all, stagnation in order. A stagnation which kills . . . draining the generator, preferring nature to the false god Viagra. Slowly.

Quickly. Without us looking, while we eat our cheese and crackers over a latté, tea, and friendly conversation. If you fear Lilith's power, her seductive nature, then be less insistent upon your order—your fine lines—your illusions of the perfectly working machine. She is but a teacher.

Yet, while embracing Lilith, am I not, as well, embracing binary rules? Am I too . . . guilty? Is not nature a binary as well? Chaos. Order. Chaos. Order. Yes, I am guilty. I bare the stigmata that will kill me. My blood. Man/Woman. Order/Chaos. Light/Dark. Soul/Body. Can I blame you ancient Greece? Pythagoras? Or you, Plato? Shall I hate you for your perfections and your male-ordained order? You are not unique, Plato, though you may be famous, I'll give you that. Yet you bought that fame. Like most, you marketed it in the streets. No . . . you are not the only one. I am fighting against many Viagracentric traditions. Boxed in. My history blends with the history of all of her (Cixous 1529).

*"I need to know. Were you right, Hélène Cixous?"<sup>[2]</sup> Do women need a new language? A white ink? Cixous had taken John's place at the table and sat like a Mona Lisa coming to life in front of me. Watching me. Musing. Silent. Centered in my frenzied presence—sipping tea, while I continued with my latté.*

*"Hélène," I said hoping to move her, "Can I say black/white and not say white/black? What will this do to the 'sacred' social order? Woman/man. There I said it. What has happened? Anything? Is there change? Have I knocked you off your chair?"*

*"Shush . . . be still," she replied.*

*"Well . . . have I?"*

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Cixous's calm eludes me. I cannot be still. My history is sandwiched like McCain's embrace of my hands, between all the Hers and Hims. All pulling on me until I am the backslash living between the him\her, her\him duality. So I will reject the artificial hierarchies, the social construction of order, while still living in the binaries because I cannot seem to get loose. Yet, if I must live with the binaries, then I will reject the hierarchies and the absolute phallogocentric nature of the ancients, and of Freud, and of McCain, and of my next door neighbor, who dreams of mowing his wife's pubic hair like he mows his lawn. We need not set such things in stone; besides, stone can be overthrown and the tower will just need to be rebuilt anyway.

*"Hélène, wouldn't you agree? May I put words into your mouth?"*

*"You may, but I might spit them back up upon my pleasure."*

*"Yes, well, that is only fair."*

*"So, are you ready to write from your body?" (Cixous 1527a)*

*"What, in white ink (1528a)? I am not certain I wish to. I am not certain I want to write my orgasm. Isn't that the same as Viagracentric logic?"*

*"Are you afraid to touch yourself?"*

*"No, not afraid. I just don't want to continue tradition, to be body. I want more than body. And I want less than body. I want my own definitions. Can you please pass me my diaphragm? John's been eying it since the game of heads or tails."*

I should have started here, with you, beautiful Hélène, with the ongoing conversation. For you, writing from our bodies will free us. But I am afraid of being the mother, the body. Afraid of the traditions associated with it. Afraid that I will find myself reasserting the He-Said, She-Said script. I want to throw such hierarchies away, to mix them up in a martini and drink them.

*"Can you not see, Hélène? Putting a new slant on an old metaphor does not change the metaphor. Glenn Close in Fatal Attraction is still the Medusa . . . Lilith . . . and now Hillary Clinton. Their bodies, no matter how firm, or their milk white,*

*could not stop the Viagra politicking."*

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If I must write from my body, being that I cannot escape my body, it must not be from my milk. If I write with white ink, will it not blend in with the paper—consuming my words, my thoughts, my rhetoric into invisible ink? My blood stands out more. Let my blood speak. It, too, is metaphoric and lyrical and life-giving. Let my blood speak. For with my blood, unless it is placed under a microscope or dissected for DNA, no one can tell what I am—which socially constructed gender . . . man . . . woman . . . gender challenged? Let my blood speak for plurality. Let it be blood for ink.

Hélène, you write with your milk, and I will write with my blood, and we will rewrite the gendered script. We must avoid becoming the language of old, the language of hierarchies. If I fight against that language, I have a better chance of coming out of it whole and not compromised.

*"Isn't that true, Hélène?"* I asked searchingly, while watching John slowly make his way back to our table, one handshake at a time. *"Please tell me that it's true. The language of the corset could kill me, could widen my stigmata, allowing my ink to run out, never to replicate."*

*"Don't think of a corset as a jail, but as a thing of beauty,"* said the press-deemed maverick, while fruitlessly reaching for Hélène's hands.

*"John,"* I said, *"I did not invite you into my skin. I would have remembered addressing the invitation."*

*"Shush. Enough now"* said McCain, who was backing away from Hélène's Mona Lisa smile. *"You look lovely in the corset, enchanting. Let me lace up the back for you."*

*"Goddamn it! That's too damn tight!"*

*"Just a bit more. There, now turn towards me. Yes, that is what I like to see. As Rousseau, that great defender of democracy liked to say, a woman 'ought to make herself pleasing in [a man's] eyes and not provoke him to anger; her strength is in her charms, by their means she should compel him to discover and use his strength'"* (Rousseau 385).<sup>[3]</sup>

*"To please you? I didn't even invite you."*

*"But you did, my dear. Or why would you have let me play with that diaphragm of yours? I think it landed on heads."* John McCain smiled.

*"Stop calling me 'dear,' I'm Lilith."*

*"Would a rose by any other name . . .?"*

*"I am unlacing myself—I am untangling myself from your words. I did not invite you. I will not become you. Now give me back my diaphragm, I saw you slip it into your pocket, next to your Viagra."*

Watch him run. Can you see him? Limping forward, legs close together, protecting himself from possible castration—run, sir, run to Freud . . . comfort each other the best you can as time for both of you is linear and short. I live in the circular realm; it goes around and around, never to stop.

*"Hélène, do you think he saw in me the Medusa?"*

*"You're Lilith, and I'm Medusa."*

*"A rose by any other name . . ."*

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You warned me, Hélène. You warned me about the seductive nature of the Viagra logic (1535b). I am trying to cut through, to break out, to step out from my mirrored-self, but the binaries pull me back, while the glass ceiling remains. I have a photograph of me taking a picture of myself reflected in a mirror, down the hall from my bedroom. I am seven, naked and

lanky with uncombed hair. But the flash from the camera ricocheted off the glass, blinding out part of myself. Is it myself? It is not? Standing inside and outside at the same time. And so is my relationship to binaries, to language itself. I am inside and outside it. I bang at the language, the logic. There is something seductive in the ordered. I fight with the circles and stretch it into ovals and finally into circular zigzags. Such warfare is not easy, Hélène. Not easy at all. My words have become naturalized. Sexism . . . careless, as tossed away trash on the side of highway 99. My thoughts—natural traditions. Even though I know better, and I do.

At that moment, Hélène slid our cups aside and took my hand. She told me to "*break the mirror.*"

"*What?*" I asked in a whisper.

"*I said . . . break the glass.*"

"*Is that wise?*"

"*Certainly it's wise. The longer you look at your image, the more united you may become with inflexible language. So, stand outside then.*" Hélène bent down and found a rock lying by our table. She cupped it in her hands and then, like John, but not like John, she cupped my hands in hers with the rock in the center of our clasp. "*Here,*" she said smiling that Mona Lisa smile of hers, "*use this rock.*"

## Notes

[1] In Jewish mythology, Lilith was said to be Adam's first wife, before Eve was made from Adam's rib. As legend has it, Lilith, unhappy with being considered the lesser of Adam, demanded equality. When denied, she left Eden, traveled to the Red Sea and took demons as her lovers, giving birth to a multitude of demon children. Adam wanted Lilith back, so he asked God to return her to him. God sent out three angels to ask Lilith to return. The angels told Lilith that if she refused to return, she would be doomed forever to walk the earth and bring forth demon children who would die by the hundreds every day. Lilith decided to stay in exile rather than returning to Adam as an unequal (Williams and Adelman 76)..

[2] Hélène Cixous (born 1937) is a French feminist writer, rhetorician, poet and playwright who in her 1975 essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa," suggested that in order for women to avoid being prisoners of their sexually defined bodies, they must take back their bodies and write from their bodies in a new female language, what she termed *écriture féminine*, and with a new ink—her metaphoric white ink.

[3] The philosopher Rousseau (1712-1778) in his book *Émile* states that men and women are equal in their differences. For women, however, equality can only be found through service to the male. Rousseau writes:

Men and women are made for each other, but their mutual dependence differs in degree; man is dependent on woman through his desire; woman is dependent on man through her desires and also through her needs; he could do without her better than she can do without him. She cannot fulfill her purpose in life without his aid, without his goodwill, without his respect; she is dependent on our feelings, on the price we put upon her virtue, and the opinion we have of her charms and her deserts. Nature herself has decreed that woman, both for herself and her children, should be at the mercy of man's judgment. (392)

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