Desire Makes The Difference

REPRESENTATION OF SEXUALITY IN THE STRUCTURES OF NARRATIVE

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> *If the work of mythical structuration is to establish distinctions, the primary distinction on which all others depend is...sexual difference.*1

In this paper I will use Jane Rule's novel, Desert of the Heart, and references to my experience as someone who frustrates people's attempts to "decide" my gender, as specific illustrations of the connection between different desires and different sources of narrative presence. More particularly, I will focus on feminist literary and critical theory, primarily through Teresa de Lauretis' work, to argue that the condition of narrative presence is not necessarily based on sexual difference as it is conceived within the Oedipal story. I will argue that the rejection of the inherent heterosexism in the Oedipal narrative both challenges the Oedipal story as the basis of everyone's sexual story and promotes a caution against the risks a feminist insistence on sexual difference may imply.

Relying on Roland Barthes, de Lauretis claims that

> *if desire is the question which generates both narrative and narrativity as Oedipal drama, that question is an open one, seeking a closure that is only promised, not guaranteed. For Oedipal desire requires...an identification with the feminine position....In other words, women must either consent or be seduced into consenting to femininity* (pp. 133-4).

The contradiction in the above quote between openness and requirement is one that de Lauretis can not get herself around. The closure of heterosexuality seems inevitable as it is inherent in both desire and in narrative to begin with. Unfortunately, therefore, de Lauretis' plea for a "rereading of the sacred texts" does not necessarily yield a "different question, a different practice,and a different desire" (my emphasis, p. 107). In other words, one of the reasons that the Oedipal narrative is an insufficient story for the description and meaning of sexuality is its very status as a closed narrative--it ends its own story and prohibits further interpretation and, therefore, change. In de Lauretis' own words, the Oedipal myth may be evidence of "just how much of the despised structuralism is still active, however repressed, in the so-called age of post structuralism" (p. 128).

Related to the problem of narrative closure is the assumption that a certain notion of sexual difference is the "driving tension" in our understanding of "the subject and its representations" (p. 129). Desire may in fact always be gendered. It may be true that sexual difference is necessary to desire. What seems less clear is whether or not desire is gendered as heterosexual or, even if it is, if it is limited to heterosexual practice. Whether desire 'itself' is described as 'just' distinct from heterosexual desire or

whether this distinction itself might reform our notions of desire and, subsequently, the relationship between desire, narrativity and subjectivity is what is at issue here. In other words, how we theorize this relationship independently of the assumption that sexual difference is already (and only) embodied in two distinct (male and female) desiring subjects is a question I try to raise within, but which certainly goes beyond, this paper. I want to pose the question of why feminists often begin with the assumption that women are "people of one gender" and to argue that desire or, for that matter sexual difference, understood as heterosexual, is not the only form necessary for a narrative's 'generativity.'

Just how effective the Oedipal myth, as the embodiment of sexual difference may be, is illustrated by both responses to my experience of being treated as both a woman and a man. A lot of people are often shocked and sometimes amused when I tell them that 'mistaken' gender identity is something which I frequently encounter. Since there are supposedly only two genders, the 'liberated' sort who express shock at my experience may be helping to reinforce this binary model. Given that there are only two options, those who think I am a boy, seem to recognize that they have a 50/50 shot at being right. Because I think that most people are confident both in their belief that there are only two choices and in their own notions of masculinity and femininity, they are compelled to gamble and choose to label me as male or female. I am not, therefore, as de Lauretis puts it, "engaged in the cogs of [a different/female] narrative" (p. 106); I am rather a cog in the traditional narrative machine. I seem to transgress the closure of this narrative by embodying others' inability to consistently identify my gender correctly.

Like Barthes, however, de Lauretis seems to assume that "the transgression of values...has as its counterpart--perhaps even its foundation--a technical transgression of the forms of language."[3] The question remains why desire, if not conceived as heterosexual, implies a transgression or, in a feminist construction, marginality. Consider the blatant example of assumed sexual difference and the implied marginality of lesbian sexuality in the following quote from Alice Doesn't: "since one 'becomes a woman' through the experience of sexuality, issues such as lesbianism...are not merely social...or merely sexual; they are political and epistemological" (my emphasis, p. 18). Becoming a lesbian is not conceived as an experience of sexuality, but is rather relegated to the status of an 'issue' within the larger experience of woman's sexuality.

It's all very confusing, but I think that if we are ever to get rid of stories about boy meets girl or more than one girl at a time (but this is the point--the girls are interchangeable), it seems we have to get rid of boys and girls. This is very different than constructing an "alternative" model based on lesbian sexual sameness which inverts a sexual order only to solidify gender differences again. In other words, feminists have to get rid of gendered relations in precisely the ways, and for the same reasons, that we have understood them to be gendered. Thus, if part of the presentation of myself includes confusing people, it does not necessarily follow that I am the one confused, that I have just not 'decided' into what gender mold I will make myself. Nor do I consciously intend to walk around throwing people off--it is often not a pleasant experience. But this is my point. How do we account for lesbians within a narrative once we have claimed that the phrase lesbian woman is not necessarily redundant? What, in other words, does sexual difference mean in the above question, particularly if the redundancy is refused on the basis of sexuality *per se* and not on the basis of political or epistemological issues?

In this paper, I am primarily asking why the "Oedipus story proper" is considered "paradigmatic of all narratives" (de Lauretis, p. 112). In other words why, in an attempt to understand "the various conditions of presence of narrative in forms of representation," (p. 105) does heterosexuality, as embodied within the Oedipal drama, become the condition of presence? Embedded within this question, is an attempt to figure out one way of engaging a question that Biddy Martin has raised--what "is at stake for feminists...in the articulation of the problem of sexual difference?"[4] What is at stake, as Martin reminds us and as de Lauretis points out, is an "approach to meaning."[5] Assuming that the problem of sexual difference raises some of the questions that I have tried to point out, we need to ask if we want these "official myths" to remain "the stuff of our 'cultural psychology."[6]

Why then do feminists often continue to pose the question of women (more precisely, the construction of women as subjects) from within the same narrative? Again, why does the

focus on women (or, in this case lesbians) within narrative imply a transgression or, as in the feminist formulation, an insistence on marginality? What I am going to argue, primarily through a reading of Jane Rule, is that she resists the notion that there are real women and real men and, precisely because this is true, real lesbians or real heterosexuals. Rule does not create an "alternative" model of subjectivity through her conscious critique of the Oedipal myth. She positions her characters in such a way that change is possible--something neither the Oedipal complex, current semiotic theory, nor some feminist constructions of woman can account for.

To begin a discussion of Rule, I'd like first to look at the end of her novel. After reading about narrative closure in the Oedipal myth, it is not difficult to spot the lack of closure at the end of Desert of the Heart. Ann and Evelyn agree to live in a "house by the river" with the five photos of Ann's foster children. They agree that they will do so for an "indefinate period of time."[7] They walk, as Rule tells us, toward their own image--one that is their own but one that, because of its status as an image, is subject to change as well. Rule is writing less about fixed identities than she is about how Ann and Evelyn understand themselves at this particular moment. This does not mean,however, that Ann and Evelyn are in any way marginal to the movement of this story. The sexual interactions and range of possible sexualities are endless in this novel. Because Rule's characters are not fixed in particular forms of sexuality--one or the other--there is no normal postion to which Evelyn and Ann can be compared (Evelyn has been married and then she falls in love with Ann; Ann sleeps around a lot--with men and women--and then she falls in love with Evelyn; Silver sleeps with Ann and has slept with other women except when she was making her living as a prostitute; Silver marries Joe in the story; Joe's love for Silver is one of the sweetest depictions of love in the book; he aspires, at the same time, to be a pornographer. The missing 'normal' position would seem necessary in order to define Ann and Evelyn as marginal.

I said earlier that the range of sexual possibilties which Rule offers is different from an alternative model of sexual representation based on sameness--sameness between some would imply either difference among others or a static definition of any one character's sexuality. In other words, Rule exposes the problems within the sameness/difference form, as a representation of sexuality, precisely because it falsely homogenizes her characters' experiences of their own sexuality. Why then does she create her two main characters, Evelyn and Ann, as two women who look remarkably alike? Further, why is Evelyn portrayed as old enough to be, and is indeed mistaken for, Ann's mother? If Rule is playing with the rejection of lesbian sexuality based on a model of sameness, how does she play with it? I do not think she does so in order to create an "alternative" model of sexuality.

For example, Evelyn and her soon-to-be-ex-husband, tried to have a child and 'failed.' Evelyn knows that

> *the cheapest and crudest pornography could not have been more destructive to the spirit of love [than when each of them had exposed their] secret sex to the laboratories, had admitted to specialists [their] private, unscientific fears, together they submitted themselves to experiment, making love by the book, by the calendar, by the temperature chart* (p. 68).

Ann, on the other hand, thinks that "motherhood should become a specialized profession...for people really suited to it" (p. 70). Frances, Ann's step-mother is described as the "non-mother of a grown child" (p. 60). Evelyn, while still married, nurses her neighbor who has lost her husband in the war. Silver, the lesbian-prostitute-eventual wife of Joe--is the only character in the book who gets pregnant.

My point is, therefore, that Rule is asking us to question our hasty assumption that, because Ann and Evelyn look alike, lesbian sexuality is therefore modeled on a notion of identity via sameness. If the mother figure is part of what has influenced our notions about sexual difference (and, by implication, sameness), then Rule does everything she can to make the experience of motherhood as diverse as she makes other experiences of sexuality. In this novel, there is neither a model mother nor a mother model.

So Jane Rule does not seem satisfied with inverting or creating an alternative to the sexual order--a creation which would only make the order itself stand in more stark relief. What she is most interested in is changing the order of

language itself--where heterosexuality is not the driving force of all narrative forms or of women's representations of themselves. In the following passage, the connection between language and convention offers an example of the connection between different stories and different desires:

> *Conventions...have a way of surviving their own usefulness. They are then excused or defended as the idioms of living. For everyone, foreign by birth or by nature, convention is a mark of fluency. That is why, for any woman, marriage is the idiom of life....She give[s] it up...only when she is forced to admit that she has never been able to pronounce it properly and has committed continually its grossest grammatical errors. For such a woman marriage remains a foreign tongue* (my emphasis, p. 5).

At this point then, two general things distinguish Rule's narrative from the Oedipal one. Most obviously, heterosexuality is not the condition of presence which generates this novel. Therefore, Ann and Evelyn have neither clearly consented to nor have been seduced by femininity--defined, as de Lauretis implies, by a relationship to a male other. Secondly, their story is not completed. It does not close Ann and Evelyn off from their own abilities to interpret their own lives.

Just as Rule opens a space for tolerance in the face of the range of her characters' (or subjects') relationship to their own sexuality and avoids both rigid judgement and narrative closure, so I think feminists should consider if the narratives we use may mean the confinement of particular women. Perhaps too, Rule has offered us a notion of subjectivity in which sexuality is relegated as a part of subjectivity rather than subjectivity itself. In other words, de Lauretis' claim that the "most exciting work in cinema [and I think she would include literature as well] and feminism today...is narrative and Oedipal with a vengeance, for it seeks to stress the duplicity of that scenario and the specific contradiction of the female subject in it" (p. 15), makes little sense if we question both the notions of duplicity and female subjectivity as they are already prescribed by "Oedipal logic--the inner necessity or drive of...drama" (p. 125).

In Jane Rule's novel, this model of duplicity is shattered because the Oedipal story can not account for the range of sexuality she presents. In fact, if heterosexuality is supposed to be the condition for narrativity, the very existence of Jane Rule's novel can not be explained, let alone what happens within it. As a structural paragon and the paradigm of meaning therefore, the Oedipal myth fails.

ENDNOTES

1. Teresa de Lauretis, Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 119. All further references to this work will be cited in the text.

2. Teresa de Lauretis, Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 16.

3. Quoted in Susan Rubin Suileman's essay "Pornography, Transgression, and the Avant-Garde," in Nancy K. Miller, ed. Poetics of Gender (Columbia University Press, 1986), 120.

4. Biddy Martin, "Feminism, Criticism, and Foucault," New German Critioue (1982), 13.

5. Ibid.

6. Carolyn Kay Steedman, Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 75. For an analysis, primarily of the class presumptions in psycholanalyis, see Steedman. She relates these presumptions to ethnic, political and historical limitations as well. I have used part of her analysis because it seems to apply to 'unofficial' forms of sexuality as well.

7. Jane Rule, Desert of the Heart (The Naiad Press, Inc., 1964), 222. All further references to this work will be cited in the text.