Between Life and Literature: The Influence of Don Quixote and Madame Bovary on Twentieth-Century Women's Fiction

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BETWEEN LIFE AND LITERATURE: THE INFLUENCE OF DON QUIXOTE AND MADAME BOVARY ON TWENTIETH-CENTURY WOMEN’S FICTION

by

VICTORIA TOMASULO

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York.

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

Between Life and Literature: The Influence of *Don Quixote* and *Madame Bovary* on Twentieth-Century Women’s Fiction

by

Victoria Tomasulo

Advisor: Evelyne Ender

This project demonstrates the influence of two foundational novels in the Western canon, *Don Quixote* and *Madame Bovary*, on twentieth-century British, Italian, and Anglo-American women’s fiction. Both novels illustrate the dangers and pleasures of literary influence. Stylistically innovative, they anticipated concerns that were of import to feminist literary critics in the seventies and beyond: the transformative power of the reading encounter, its normative and subversive effects on gendered identities, and the need of individual writers to liberate themselves from the shackles of literary convention. Drawing upon textual and paratextual evidence such as interviews, journal entries, and essays, I argue that novels as groundbreaking as Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* (1928), Elsa Morante’s *Menzogna e sortilegio* (1948), and Erica Jong’s *Fear of Flying* (1973) appropriate key motifs from Don Quixote and Madame Bovary to represent a woman writer’s impossible quest for self-representation in a male literary tradition. Emphasizing the formative effect that *Don Quixote* and *Madame Bovary* had on the literary imagination of twentieth-century women writers, my study offers a new perspective on the emergence and development of feminist metafiction, a genre which scholars have located within and as an agonistic response to the traditional British canon.
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INTRODUCTION:  
*DON QUIXOTE, MADAME BOVARY, AND THE WOMAN WRITER*

…She looked at the paper and looked up; she looked at the sky and looked down. Life? Literature? One to be made into the other? But how monstrously difficult! For—here came a pair of tight scarlet trousers—how would Addison have put that? Here came two dogs dancing on their hind legs. How would Lamb have described that?

--Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (1928)

My study situates twentieth-century Italian, British, and Anglo-American women’s fiction in relation to two foundational novels in the Western canon: Miguel de Cervantes’s *Don Quijote, El ingenioso hidalgo de la Mancha* (1605; 1615) and Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (1857). Both books foreground the dangers and pleasures of literary influence. Stylistically innovative, they anticipated concerns that were of import to feminist critics in the seventies and beyond: the transformative potential of the reading encounter, its normative and subversive effects on gendered identity, and the need of individual writers to liberate themselves from the shackles of literary convention. As my analysis will show, groundbreaking novels such as Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* (1928), Elsa Morante’s *Menzogna e sortilegio* (1948), and Erica Jong’s *Fear of Flying* (1973) reflect the formal and thematic influence of one or both of these classics.

*Don Quixote* is widely considered the first modern novel. Its eponymous protagonist, a middle-aged landowner of modest means, is obsessed with books of chivalry. Inspired by the inimitable Amadis de Gaul, he decides to turn himself into a knight in early seventeenth-century Spain, to right all manners of wrong and defend the honor of maidens and other vulnerable subjects. He enlists his poor, illiterate neighbor Sancho Panza in his enterprise, promising to make him the governor of an island, and the two embark on a series of adventures that make them the laughing-stock of their
community. Cervantes pokes fun at our tendency to confuse fantasy with reality not only through his book-addicted protagonist—Quixote mistakes an inn for a castle, a barber’s basin for a giant’s helmet, and prostitutes as princesses—but also through his narrative method. In sixteenth-century Spain, the generic category of fiction did not exist: chivalric romances were presented as true stories, with the label “historias” or “crónicas” inserted in the subtitles (Fox 5, 50). The conflation of history and fantasy in the popular imagination led the Spanish to romanticize their colonial enterprise. Several of the conquistadores, including Columbus and Cortés’s men, viewed the New World through the lens of chivalric romances; conversely, the chroniclers of romantic tales took inspiration from the exploits of the conquistadores (Fox 10-11). Cervantes parodies these “historias” throughout the *Quixote*, imitating their many inconsistencies and errors. Framing the *Quixote* as the translation of a book written by an Arab historian Cid Hamete Benengali, he exposes the artifice involved in the creation of verisimilitude. Since books in Arabic had been burned in Counter-Reformation Spain, the fiction of the Arab historian appeared outrageous in Cervantes’s time.

Women’s literary history has been bound up with *Don Quixote* since the eighteenth century, when the growing popularity of the novel and the spread of circulating libraries in England facilitated an increase in female literacy. Reacting against this new development, critics of the time constructed the female reader as naïve, impressionable, and incapable of distinguishing between fantasy and fact (Gordon 35). The first quixotic novels penned by women functioned as cautionary tales. Published anonymously in 1752, Charlotte Lennox’s *The Female Quixote, or the Adventures of Arabella* illustrates how a wealthy young woman’s reading of French romances causes
her to misread her suitor’s motives and to put herself in potentially dangerous situations. Like Don Quixote, Arabella applies the codes of chivalric literature to her life, with disastrous results: for instance, mistakes the Thames for the Tiber in *La Fausse Clélie* [*The Mock-Clelia* 1678], she jumps into the river in an attempt to flee horsemen whom she believes are “ravishers.” The novel’s ending is so conservative that for many years it was believed to have been written by Samuel Johnson: after an edifying conversation with a “pious and learned Doctor,” Arabella realizes her folly and accepts her cousin’s hand in marriage, following her dead father’s wishes. Lennox’s novel inspired a spate of female quixote narratives, most notably American author Tabitha Gilman Tenney’s *Female Quixotism: Exhibited in the Romantic Opinions and Extravagant Adventures of Dorcasina Sheldon* (1801), which was also published anonymously. Dorcasina, like Arabella, is an aristocratic young woman whose consumption of French romances leads her astray from a conventional feminine destiny. Unlike Arabella, however, she does not realize her folly until she is an elderly spinster who has been exploited by multiple suitors, including a nefarious Irishman.

*Don Quixote* also influenced Charlotte Turner Smith, a Romantic poet and novelist who had fallen into obscurity by the middle of the nineteenth century. Her most successful novel, *The Old Manor House* (1793), deserves mention as a possible source for Virginia Woolf’s fictional biography of her lover, the English poet Vita Sackville-West. Not only are the protagonists of both novels androgynous, they also have the same first name—Orlando—recalling Ariosto’s lovesick warrior. Like Woolf’s nobleman-turned-woman, Smith’s Orlando is a passionate reader and writer of verse who transgresses class norms in his romantic relations and struggles to regain his rightful
place as the heir of an English estate. Anne K. Mellor has argued that Orlando’s “pronounced femininity” in *Old Manor House* “embodies a critique…of the ideology of feudal aristocracy” (9). The same could be said of Woolf’s effeminate nobleman, who is repelled by the uncouth mannerisms of his peers and comes to regard his ancestors as “vulgar upstarts” (149). In each novel reading engenders a revolution from within that has political consequences: Smith’s quixote leaves England to fight in the American War, and Woolf’s becomes an ambassador in Constantinople during the uprising against the Sultan.

With the publication of *Madame Bovary*, the novelistic discourse of female Quixotism gave way to a new literary phenomenon known as *Bovarysme*. An admirer of *Don Quixote* since childhood, Flaubert transposed Cervantes’s mock-heroic knight into a mock-sentimental heroine and impersonated her voice through *free indirect style*, a mode of narration which reveals the thoughts and emotions of characters without the use of tags such as “she thought” or “he felt.” Blurring the boundary between the omniscient male narrator and his female protagonist, this style offered the reader a window into a desiring woman’s subjectivity. Unlike Lennox’s and Tenney’s female Quixotes, Emma Bovary is a hedonist: her attempt to “live literature” takes the form of extramarital affairs. The daughter of a farmer married to a dull country doctor, she reads (sentimental eighteenth-century novels, popular romances, and women’s magazines) to escape into atmospheres of sensual abundance and yearns to experience words like “passion,” “bliss,” and “ecstasy” firsthand. If Cervantes’s Quixote sacrifices comforts in pursuit of an ideal, Bovary conflates the sensible with the transcendental: a viscount’s green silk-cigar case, like a map of Paris, embodies a glamorous, exciting life beyond her reach. Her habit of
living beyond her means becomes her undoing: having forged her husband’s signature on one too many promissory notes, she plunges her family into a debt and commits suicide by swallowing arsenic, and the novel goes on without her, underscoring the futility of her rebellion against her lot.

While Novillo-Corvalán and other critics have referred to Emma Bovary as a female Quixote, throughout this study, I distinguish between quixotic and bovaresque heroines, and, by extension, between the quixotic novel and the novel of bovarysme. Both Don Quixote and Emma Bovary are voracious readers of romantic genres, but books mediate their desires in different ways. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a Quixote is “an enthusiastic visionary like Don Quixote or Don Quijote, inspired by lofty and chivalrous but also unrealizable ideals.” In contrast, bovarysme is defined as “a disposition towards escapist daydreaming in which one imagines oneself as a heroine or hero of a romance, whilst ignoring the everyday realities of the situation.” Although Barbey d’Aurevilly coined the term in a 1862 review of a novel, it did not acquire critical currency until after Jules de Gaultier had published his influential study of Flaubert’s fiction, Bovarysme: La Psychologie dans l’oeuvre de Flaubert (1892). Gaultier defined bovarysme as “the faculty of conceiving oneself as other than what one is” (4) and linked it with metamorphic processes necessary for evolution. Around the same time, bovarysme appeared in psychiatric textbooks as “a disorder of the imagination; involving profound disgust at reality, dissatisfaction with one’s life, flight into imagined worlds, and resulting in a neurotic—specifically hysterical—state” (Heath 140). A precursor to hysteria, it was associated with women, replacing quixotism as a pathological description of femininity. In my analysis, I use “quixotism” to denote book-inspired idealism and
“bovarysme” to denote book-inspired fantasizing, thereby modifying the OED definitions to include a passion for reading as the hallmark of quixotic and bovaresque subjectivity. These terms are distinct, but by no means mutually exclusive: as we will see, the transformation of a bovaresque heroine into a quixotic one is a recurring pattern in twentieth-century women’s fiction.

Adultery figures as a trope in most novels of bovarysme. As Rita Felski has argued in *Literature after Feminism* (2002), the difference between the plots of *Don Quixote* and *Madame Bovary* is largely a function of its protagonist’s gender: because Emma is a woman, her quest is limited to the love affair. When men inevitably disappoint or betray her, she becomes despondent and takes refuge in the role of the good Christian wife/mother, only to resume the role of adulteress with renewed abandon. Emma’s indifference to the venerable institutions of marriage and motherhood and her capacity for sexual pleasure—qualities inherited by the heroines of American feminist metafiction, as Suzanne Leonard has observed in “‘I Really Must Be an Emma Bovary:’ Female Literacy and Adultery in Feminist Fiction” (2010)—accounted for the novel’s scandalous dimension in France of the Second Empire, well after the Napoleonic Code of 1804 had criminalized female adultery.

*Madame Bovary* was put on trial in 1857, its author accused by the Conservative Second Empire (1852-1870) of offending public morality and religion. Although Flaubert exonerated himself of these charges, claiming that his novel was a cautionary tale that promoted virtue by punishing vice, the book continued to stir deep-rooted cultural anxieties about the influence of fiction on the female imagination: it was banned on sexual grounds in Italy in 1864, and in the U.S. in 1954 by the National Organization of
Decent Literature. In post-unification Italy, which witnessed the rise of the novel and the slow spread of literacy among the middle classes, young women’s reading habits were a site of surveillance. Church and State officials pontificated on what genres were suitable for unmarried girls: devotional literature was favored, and the novel, which was conflated with the romance in the popular imagination, was deemed risqué. The same year that *Madame Bovary* was banned, the scapigliato artist Federico Faruffini painted *La lettrice*, investing the image of a young woman reading with erotic overtones. The woman is reclining on a red armchair, absorbed in a book. Although its contents are not visible, Italian audiences would have assumed that it was a novel because of her relaxed pose and her expression of sensual enjoyment. She is smoking a cigarette, a “masculine” activity from which Italian women were discouraged. Her back and profile are turned towards the spectator, and a heap of books lay pell-mell on the table in front of her. Faruffini’s provocative painting suggests that when young women read, they inhabit a space beyond the reach of well-meaning parents and church officials.

*Madame Bovary*’s arrival in Italy strengthened the association in the popular imagination between female reading and adultery, at a time when women were reading and writing in unprecedented numbers. Prominent writers Marchesa Colombi (1840-1920) and Matilde Serao (1856-1927) drew from this motif in their novels *Prima morire* (1887) and *Fantasia* (1883), respectively. Colombi’s Eva is Emma Bovary’s Italian cousin, an aristocratic young woman who turns to novels to assuage her boredom with her marriage. As in Flaubert’s novel, literature exacerbates rather than cures her hysterical symptoms. Zola’s *Une page d’amour* initiates Eva’s amorous relationship with her neighbor, who discovers the book, along with a letter that Eva has written to a friend,
in a subscription library. After reading the book, he attributes Eva’s unhappiness to her absorption in fictional worlds, yet this does not prevent him from getting involved with Colombi’s unhappy heroine, in an affair that engenders the ruin of all parties involved. Ann Hallamore Caesar has called *Prima morire* “a dishonest novel” because it “pretends not to be doing what it is in effect doing:” unmasking the moral danger of reading fiction to a nineteenth-century female audience. The novel abounds with allusions to Tarchetti and Foscolo, affording the female reader a kind of “pleasurable identification that it then condemns as threatening the very foundations of woman’s moral standing and family life” (13).

In ‘Romanzi d’amore’ (1884), Matilde Serao acknowledged the subversive power of the romance on the female imagination: “Il lettore rumina con l’immaginazione il romanzo come fosse un’avventura sua propria, e una trasfusione accade, una comunione si fa, il critica svasisce nel sognatore” [“The reader gives herself over imaginatively to the romance as if it were her own adventure, a transformation happens, a communion, the critic vanishes in the dreamer,” my translation]. Her first novel, *Fantasia* (1883), was likely inspired by *Madame Bovary*. Serao transposes Emma Bovary into the capricious Lucia Altimare and Charles Bovary into the unimaginative Caterina Spaccapietra, the protagonist with whom we are made to sympathize. Like Emma, Lucia is an avid reader who suffers from hysterical fits. After marrying her consumptive cousin, she pursues Caterina’s husband, Andrea, courting him with the rhetoric of love she has learned in romances. Yet she is cleverer than Emma, for she is aware of the derivative nature of her predicament. In a conversation with Andrea, Lucia likens their affair to Flaubert’s “dramma borghese” (“bourgeois drama”):
‘Do you know that you can find our situation in *Madame Bovary*? It’s a novel by Flaubert.’

‘I haven’t read it. How can you say such cruel things to me?’

‘According to him we are playing in a bourgeois drama or a provincial drama, which mean the same thing.’ (*my translation*).

According to Lucienne Kroha, the first critic to give serious consideration to *Fantasia*’s intertextual relationship with *Madame Bovary*, through the creation of Lucia and Caterina Serao presents two contrasting feminine archetypes—the femme fatale and the self-effacing, obedient wife—and rejects both, without offering a satisfying alternative (49-50). Serao, in Kroha’s view, expresses her insecurities as a woman writer through Caterina, who is too paralyzed to articulate an opinion when Lucia enlists her help in deciding whether she should marry her deformed cousin. Kroha concludes that “Serao’s failure to find a ‘voice’ with which to counter prevailing literary representations of women is reflected over and over again in Caterina’s failure to find a voice of her own with which to resist Lucia’s imperious personality and will “ (53).

Although *Fantasia* did not “counter prevailing literary representations of women,” in withholding punishment from Lucia, Serao departed from her male literary predecessors. The denouement of *Fantasia* was extremely unconventional for its time. Instead of killing her adulterous heroine, Serao allows her to elope with Andrea, while the “good” wife, Caterina, commits suicide. This ending met with so much opprobrium in England that it had to be rewritten to satisfy conventional moral expectations: in the 1890 translation by Henry Harland and Paul Sylvester, a remorseful Lucia smothers herself.
with charcoal, her fate aligned with that of Emma Bovary and Anna Karenina. In a late
tenineteenth-century American anthology of contemporary fiction that included excerpts of
Serao’s work, Fantasia is introduced as follows:

This is the story of a morbid and fanatically religious invalid, who through her
sickly romanticism is led into sinful feeling. She infatuates the husband of her
dearest friend, and finally leaves her own husband to run away with him; but,
overcome with remorse, evades her lover, and smothers herself with charcoal, to
secure the happiness of the deserted wife.¹

Given Fantasia’s American reception, it is not surprising that Kate Chopin’s The
Awakening (1899) met with so many unfavorable reviews. Unlike Fantasia, The
Awakening does not mention Madame Bovary; its heroine, Edna Pontélier, is drawn to
classical music and visual arts rather than to books. Yet the novel has been considered an
American version of Madame Bovary, and with good reason. Like Emma, Edna
fantasizes about men she has never met, throws herself into artistic projects she cannot
complete, and finds no contentment in marriage and motherhood. Yet as the wife of a
successful New Orleans businessman who vacations on Grande Isle, she has no desire for
extravagant dinner parties. Chopin strips Edna of Emma’s materialistic desires, charting a
spiritual awakening that recalls the transcendentalism of Thoreau: finding freedom in her
solitary contemplation of the ocean, she aspires to “swim where no woman had swum
before.” Like Flaubert, Chopin uses free indirect style, but she refrains from commenting
on Edna’s thoughts and actions, leaving readers free to make their own judgments.
Symbolic details revolve around the ocean, whose sensuous, maternal nature represents
an alternative to a phallic symbolic order [“the touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the
body in its soft, close embrace” (109)]; they are never grotesque as in Madame Bovary.

Although Edna Pontelier kills herself, she does so by drowning rather than by swallowing rat poison, and her suicide is represented as a liberation: as she walks into the ocean, she returns to the sensual landscape of her childhood memories, surrendering to her unconscious desires.

*Don Quixote* and *Madame Bovary* continued to exert a formidable influence on women’s fiction in twentieth-century Italy and America. Two world wars, the rise and fall of fascism, and the emergence of feminist and civil rights movements transformed the sociopolitical landscape in both countries, leading women writers to question their relationship with their literary heritage and to search for new forms of self-representation. Paradoxically, recourse to the tradition of Cervantes and Flaubert enabled their revisionary poetics. Elsa Morante (1912-1985) modeled her first novel, *Menzogna e sortilegio* (1948), after *Don Quixote*; she hoped that her metafictional family saga would transcend the limitations of romantic and postromantic genres. Nearly forty years later, Kathy Acker, an American writer famous for her subversive plagiarism of male classics, “copied” *Don Quixote* while she was in a hospital in London, waiting to have an abortion. Although she did not intend to revise *Don Quixote* from a feminist perspective, midway through the book she realized that it was about “appropriating male texts and […] trying to find your voice as a woman” (“An Interview with Kathy Acker,” 91).

If *Don Quixote* inspired Morante’s and Acker’s experiments with narrative form, *Madame Bovary*’s satirical portrait of a bourgeois housewife garnered the attention of feminist writers in Italy and America. In her full-length study, *Cercando Emma* (1993), Dacia Maraini casts doubt on Flaubert’s oft-quoted assertion that “Madame Bovary c’est moi.” Paying close attention to Flaubert’s correspondence with his mistress, Louise Colet,
and with his literary compatriots, Maxine Du Camp and Louis Bouilhet, Maraini contends that Emma Bovary was based on Louise Colet and became the locus of Flaubert’s misogynistic projections². The female reader could identify with Emma Bovary’s desire for transcendence but not with her selfish, amoral character: an observation that would be echoed by Linda Urbach, the American author of Madame Bovary’s Daughter (2011). In “Fiction Victim” (1999), Erica Jong arrives at a different conclusion. Arguing that Flaubert mocked himself through his book-besotted heroine, she emphasizes Bovary’s universal appeal: “If Emma Bovary, with all of her self-delusion, still stirs our hearts, it is because she wants something important: for her life to have meaning, for her life to bring transcendence.” While neither Maraini nor Jong have cited Madame Bovary as an influence on their fiction, both have explored the subjectivity of adulterous reading women in their most highly acclaimed novels. Flaubert’s influence on their fiction also manifests itself on a formal level: Maraini’s omniscient narration, use of free indirect style, and abundance of sensory details in La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa (1990), like Jong’s parodic inventory of cultural clichés and ironic stance towards her protagonist’s bovarysme in Fear of Flying (1973), bring to mind Madame Bovary.

The idea of influence evokes genealogical models that are problematic for feminist thought. My study relies on two assumptions: first, that women writers were not aware of the extent to which they had been influenced by Don Quixote and Madame

² American scholar Janet Beizer reached the same conclusion as Dacia Maraini. In Ventriloquized Bodies: Narratives of Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century France (1993), respectively, she read Flaubert’s epistolary correspondence with his mistress Louise Colet as an intertext to Madame Bovary, arguing that Louise served as a model for Emma. She also reads Louise’s La Servante as an intertext to Madame Bovary. Like Cercando Emma, her work illuminates the dynamics of cross-identification, disavowal, and projection involved in a canonical male author’s relationship with a marginal female poet.
Bovary; second, that they recreated the traditions that influenced them, appropriating the motifs of quixotism and bovarysme to represent their own search for sexual and textual freedom. My analysis draws from French structuralist critic Gérard Genette’s theory of “hypertextuality.” In Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree (1982), Genette uses the term to describe “any relationship uniting a text B (hypertext) to an earlier text (hypotext), upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not one of commentary.” He adds that “text B (hypertext) may not speak of text A at all but is unable to exist without text A, from which it originates through a process called transformation or imitation” (5).

Positioning Don Quixote and/or Madame Bovary as hypotexts to seven major works of feminist fiction, I argue that Italian and American women writers have created a novelistic tradition of their own by drawing from and revising the tradition of Cervantes and Flaubert.

The tradition I am referring to is known as feminist metafiction. In Changing the Story (1991), Gayle Greene has written of this genre that it resolves a problem at the heart of feminist debate: can we ‘adapt traditionally male-dominated modes of writing and analyses to the articulation of female oppression and desire,’ or should we ‘rather reject tools that may simply reinscribe our marginality and… forge others of our own? (20)

For Greene, novelists such as Margaret Drabble, Doris Lessing, and Margaret Atwood resolve this dilemma by positioning their protagonists within the nineteenth-century tradition of realism while making them “readers and writers who question old forms and devise new ones” (21). In Feminist Metafiction and the Evolution of the British Novel (2002), Joan Douglas Peters objects to Greene’s assumption that feminist metafiction emerged in the mid-twentieth century. She locates it within the traditional British literary
canon, in male-and female-authored texts that use female narrators to destabilize generic conventions. However, both critics have overlooked the formative effect that *Don Quixote* and *Madame Bovary* had on the literary imagination of twentieth-century women writers who, like Cervantes and Flaubert, were engaged in a revisionary enterprise. “I write by using other texts…. I’m playing the same game as Cervantes,” Acker has said in an interview with Lori Miller. That the most influential novel in the West emerged as a countergenre to existing forms of poetry and prose fiction obviates the debate among feminist literary critics in the nineties about whether women writers should use or abandon the master’s tools.

Given the foundational status of *Don Quixote* and *Madame Bovary*, it is easy to position them as hypotexts to a wide range of novels. In response to Lionel Trilling’s oft-quoted remark that “all prose fiction is a variation on the theme of *Don Quijote*” (206), Diana de Armas Wilson cautioned Cervantes scholars against “chasing the hoary theme of illusion and reality,” reminding them that “*Don Quijote* begins as a book about books.” (*Don Quijote* ix) To avoid seeing influence where it does not exist, I have limited my analysis to novels with a book-inspired protagonist whose authors have written about *Don Quixote* and/or *Madame Bovary*. Using intertextual and paratextual evidence (journals, essays, interviews, notes on manuscripts), I investigate how women’s reading of one or both of these classics has informed their fiction.

My study is divided into two parts. Part I, “Reimagining Don Quixote,” situates twentieth-century women’s novels in relation to Cervantes’s novel. Chapter 1 establishes Woolf’s *Orlando* as a quixotic novel, Chapter 2 considers Acker’s *Don Quixote, Which Was a Dream* as a postfeminist revision of Cervantes’s classic, and Chapter 3 examines
the influence of both Don Quixote and Madame Bovary on Morante’s *Menzogna e sortilegio*. I begin with Woolf’s *Orlando* because its playful deconstruction of gender and genre set a precedent for women writers in America and Italy: both Anna Banti’s *Artemisia* (1947) and Acker’s *Don Quixote* (1986) are indebted to *Orlando*. Unlike Morante and Acker, Woolf did not claim *Don Quixote* as a narrative model. However, as a prolific reader of English fiction (Laurence Sterne’s quixotic novel *Tristam Shandy* was one of her favorite books), Woolf was steeped in a Cervantean tradition, and the influence of Cervantes’s classic manifests itself in her parody of pastoral and biographical conventions and in her protagonist’s pursuit of a romantic ideal of authorship through four centuries.

Part II, “Reimagining Emma Bovary,” focuses on feminist appropriations of Madame Bovary in Italy and America. It is more comparative in scope than Part I, bringing together four novels: Alba de Céspedes’s *Dalla parte di lei* (1949), Dorothy Bryant’s *Ella Price’s Journal* (1972), Erica Jong’s *Fear of Flying* (1973) and Dacia Maraini’s *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucria* (1990). While de Céspedes’ novel was set in Rome during and after fascism, Bryant’s and Jong’s fictions were written during the heydey of the Women’s Liberation Movement in America. Maraini’s historical novel is an imaginative rendering of her ancestor, a mute-deaf Sicilian duchess whose estate she visited on a trip to Bagheria. Despite their divergent historical and biographical contexts, each of these novels writes beyond a Flaubertian model of bovarysme, allowing the adulterous female reader to survive romantic disillusionment and “rewrite” her destiny. In so doing, they depart from the neo-Bovarysme of James Joyce and Manuel Puig, both of
which, in Patricia Novillo-Corvalán’s words, have created “defective, worse off versions of Emma Bovary” (13).

Two distinct patterns of hypertextuality have emerged from my analysis. While Woolf, Acker, and Morante imitate Cervantes’s model, adapting quixotism to their own plight as women writers, de Céspedes, Bryant, Jong, and Maraini resist repeating Flaubert’s, often defining their protagonists against Emma Bovary. Clearly an anxiety of influence was at work, but it could not be more different from the model envisioned by Harold Bloom. To borrow from Susan Gilbert and Sandra Gubar, the authors of Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination (1979), their struggle was “not against [Flaubert’s] reading of the world but against his reading of her” (49). Endowing their bovaresque heroines with sexual and textual agency, Italian and American feminist authors have given us an alternate perspective on what it means for a woman to fall in love with, and be forever changed by, books; to yearn for an erotic transcendence, for life and literature to converge.

Between Life and Literature is the first study to trace the emergence of a feminist poetics to the encounter of twentieth-century women writers with Cervantes’s and Flaubert’s classics. I am indebted to Adrienne Rich’s notion of writing as “re-vision,” “a way of looking backwards, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction.” The fictions represented in this study invite us to read Don Quijote and/or Madame Bovary through a gendered lens, to reconsider its most basic assumptions: Can a woman ever inhabit the role of quester? How can she articulate her desire within an androcentric culture? Locating the quixotic in a woman writer’s quest for self-representation, imagining a different fate for the adulterous female reader, they
reflect on the relationship between life and literature from the perspective of feminine difference.
PART ONE: REIMAGINING DON QUIXOTE
CHAPTER ONE:  
‘AFFLICTED WITH A LOVE OF LITERATURE’: WOOLF’S  
ORLANDO AS A QUIXOTIC NOVEL

The reader of today, accustomed to find himself in direct communication with the writer, is constantly out of touch with Cervantes. How far did he himself know what he was about—how far again do we overinterpret, misinterpret, read into Don Quixote a meaning compounded of our own experience, as an elder person might read a meaning into a child’s story and doubt whether the child himself was aware of it?

--Woolf, “Reading” (1920)

Woolf, Orlando, and the Tradition of Cervantes

Woolf read Don Quixote in 1919, the same year that her essay “Reading” was published. Written in the stream-of-consciousness style that would become her hallmark, this essay oscillates between her memory of herself as a young woman reading in her father’s library and a description of the first communities of writers and readers in England. Books summon forth a procession of literary ancestors that lead back to Cervantes. Like Borges’s Pierre Menard, Woolf tries to inhabit Cervantes’s time through her own; she imagines his audience as grown children sitting around a fireplace, saying, “Tell us a story—something to make us laugh—something gallant, too—about people like ourselves only more unhappy and a great deal happier” (Essays 157). She represents her alienation from Cervantes in temporal terms, as the modern reader’s distance from a tradition of storytelling that appeals to the group rather than to the individual. Yet the future author of A Room of One’s Own knew herself to be outside of a tradition that linked male writers with male readers, making each literary or critical work a creative misreading of its parent text, to paraphrase Harold Bloom. Unlike Borges, then, whose Pierre Menard attempts the impossible task of reproducing the Quixote for a twentieth-century French audience, Woolf uses the figure of a quixote to reflect on the role that gender plays in the
experience of literary influence. I am referring to *Orlando*, Woolf’s fictional biography of her lover Vita Sackville-West and her most commercially successful novel.

Like “Reading,” *Orlando* takes the reader on a journey across four hundred years of English literary history. Its eponymous protagonist, a young nobleman who is “afflicted with a love of literature,” undergoes a sex change in seventeenth-century Constantinople, returns to England, and lives through three more centuries as a noblewoman, aging only six years; in the process, s/he moves from the margins to the center of England’s literary tradition, becoming an esteemed poet. Yet s/he falls short of his/her lofty ideal of artistic freedom.

Although *Orlando* has been read through the lens of queer and feminist theories, it has yet to be situated within the tradition of the quixotic novel. For the purpose of this study, I define a quixotic novel as a work of fiction that bears a formal and a thematic relationship with *Don Quixote*. *Orlando* evokes *Don Quixote* through its parody of biography and romance, its incorporation of pastoral and picaresque elements, and, most significantly, its focus on a voracious reader who fashions romantic ideals that are at odds with historical realities. Susan Staves has defined a quixote as a typology of protagonist “whose consciousness is formed by the reading of some kind of literature, and who then goes forth into the world, assuming the world’s reality will match the literary reality he knows” (193). Like Cervantes’s Quixote, Woolf’s Orlando is presented as a victim of bibliomania, a “disease” whose “fatal nature” is “to substitute a phantom for reality” (73-74). Both Don Quixote and Orlando are so intoxicated by what they read that the world

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3 Throughout this chapter I alternate between using the ambiguous pronoun s/he to refer to Orlando and using gendered pronouns. Since Orlando is both androgynous and sexed, my choice of pronoun is determined by the context of my discussion.
of books replaces the everyday world in which they live, alienating them from their peers.

The former, we are told,

spent his free time (...) reading tales of chivalry with such passion and pleasure that he almost forgot to keep up his hunting, not to mention taking care of his estate, carrying his curiosity and foolishness so far that he sold acre after acre of good land in order to buy books of these tales (13).

Similarly, at the height of his love affair with literature, Orlando “would read often six hours into the night, and when they came to him for orders about the slaughtering of cattle or the harvesting of wheat, he would push away his folio and look as if he did not understand what was said to him” (74). Books mediate each protagonist’s desires, inspiring him to adopt a new identity: Alonso Quesada, a middle-aged farmer, decides to become a knight-errant, names himself Don Quixote, and sets out in search of dangerous adventures through which he could prove his valor and rid the world of social injustice; Orlando, a nobleman by birth, undertakes to “win immortality against the English language” and decides that he belongs “to the sacred race…was by birth a writer, rather than an aristocrat” (82, 83). The genres they read—books of chivalry and pastoral poetry, respectively—offer an alternate epistemology, leading them astray from socially sanctioned values. For the Don, valorous deeds mean more than a Christian blood lineage, a radical sentiment in inquisitorial Spain; for Orlando, the life of an obscure, Nature-loving poet is far more valuable than the life of an aristocrat. Hence, others regard their literary passion with suspicion: Quixote’s obsession with chivalric novels is identified as a form of madness by the narrator/“author” and other characters; Orlando’s love of poetry is likened to a “disease,” and the Victorian biographer, whose normative standards Woolf parodies in a Cervantean fashion, thinks it “pitiable in the extreme” that a nobleman “with houses and cattle, maid-servants, asses and linen” should fall prey to it
The community tries in vain to cure its afflicted member: Quixote sets off on a new adventure soon after the townspeople burn his books; the young Orlando is undaunted by his parents’ attempts to prevent him from indulging in his nocturnal pleasure for verse: “They took his taper away, and he bred glow-worms to serve his purpose. They took the glow-worms away, and he almost burnt the house down with a tinder” (73). In each novel the character makes a pact with literature that supersedes his relationships with others, binding him to a code of conduct considered bizarre, foolish, and dangerous by his society’s standards.

While “excessive” reading leads each protagonist to transgress social norms, it has very different effects on identity-formation. In the original Quixote, it consolidates masculine, imperialist ideals: Quixote imagines himself the Emperor of Trebizond and lures his neighbor, Sancho Panza, into joining his chivalric expedition by promising to make him the governor of an island. In Orlando, it renders class and gender identifications fluid, making the protagonist more likely than his peers to fling himself, sighing, at the foot of an oak tree, or to consort with sailors and gamekeeper’s nieces at disreputable places like Wapping Old Stairs. Orlando’s encounter with literature dislocates him from his identity as an English nobleman, allowing him access to his “naked” (private, asocial) self:

…..Orlando, to whom fortune had given every gift—plate, linen, houses, men-servants, carpets, beds in profusion—had only to open a book for the vast accumulation to turn to mist. The nine acres of stone which were his house vanished; one hundred and fifty servants disappeared; his eighty riding horses became invisible; it would take too long to count the carpets, sofas, trappings, china, plates, cruets, chafing dishes and other movables often of beaten gold, which evaporated like so much sea mist under the miasma. So it was, and Orlando would sit by himself, reading, a naked man (74)
Orlando’s scenes of reading complicate René Girard’s theory of triangular desire in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (1961). According to Girard, desire originates not from the subject or the object but from an outside source, a mediator. Of Cervantes’s hero he writes: “Don Quixote has surrendered to Amadis the individual’s fundamental prerogative: he no longer chooses the objects of his own desire—Amadis must choose for him” (1). He distinguishes between external mediation, in which the distance between the subject and the mediator is so great as to preclude the possibility of contact, and internal mediation, in which the distance “is sufficiently reduced to allow these two spheres to penetrate each other more or less profoundly” (9). Both Quixote’s and Sancho Panza’s desires are externally mediated, even though Quixote’s mediator is “enthroned in an inaccessible heaven” whereas Panza’s is inspired by his neighbor; in each instance, the mediator and the subject are not close enough to desire the same object, or to enter into a relationship of rivalry. On the other hand, the inserted tale “The Story of the Man Who Couldn’t Keep From Prying” illustrates the dynamic of internally mediated desire. Anselmo makes his best friend Lothario his rival in order to continue desiring his wife, Camila; he instructs Lothario to test Camila’s fidelity by pretending to court her, a fiction that soon becomes reality, mirroring the novel’s theme\(^4\). The presence of both external and internal mediation in Cervantes’s novel leads Girard to conclude that “all the ideas of the Western novel are presented in germ in Don Quixote” (52), these ideas having as their common basis a triangular structure of desire.

A reader of poetry and poetic prose, Orlando does not identify with a fictional

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\(^4\) Girard’s reading elides the homoerotic dynamic between the two men that is suggested by the text; to concede that rivalry concealed love would have undermined his thesis that the rival is the origin of the subject’s desire.
character like Don Quixote. Desire does not flow in a straight line from an author to
Orlando; rather, it is generated in a circular exchange between the reader and the text.
Orlando creates what Maria DiBattista has called “the figment of the author,” fashioning
the person s/he imagines as the author based on the impressions s/he receives while s/he
reads. In Imagining Virginia Woolf: An Experiment in Critical Biography (2009),
DiBattista uses the metaphor of enchantment to describe our fascination with an author
and his or her works:

Writing, we might say, is a spell worked by the figure of the author. The demon of
reading works a counterenchantment, beguiling us with the figment of the author, a
figment that originates in our own mind and whose existence is registered by the
many excitations, some minimal, some thrilling in their force, that we feel along
the “nerve of our sensation” that is most exposed when we read (7).

Woolf’s description of Orlando’s haunting encounter with the prose of Sir Thomas
Browne exemplifies DiBattista’s notion of reading as a demon that beguiles the reader
into creating a phantom author:

Like an incantation rising from all parts of the room, from the night winds and the
moonlight, rolled the divine melody of those words which, lest they should
outstare this page we will leave where they lie entombed, not dead, embalmed
rather, so fresh is their color, so sound their breathing—and Orlando, comparing
that achievement with those of his ancestors, cried out that they and their deeds
were dust and ashes, but this man and his words were immortal (81).

The figment of Sir Thomas Browne that Orlando has created engenders his quixotic
desire to become a poet, to “win immortality against the English language” (82).

Staves’s definition needs to be revised to account for quixotes who seek to
approximate an ideal based on the figment of the author. For Orlando, poetic gifts surpass
knightly deeds, however formidable; yet the young nobleman’s romanticization of poets
is comparable to Don Quixote’s romanticization of knights, since he endows a fictive
race of beings with divine attributes:
For to Orlando…. There was a glory about a man who had written a book and had it printed, which outshone all the glories of blood and state. To his imagination it seemed as if even the bodies of those instinct with divine thoughts must be transfigured. They must have aureoles for hair, incense for breath, and roses must grow between their lips. (82-83)

Orlando’s “extravagant ideas about poets” persist long after he discovers that his idols, “Shakespeare, Milton, and the rest,” scribble their verse on the backs of washing-bills, quarrel with their wives, and make drunken fools of themselves in taverns (21, 91). If Don Quixote imitates the valorous knights in the Amadis de Gaul series, Orlando imitates English authors and aspires to be “knighted” into the patriarchal world of letters. His boyhood manuscripts teem with formulas from chivalric literature: “Vice, Crime, Misery were the personages of his drama; there were Kings and Queens of impossible territories; horrid plots confounded them; noble sentiments suffused them; there was never a word said as he himself would have said it” (16). However, after the seventeenth-century poet Nick Greene lampoons one of his poems, Orlando vows to write only to please himself, without regard to literary conventions or critical judgments. A mimetic paradigm of desire gives way to a non-mimetic one. Orlando’s becoming-woman accompanies this shift, as I will discuss later in this chapter.

Given the expansive scope of Woolf’s reading, it would have been impossible for her not to have absorbed Cervantes’s influence even if she had not read the Quixote, for as Staves has remarked, “no national literature assimilated the idea of Don Quixote more thoroughly than the English” (193). Many of the novels that Woolf admired—Laurence Sterne’s Tristam Shandy, Jane Austen’s Northanger Abbey, Walter Scott’s Waverly, George Elliot’s Middlemarch and The Mill on the Floss—employ a quixote for comic, satiric, and/or romantic ends. Of these, Sterne’s novel exerted the most significant
influence on Orlando:\textit{Tristam Shandy} abounds with allusions to \textit{Don Quixote} and Cervantes, earning Sterne the reputation of “one of the most congenial of Cervantes’s followers” (Mullenbrook 207). Although Woolf modeled Orlando’s escapades with Turkish gypsies after \textit{Twelve Days}, Vita Sackville-West’s account of her nomadic life in the Bakhtiari Mountains, she might also have had \textit{The Mill on the Floss} in mind. An avid reader with few outlets for her creative ambitions, Maggie Tulliver flees her stifling life as a girl in a provincial English household to live among gypsies and imagines herself their queen. Yet, as Howard Mancing notes, she “characteristically finds little resemblance between reality and her romantic fantasy of gypsy life” (107). Orlando, too, is disillusioned by the end of her stay with Turkish nomads, who challenge her illusions of English superiority and plot her death.

Woolf’s reflections on \textit{Don Quixote} in “Reading” offer a better understanding of her aims in \textit{Orlando}. Rather than tell stories to entertain an English audience, she “redefines the relationship of reader and writer” by casting the former as “a participant creating the biographical characterization of Orlando” (Benzel 2). Her self-conscious Victorian biographer—like Sterne’s autobiographical narrator in \textit{Tristam Shandy}, whose “hobbyhorse” is writing—frequently comments on the difficulty of representing a life and draws attention to narrative gaps and silences, as Maria DiBattista has noted (lvi-lvii). Rather than create a character with whom readers could identify, Woolf uses her quixote to allegorize England’s literary history. Since Woolf conceived of Elizabethan

\footnote{In her introduction to the 2006 edition of \textit{Orlando}, Maria Di Battista has explored the stylistic parallels between Woolf’s novel and \textit{Tristam Shandy}, a novel Woolf had praised in “Phases of Fiction.” “So finally, we get a book in which the usual conventions are consumed and no ruin or catastrophe comes to pass…. we live in the humours, contortions, and oddities of the spirit, not in the slow unrolling of the long length of life” (\textit{On Fiction} 68).}
literature as “exclusively masculine” (“Women and Fiction,” *On Fiction* 92), Orlando is a young man in the sixteenth century; he does not become a woman until 1688, the same year that Aphra Behn’s influential *Oroonoko, Or The Royal Slave* was published. In *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf famously wrote that “all women together ought to let flowers fall on the grave of Aphra Behn, for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds” (65). Equally significant is Woolf’s decision to withhold Orlando’s “Oak Tree” poem from the reader. Written and rewritten over three hundred years, the culmination of Orlando’s literary labors is a ghostly palimpsest: like the character of Orlando and like the text itself, Woolf’s references to Sappho and Orlando’s erotic adventures having been excised from her manuscript.

Unlike Cervantes and his followers in England, Woolf extends Orlando’s life for three hundred and twenty-eight years, foregrounding a tension between the timelessness of the book-inspired imagination and the historical circumstances that shape identities. Orlando’s sex, fashion, verse, and lifestyle respond to “the spirit of the age”; only her quixotic desire to translate life into art (the inverse of Quixote’s desire to translate art into life) remains consistent. DiBattista has observed that Woolf’s “fantasy of an impossibly extended life is a concave mirror reflecting Tristam Shandy’s abbreviated one” (lvi). Indeed, with the creation of a transhistorical quixote, Woolf writes beyond the ending of the quixotic novel, turning Orlando’s “affliction” into a source of agency: “Happily, Orlando was of a strong constitution and the disease [of reading and writing]… never broke him down as it has broken many of his peers,” the biographer remarks (75). While the Don renounces his book-inspired idealism on his deathbed, Orlando preserves her quixotism: her desire to write on her own terms returns in the form of a wild goose
leaping over the head of her husband as she remains poised on the threshold between Victorianism and modernism.

Harold Bloom has noted the affinity between *Orlando* and *Don Quixote*. In “Feminism as the Love of Reading” (1994), Bloom writes: “I cannot recall Woolf mentioning Cervantes anywhere, but that scarcely matters: Orlando is Quixotic, and so was Woolf.” However, one gets the feeling that Bloom puts Woolf into a dialogue with Cervantes primarily to assert the superiority of the original *Quixote*: “The comparison to *Don Quixote* is hardly fair to *Orlando*; a novel far more ambitious than, and as well-executed as, Woolf’s playful letter to Sackville-West would also be destroyed by the comparison.” (6) While “the Don lends himself endlessly to meditation, like Falstaff,” Orlando is easily forgotten. Yet both novels facetiously undermine “societal and natural reality” through the reveries of a book-inspired character who is a “surrogate” for a book-obsessed author. For Bloom, feminist critics have misread *Orlando* (and *A Room of One’s Own* and *Three Guineas*) by attributing political aims to Woolf, overlooking what is foremost in all of her writings: her love of literature for its own sake, her “Paterian estheticism.” Orlando’s deviant sexuality deflects from Woolf’s main intent: to celebrate the British canon. Arguing that Orlando’s “passion for Shakespeare, Alexander Pope, and the possibility of a new literary work” is far more credible than her “raptures for Sasha or for the sea captain,” he concludes that “love, in *Orlando*, is always the love of reading, even when it is disguised as the love for a woman or a man” (37).

Reading *Orlando* as a quixotic novel, a form that “emerged as a countergenre to existing classifications of both poetry and prose fiction” and which identifies “generic conventions” rather than “fantasy” or “reality” as “the true threat to literature” (Fox
“Cervantes” 2, 3), undermines Bloom’s assessment of Woolf’s text as an elegiac encomium to the English canon. While Bloom rightly links Cervantes and Woolf based on their mutual love of reading, he overlooks one of the most significant parallels between the two: their innovativeness. Both authors situate their works within a patriarchal literary tradition whose influence they will subvert: Cervantes pays homage to Aristotle, Horace, Virgil, Ovid, and Fonseca in his prologue, while Woolf acknowledges her debt to Defoe, Sir Thomas Browne, Sterne, and Sir Walter Scott in her preface. Cervantes is thought to have inaugurated the novel by both assimilating and distancing himself from a wide range of genres—books of chivalry, the pastoral, the picaresque, neo-Aristotelian poetics—and Woolf has been credited by her contemporaries with inventing a new form of biography.

Originally conceived of as “a Defoe narrative for fun” entitled The Jessamy Brides about “two women, poor, solitary at the top of a house” and as a detour from her “serious poetic experimental books whose form is always so closely considered” (Diary 104), Orlando marked a transitional phase in Woolf’s career. Having figuratively “laid to rest the ghost of her parents” with To the Lighthouse (Squier 167), in Orlando she parodies her own high modernist style and pokes fun at the gendered conventions of the genre that her father, Sir Leslie Stephen, had immortalized in Dictionary of National Biography. The hallmarks of the ideal biographical subject’s life—birth, childhood, career accomplishments, marriage, death—are subordinated to a subjective rendering of time, space, and identity: “Memory is the seamstress, and a capricious one at that,” the biographer writes, in one of the novel’s many self-reflexive passages (78).
Harold Nicolson’s *Some People* may have inspired Woolf’s experiment with form. In “The New Biography” (1927), Woolf lauds Nicolson for “having devised a method of writing about himself and other people as though they were at once real and imaginary” (232). Yet her use of a self-conscious biographer can be traced back to Cervantes. In the Prologue of *Don Quixote*, the narrator/“author” questions whether he should follow the convention of padding his work with quotes from ancient texts. His interlocutor, a friend, convinces him not to, and the story of Don Quixote follows, the narrator having announced his anti-mimetic impulse. In contrast, in *Orlando*, the biographer’s identity shifts in relation to his subject’s. His epistemological certainty, evident in the opening sentence—“He—for there could be no doubt about his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it…” (13)—breaks down in Chapter Three, when he examines Orlando’s life as an English ambassador in Constantinople. His account of what happened on the eve of the uprising against the Sultan, an insurrection which is metonymically linked to Orlando’s wedding with a gypsy dancer (Rosina Pepita) and subsequent gender reversal, is riddled with gaps and inconsistencies; he cannot separate the truth from rumors of Orlando’s behavior, just as Cervantes’s narrator cannot separate truth from fiction in the account of Quixote’s life given by the Arab historian Cid Hamete Benengali. What Maria DiBattista has referred to as “gynomorphosis,” “the transformation of male bodies and masculinist fictions into their equivalent—but different—counterparts” (*Introduction* Iv), applies to the biographer as well as to Orlando. No longer frustrated with Orlando for thinking too much, for not being the exemplary subject of a Victorian biography, the biographer surrenders his authorial control and focuses on exploring Orlando’s subjectivity in passages of free indirect speech.
Orlando’s parody of courtly love also recalls the Quixote, which is framed as an attack on books of chivalry. A Russian visitor to the English court, Sasha, embodies Orlando’s chivalric ideal. Fashioned as Orlando’s androgynous counterpart, Sasha is described in terms that are analogous to the biographer’s description of Orlando: “a figure….whether a boy or a woman’s, for the loose tunics and trousers of the Russian fashion served to disguise the sex” (37). Her presence engenders metaphoric excesses—Orlando sees her as “a melon, a pineapple, an olive tree, an emerald and a fox in the snow” (37)—and transforms him from “a sulky stripling” into “a nobleman full of manly grace and courtesy” (42). Just as the Don turns the daughter of a farmhand (Aldonza Lorenzo) into a noble Lady (Dulcinea), Orlando imagines that her beloved, Sasha, is from an aristocratic background and ignores all evidence to the contrary, such as her habit of gnawing at candle-ends fallen from the King’s table. Ariosto’s Orlando Furioso serves as an intertext in both novels. However, whereas Cervantes has his hero imitate Orlando’s madness for Angelica in the Siena Morena, Woolf creates a direct parallel between the plight of her protagonist and that of Charlemagne’s warrior. Both Ariosto’s and Woolf’s Orlando’s are high-ranking subjects who are torn between their duties to the state and their desire for Eastern princesses, and both are emasculated by their partners’ active sexuality. While Angelica betrays Ariosto’s Orlando by marrying Medoro, an Arabian foot-soldier, Sasha betrays Woolf’s Orlando by coupling with a Russian sailor and reneging on their appointment to elope together.6

6 Woolf’s choice of name not only recalls Ariosto’s hero, but also Shakespeare’s hero in As You Like It (who, like Vita/orlando, is denied his father’s inheritance) and Orlando Somerieve, the effeminate protagonist of Charlotte Smith’s quixotic novel The Old Manor House (1793). Like Woolf’s Orlando, Smith’s hero is a passionate reader and writer of poetry who transgresses class norms in his love affairs and struggles to regain
Parody leads to travesty with the introduction of Archduchess Harrriet Griselda, the hare-like man/woman who pursues Orlando in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Both as men and as women, Orlando and Griselda pantomime the rites of heterosexual romance to the point of buffoonery. Although the Archduchess becomes an Archduke after Orlando has become a noblewoman, their roles remain asymmetrical, with Griselda’s attempts to woo Orlando as hyperbolic as Orlando’s attempts to get rid of her suitor. The interludes with Griselda not only function as comic relief after the tragic denouement of Orlando’s romance with Sasha, they also serve as its ironic counterpoint, showing how the two aspects of Love—the one “white” and “smooth,” the other “hairy” and “black”—belong to the same person, just as Aldonza and Dulcinea are the same woman. The romantic is wedded to the grotesque, a recurring trope in quixotic fiction: just as Cervantes’s Dulcinea morphs into a coarse, stocky peasant in Book X of Part II, Orlando’s Sasha morphs into fat, middle-aged Victorian woman shopping for a fur coat in a department store in London.

While Woolf never compares Orlando with Don Quixote, the term she uses to describe both are similar. In a journal entry dated October 22nd, 1927, seventeen days after Woolf’s decision to frame her book as a biography of Vita Sackville-West beginning in the year 1500 and ending in the early twentieth-century, she writes about having “abandoned” herself to “the pure delight of this farce” written “half in a mock style very clear and plain so that people will understand every word,” echoing her earlier description of Don Quixote in “Reading” as a “delightful, plain-spoken book built up, his rightful place as the heir of an English estate. Both Walter Scott and Jane Austen, Woolf’s disciples, have praised The Old Manor House. However, there is no mention of Smith’s novel in Woolf’s letters or journal entries.
foaming up around the ancient conception of the knight and his world, which, however things may have changed, remains an unassailable statement of man and his world.” (Diary 115; Essays 158). Interestingly, she minimizes the importance of both works, doubting whether “the beauty and sadness” which she feels while reading about the galley slaves was intended by Cervantes (entry dated August 5, 1920), characterizing the completed Orlando as a “writer’s holiday” “too long for a joke and too frivolous for a serious book” (entry dated March 18, 1928; Diary 122).

Postcolonial critics have brought the seriousness of both Don Quixote and Orlando to the fore, reaching similar conclusions. Diana de Armas Wilson’s catalogue of Cervantes’s Amerindian sources in Cervantes, the Novel, and the New World has done much to corroborate the notion of Don Quixote as a satire of the conquistadores, an idea which was first proposed by a Peruvian scholar in the 1950s. Likewise, Susan Bazargan’s analysis of Orlando’s pastoral sources—Vita Sackville-West’s The Land, the model for Orlando’s “Oak Tree” poem, as well as her Persian travel memoirs, Passenger in Tehran and Twelve Days—has illuminated its satiric vision. Like Cervantes, Woolf uses the motif of quixotism (book-inspired idealism) to illustrate how genres shape and are shaped by imperialist perspectives. If the Don evokes Columbus and his men, many of whom read the New World through the lens of chivalric romances, Orlando pokes fun at Sackville-West, whose love of the Persian countryside did not extend to its disenfranchised georgic subjects. Both authors link chivalric with national ideals and undermine both in their novels’ opening scenes. Cervantes’s hero, who thinks fondly of Cid Ruy Díaz, Spain’s eleventh-century hero, polishes his great-grandfather’s neglected suit of armor and lunges at his makeshift cardboard helmet with a sword, instantly
destroying a week’s labor. The sixteenth-century Orlando, Don Quixote’s contemporary in literary time, is initially presented as a mock-warrior who is given over to patriarchal myths of family and nation: while slashing at a Moor’s desiccated head in the attic of his ancestral home, Orlando recalls how his fathers “had struck many colors off many shoulders” and aspires to continue their legacy in Africa or France (13). Woolf makes explicit the connection between imperialism and literary tradition through the image of the young male Orlando hanging “the dead nigger’s head” “chivalrously out of his reach” before seating himself by the window with a book (72).

Notwithstanding their critique of Empire, both *Don Quixote* and *Orlando* exceed their caricature value. Each vacillates between sympathy for and ironic distance from their quixotic protagonists and the literary genres of which they are enamored. Soledad Fox has remarked that since chivalric romances “had already fallen out of fashion by the time Cervantes was writing, and he himself enjoyed them immensely,” Cervantes’s decision to frame his novel as an attack on books of chivalry “can be read as a gentle parody not only of the outmoded genre, but also of the royal mission to ban these evil works” (5). Bazargan emphasizes the pleasure that Woolf derived from reading *Passenger in Tehran* and characterizes *Orlando* as “Woolf’s highly nuanced response to her friend’s writings, nuances which both complement and critique Sackville-West’s work” (27). Although Woolf subtly mocks Vita/Orlando’s Orientalism in the Constantinople scenes, she also affirms how she uses the land in literal and symbolic ways to establish her agency as a female poet. Both novelists celebrate what Emma Wilson has called “the formative power of the reading encounter:” literature’s potential to recreate the reader by engendering “a recognition of aspects of self which were
previously occluded or unknown” (33). However, by linking the habit of “excessive” reading with the production of an androgynous female subjectivity, Woolf both “queers” the quixotic novel and lends it a feminist dimension.

**Orlando’s Quixotic Quest for Authorship**

Orlando’s “gynomorphosis” constitutes Woolf’s most significant innovation of the quixotic novel. His change from male to female corresponds to a shift in his pattern of identification and desire. As a boy, Orlando imitates the poets of antiquity with the same single-mindedness with which Don Quixote imitates fictional knights, turning out copious manuscripts with titles like “The Death of Hippolytus” and “The Return of Odysseus.” As a young man enraptured by “the marvelously contorted cogitations” of Sir Thomas Browne, he vows to “be the first poet of his race and bring immortal lustre upon his name” (73, 81), much in the same way that Don Quixote vows to do “everything that, according to his books, earlier books had done, righting every manner of wrong, giving himself the opportunity to experience every sort of danger, so that, surmounting them all, he would cover himself with eternal fame and glory” (15). However, after his poem “The Death of Hercules” is publicly lampooned by the poet Nick Greene, Orlando burns his fifty-seven poetic works, sparing only his “Oak Tree” poem, and swears “one of the most remarkable oaths of his lifetime:”

“I’ll be blasted,” he said, “if I ever write another word, or try to write another word, to please Nick Greene or the Muse. Bad, good, or indifferent, I’ll write, from this day on, to please myself” (103).

Orlando is now a woman, although the effects of the oath he has taken have yet to materialize on a bodily level. From then on, s/he must write on the outskirts of tradition,
without caring what men like Nick Greene think, in the absence of models: “Memory
ducked her effigy of Nick Greene out of sight and substituted for it—nothing whatsoever.”
The male writer’s quest for literary immortality gives way to what is perhaps a far more
quixotic enterprise: the woman writer’s quest for artistic freedom.

This quest is the subject of Woolf’s inquiry in “A Room of One’s Own,” which
was originally delivered as a set of lectures at two women’s colleges shortly after she had
finished writing *Orlando* in October of 1929. Taking up the question of why women have
been unable to create a literary tradition that is comparable to that of men, Woolf
foregrounds the social and historical constraints on their freedom: lack of money, privacy,
and social encouragement. The title of her essay alludes to a psychic as well as a physical
space, one in which women could write without the crippling consciousness of their
inferior position in the world (which is why Woolf refrains from titling her essay, “A
Room of Her Own”).

Woolf introduces her theory of the androgynous mind in the last chapters of *A Room of One’s Own*, drawing out the implications of Coleridge’s statement in *Table Talk*
that “the mind of a great artist must be androgynous.” In Chapter 6, she speculates that
“there are two sexes in the mind corresponding to the two sexes in the body” and that
both need to fertilize each other in the act of creation:

…And I went on amateurishly to sketch a plan of the soul so that two powers
preside, one male, one female; and in the man’s brain, the man predominates over
the woman, and in the woman’s brain, the woman predominates over the man.
The normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two live in harmony
together, spiritually co-operating. If one is a man, still the woman part of the brain
must have effect; and a woman must also have intercourse with the man in her
(98).
An androgynous practice of writing does not imply a sympathetic attitude towards the female sex. Rather, it liberates men and women from their subject positions so that they are free to explore the full range of human subjectivity: the woman writer forgets that she is in an inferior position, and the male writer forgets his egotism and his derision of women. For Woolf, artistic greatness requires freedom from all the biases and grievances engendered by a sexually stratified society. Shakespeare is the exemplar of her androgynous ideal:

The reason perhaps why we know so little of Shakespeare—compared with Donne or Ben Johnson or Milton—are that his grudges and spites and antipathies are hidden from us. We are not held up by some “revelation” which reminds us of the writer. All desire to protest, to proclaim an injury, to pay off a score, to make the world the witness of some hardship or grievance was fired out of him and consumed. Therefore his poetry flows from him free and unimpeded. If ever a human being got his work expressed completely, it was Shakespeare (56-57).

One must be detached from the opinions of others in order to achieve an androgynous state of mind, one in which the writer “could continue because nothing is required to be held back” (97). Thus it was considerably harder for women to write well, given the proliferation of discourses that constructed them as incapable of intellectual and artistic pursuits, the extreme condescension with which male critics judged their works, and most significantly, the lack of a female tradition. Woolf laments that a talented sixteenth-century writer like Lady Winchilsea, who could produce lines like “Nor will in fading silks compose/Faintly the inimitable rose,” could let her despair at being excluded from the male-dominated sphere of letters consume her verse, leading to lines like “My lines decried, and my employment thought,/An useless folly or presumptuous fault” (60). She also sees the rage of nineteenth-century novelist Charlotte Brontë as an impediment to her genius, distracting readers of Jane Eyre from their enjoyment of the novel. On the
other hand, she lauds Jane Austen and Emily Brontë for defying the patriarchal censors and “hold(ing) fast to the thing as they see it.”

Many twentieth-century feminist critics, most notably Elaine Showalter, have criticized Woolf’s ideal of androgyny, raising questions such as: Is it possible or desirable to forget one’s sexual position as a writer? Does writing androgynously inevitably become indistinguishable from writing like a man, who, unbound by gendered constraints, can focus on “universal” subjects like Truth and Beauty? It is important to recognize that, for Woolf, writing androgynously does not preclude writing like a woman: while Austen and Brontë write without letting gender-based grievances distort their work, they also write “as women write, not as men wrote” (74-75). Woolf’s notion that the book should be adapted to the body seems to contradict her vision of two sexes cohabitating harmoniously in the mind of a writer, unless we consider that her theory of androgyny rests on a paradox. Bearing in mind that the distinction between sex and gender had not been made in Woolf’s time, let me translate it in contemporary terms: a woman could only write from her body, her sex, if her mind were unimpeded by gender, the culturally inherited baggage of preconceptions about what a man is and what a woman is.

Orlando embodies Woolf’s theory of androgyny. It is not a coincidence that Woolf makes Shakespeare, the exemplary androgynous artist in A Room of One’s Own, a model for Orlando. Shakespeare’s absorption in the creative process commands Orlando’s fascination: “‘Tell me,’ he wanted to say, ‘everything in the whole world’…but how to speak to a man who does not see you? who sees ogres, satyrs, the depths of the sea instead?” (21) Orlando’s specular identification with the unknown poet.
in Chapter 1 prefigures the sex change in Chapter 3 that will reconstitute him as an androgynous subject. As John W. Moses has written: “Orlando is not only psychologically male and female but physically male and female as well (though not at the same time, not hermaphroditic). As a result, over the course of the novel, Orlando will know firsthand the full range of human experience and emotion” (54). However, while androgyny is conceptualized in *A Room of One’s Own* in terms of gender complementarity, in *Orlando* it lends itself to a more intersectional analysis. Orlando’s vow to write as he pleases gives way to his decision to serve as an English ambassador in Constantinople, where he couples with a gypsy dancer, Rosina Pepita. His marriage to Rosina, witnessed by a washer-woman but unremembered by Orlando, coincides with his sexual metamorphosis. After consummating his marriage, Orlando falls into a deep sleep—one of three in the novel, recalling Don Quixote’s three deaths--- and, upon awakening, discovers that his body has become a woman’s. Despite this outward change, s/he continues to desire women. Anticipating Judith Butler’s insight in *Bodies that Matter* that “the assumption of sexual positions” takes place “through a complex series of racial injunctions which operate in part through the taboo against miscegenation” (167), Woolf makes Orlando’s interracial union with Rosina the catalyst of Orlando’s becoming a lesbian, situating Orlando (and the reader) on the outside of a heterosexist English symbolic constituted by racist norms that regulate relations of reproduction. Orlando’s illicit union with the gypsy dancer will threaten her inheritance as much as, if not more than, her legal status as a woman, since Rosina gives birth to three potential male heirs.

In her analysis of key scenes in Book II of *Don Quixote*, Barbara Fuchs uses the term “border transvestitism” to designate acts of passing that transgress both sexual and
ethnic boundaries. Fuchs notes how Cervantes “foregrounds gender confusion in episodes having to do with the rescue of captives, escape from the Moors, ambiguous conversos, and so forth,” a narrative strategy which she views as reflecting “the social anxiety resulting from the impossibility of telling apart Moors, Jews, and conversos from Christians” within inquisitorial Spain (32). While border transvestitism is represented in Don Quixote through marginal characters such as Ana Félix and Claudia Jerónima, it occupies a central position in Woolf’s text. After she becomes a woman, Orlando dresses as a man, in “one of those Turkish coats and trousers which can be worn independently by either sex” (O 139) and joins a band of androgynous mountain people in Broussa. Focalizing his subject through the perspective of the gypsies, the biographer represents Orlando as dark-skinned for the first time in the novel:

The gipsies, with whom it was obvious that she must have been in secret communication before the revolution, seems to have looked upon her as one of themselves (which is always the highest compliment a people can pay) and her dark hair and her dark complexion bore out their belief that she was, by birth, one of them and had been snatched by an English Duke from a nut tree when she was a baby and taken to that barbarous land where people live in houses because they are too feeble and diseased to stand in open air (141-142).

Hence Orlando’s quest for artistic freedom necessitates dislocations along multiple, interlocking axes of identification: class, race, and nation as well as gender and sexual orientation. While her life in England as a cross-dressing noblewoman will make her aware of gender as a performance in the Butlerian sense, that is, as “an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts” (Gender Trouble 140), her cohabitation with the Turkish nomads turns her English value system on its head. A communal people who live on the land and pride themselves on their pagan heritage, they think nothing of a lineage that extends back only
a few centuries and see an accumulation of material possessions as a sign of infirmity. Rustum-el-Sadi’s discourse desacralizes her relationship with her English heritage, making her ancestors appear “vulgar upstarts” (149). With her choice of name for the gypsies’ leader, Woolf alludes to an alternate literary tradition, subtly desacralizing the Western reader’s relationship with the English canon: “Rustum” refers to the epic hero of the Iranian *Shahnameh*, while “Sadi” was a thirteenth-century Persian poet whose works are as revered in Iran as Shakespeare’s are in England.

Noting the influence of Sackville-West’s Persian travel memoir, *Passenger of Tehran* (1926) on *Orlando*, Urmila Seshagiri has argued that “Woolf styles Orlando’s experience of Constantinople after Sackville-West’s experience of Persia,” drawing an analogy between “the Englishwoman on diplomatic duty who dreams of blending into Persia” and Orlando as an English ambassador in Turkey who “revels in racial and cultural crossovers” (180). Her argument is borne out by Woolf’s description of Orlando’s pastoral reveries: “exulting in the wild panorama” of the Turkish countryside, Orlando “wondered if, in the season of the Crusades, one of his ancestors had taken up with a Circassian peasant woman; thought it possible; fancied a certain darkness in his complexion” (121). Yet Seshagiri conflates Woolf with Vita/Orlando, concluding that her biography “remains ideologically wedded to the closed racial categories of British imperial discourse” (168). This assessment is undermined by the Cervantean elements of Woolf’s vision: her parody of the pastoral, evident in sentences such as “her soul expanded with her eyeballs, and she prayed that she might share the majesty of the hills, know the serenity of the plains, etc., etc.” (143) and her emphasis on how Vita/Orlando’s naïve romanticization of Nature blinds her to the reality of a Turkish peasant’s life.
“Nature” comes to stand for English imperialism, and by extension, for the naturalization of native poverty and hardship performed by the British pastoral tradition. Stricken by “the English disease, a love of Nature,” Orlando is undaunted when Rustum shows her his frost-withered fingers and crippled right foot: “This, he said, is what her God did to men” (143, 144); she persists in pronouncing the landscape “beautiful,” angering the gypsies. To worship the land is the privilege of the colonist; her love of Nature gives her away as English and forces her to repatriate. Yet, while the revelation of her national/literary affiliation interrupts her pastoral idyll in Turkey, her status as a woman dogs her in England. The mock-pastoral gives way to the picaresque, and Vita/Orlando becomes every woman writing in secret in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Does Orlando actualize her vow to write as s/he pleases, without giving thought to the standards of a patriarchal literary establishment (Nick Greene) or to artistic merit (the Muse)? To answer this question, we must turn to Orlando’s “Oak Tree” poem. Both the juxtaposition of the phallic “springing grass” with the vaginal “hanging cups of fritillaries” in the stanza quoted from Sackville-West’s *The Land* and the fact that Orlando writes without letting gender-based grievances distort her artistic integrity, despite the considerable obstacles she faces as a woman in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, support Moses’s argument that Orlando writes androgynously (63-64). However, for Woolf, it is not enough for women to write with the male and the female sides of the brain; they must also lay the foundation for a new literary tradition. For “we think back through our mothers if we are women,” she writes in *A Room of One’s Own*. “It is useless to go to the great men writers for help, however much one may go to them for pleasure” (76). Although great writers like Jane Austen and Emily Brontë could adapt
the male sentence for their use, they could not destroy it to create something new, like the fictional twentieth-century Mary Carmichael of *A Room of One’s Own*, whose prose Woolf likens to a railway car swerving up when one would expect it to sink (81).

Carmichael’s *Life’s Adventure* exposes the stupidity of a male logos. “For whenever I was about to feel the usual things in the usual places, about love, about death,” Woolf comments,

> the annoying creature twitched me away, as if the important point were just a little further on. And thus she made it impossible for me to roll out my sonorous phrases about “elemental feelings,” the “common stuff of humanity,” “depths of the human heart,” and all those other phrases which support us in our belief that, however clever we may be on top, we are very serious, very profound and very humane underneath. She made me feel, on the contrary, that instead of being serious and profound and humane, one might be—and the thought was far less seductive—merely lazy-minded and conventional into the bargain (91–92).

Not only is Carmichael deliberately anti-romantic and satirical, illuminating “that spot the size of a shilling” at the back of men’s heads (91), she also breaches taboos by writing that “Chloe loved Olivia.” Whether Chloe loved Olivia in a platonic or a sexual way is irrelevant for Woolf’s purpose; her point is that, for centuries, women in literature have been seen only in relation to men, positioned as rivals. This is to be expected in ages where only male genius is allowed to flourish, since even androgynous writers like Shakespeare and Proust are “terribly hampered and partial in their knowledge of women, as a woman in her knowledge of men” (83). To write “Chloe loved Olivia” in this context is to set a bold precedent, to render visible a small portion of the countless female lives lived in obscurity.

Unlike Mary Carmichael, Orlando is an inheritor of literary tradition rather than an innovator. The ages through which she travels circumscribe her agency as a woman and as a writer. In the eighteenth century, she is relegated to pouring out tea for Pope and
Addison and listening to their diatribes on women’s vanity; in the nineteenth century, the pressure to find a husband stymies her creativity, causing her to scribble page after page of insipid verse and to blot out everything she has written. It is true that Orlando adopts cultural conventions in a way that allows her to act on some of her transgressive desires. In the age of Pope and Dryden, she slips on a nobleman’s breeches and courts English prostitutes, presumably enjoying their bodies as well as their conversation behind closed doors; in the Victorian era, she chooses for her husband a womanly man, a sailor whose frequent excursions to Cape Horn allows her the solitude she needs to write. Each acknowledges the presence of their own sex in the other ---“You’re a woman, Shel!” she cried. “You’re a man, Orlando!” he cried (252)—and their helter-skelter marriage in a cave, accompanied by the booming of organs and flashes of lightening, is a parody of all wedding rites. However, Orlando does not write from these experiences; she does not use her pen to contradict statements like “when [women] lack the stimulus of the other sex, [they] can find nothing to say to each other. When they are alone, they do not talk; they scratch” (219). Women who love other women never enter her writing. To take such a risk in the nineteenth century would be to incur ignominy, Woolf implies in a climactic scene of writing at the beginning of Chapter 6. The spirit of the age, likened to a mysterious power that reads over Orlando’s shoulder, is all too ready to strike what does not conform to its standards. Although it questions the necessity of “Egyptian girls,” it is placated by the author’s obedience to heterosexist conventions: “You have a husband at the Cape, you say? That will do” (285). Rather than question its use of her life as a

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7 The “spirit of the age” personified in Orlando anticipates the Victorian “Angel of the House,” the conceit Woolf relies on in her 1942 address to the Women’s Service League, “Professions for Women.”
yardstick with which to measure her poem, Orlando is relieved to have passed the “examination.” She—and arguably Woolf—acknowledges that “the transaction between a writer and the spirit of the age is one of infinite delicacy, and upon a nice arrangement between the two the whole fortune of his works depend” (266). Only by appeasing the gender-biased spirit of the age can she be unconscious of her gender when she writes. This paradox marks the culmination of Orlando’s bildung:

Orlando had ordered it that she was in an extremely happy position; she need neither fight her age, nor submit to it; she was of it, yet remained herself. Now therefore, she could write, and write she did. She wrote. She wrote. She wrote. (266)

Like all quixotic ideals, Orlando’s is unattainable. She cannot write only to please herself: she must “smuggle in” her own vision, likened by the biographer to “contraband,” while conforming to the double standards of the Victorian Muse. Indeed, her freedom as a woman writer in the nineteenth century depends on her “dexterous deference to the spirit of the age,” on her “putting on a ring and finding a man on the moor” and “living nature and being no satirist, cynic, or psychologist” (266). This repetition of prescriptive Romantic formulas for women, albeit in an inverted order—Brontë’s Jane Eyre finds a man on the moor and puts a ring on her finger—binds her to the past and prevents her from becoming a visionary author like Mary Carmichael, who not only writes “as a woman who has forgotten that she is a woman,” but also breaks “the sentence” and “the sequence” of the Victorian male novel (93, 81). Orlando lacks the modernist imagination necessary to liberate an androgynous female aesthetic, one which, instead of pontificating on “the common stuff of humanity,” would illuminate the universal through the particular, “the everchanging world of gloves and shoes and stuffs swaying up and down among the faint scents that come through chemists’ bottles down arcades of dress material over a
floor of pseudo-marble” (*A Room of One’s Own* 91, 90). Hence Sir Nicholas Greene, who reappears as the most influential critic of the Victorian age, praises Orlando’s “Oak Tree” poem for its traditional feeling: “There was no trace in it, he was thankful to say, of the modern spirit. It was composed with regard to truth, to nature, to the dictates of the human heart, which was rare indeed, in these days of unscrupulous eccentricity” (28).

Given that Sackville-West’s *The Land* served as the model for Orlando’s “Oak Tree,” it is worth examining its reception in England. In this long narrative poem, Sackville-West effaces her gendered identity, adopting a Virgilian persona who invokes the Muses to sing the praises of the English weald. Upon congratulating her for winning the Hawthorne Prize in 1927, poet laureate Robert Bridges remarked, “I’m very pleased—very pleased indeed. You’ve got your feet on the ground—nothing wooly there—- not a woman’s writing at all—damn good” (Nicholson, *Vita* 148). Bazargan has speculated that Sir Nicholas Greene was based in part on Bridges (33). That Greene compares “Oak Tree” favorably with Addison’s *Cato* and Thomson’s *Seasons* lends credence to her hypothesis and suggests that Orlando, like Vita, dons the robes of a male poet in the absence of a female pastoral tradition. Furthermore, the comparison of “Oak Tree” with canonical English texts such as *Cato* and *Seasons* leads the reader to speculate that Orlando can write without being conscious of her sex only because she has inserted herself into a tradition in which concerns of nation are paramount.

Unlike Bridges and his peers, Woolf and other modernist writers did not think highly of *The Land*: “so good, I think, some lines,” Woolf remarked (Glendinning 188). Some feminist critics have glossed over this fact, reading *Orlando* as Woolf’s ode to Vita the writer and the “Oak Tree” as a tour de force instead of as the expression of a minor
literary talent. For instance, for Paula Rabinowitz, Orlando’s poem signifies the eruption of a feminine aesthetic into a male-dominated literary canon. Among other things, Rabinowitz ignores the link Woolf establishes between Orlando’s completion of “Oak Tree” with her memory of her son’s birth, a link which suggests that the fruit of Orlando’s centuries-long labor is also male. Far from celebrating Vita/Orlando’s “crowning achievement,” Woolf mourns her inability to innovate the language of her literary fathers, to give birth to an androgynous female voice.

No writer can be independent of his or her historical milieu: this insight was foremost in Woolf’s mind while reading *Don Quixote* in 1919, and it informs the trajectory of *Orlando*. Its denouement is Cervantean in that the protagonist realizes the unattainability of her ideal and questions her romantic relationship with literature. Orlando’s encounter with Sir Nicholas Greene, the Knight of English Letters, parallels Don Quixote’s encounter with Samson Carrasco, the Knight of the White Moon, in that each serves to disenchant the protagonists. Disguised as the White Moon, Carrasco challenges Quixote to a duel and makes him promise to abandon knight-errantry if he loses (which he does); Greene offers to publish Orlando’s “Oak Tree” poem, securing Orlando a respectable place in the English canon that threatens her ideal of herself as an obscure, free-spirited poet. Sitting before Greene in a London restaurant, Orlando is “unaccountably disappointed” by the discrepancy between her romantic notion of literature as “something as wild as the wind, hot as fire, swift as lightning” and her somber realization that literature is “an elderly gentleman in a grey suit talking about duchesses” (279-280). Her despair deepens when, in Hyde Park, she reads Nicholas’s article on “the collected works of a man she had once known—John Donne” (284).
Victorian literary criticism makes her painfully aware of the incommensurability of life with literature: “Life? Literature? One to be made into the other? But how monstrously difficult!” (285) This “monstrous” difficulty not only has to do with the non-coincidence of “reality” with its representation in art; it is also linked to a socio-historical climate that inhibits freedom of thought and expression. “Reading Sir Nicholas and his friends,” Orlando receives the impression that “one must never, never say what one thought” and that “one must always, always write like somebody else” (285). The biographer’s stream-of-consciousness prose reflects Orlando’s internal struggle against patriarchal censors, reminding the contemporary reader of Woolf’s tentative statement in *A Room of One’s Own* that it is “perhaps better” to be “locked out” of a male literary tradition than it is to be “locked in” (24).

As in Cervantes’s *Quixote*, the legendary status achieved by the protagonist comes at too high a price: the loss of dignity for Cervantes’s hero, the loss of the possibility of artistic independence for Woolf’s heroine. Yet Woolf writes beyond the ending of the quixotic novel, refusing to cure Orlando of her “affliction.” Her desire to write independently of Greene’s and the Victorian Muse’s standards is reaffirmed in the image of a wild goose flying over England, Persia, and Italy. In an extended metaphor, the biographer explains that the goose always flies too fast, resisting Orlando’s efforts to catch it; all s/he can do is fling nets into the sea, retrieving “an inch of silver—six words” but “never the great fish who lives in the coral grooves” (313). The displacement of the bird with the fish suggests a correlation between the writer who departs from tradition and artistic genius. Mary Carmichael, we should recall, is also likened to a bird at the end of Chapter 5 in *A Room of One’s Own*. Staging an imaginary conversation with
Carmichael, Woolf encourages her to leap over the barriers erected by a patriarchal literary establishment: “Think only of the jump, I implored her, as if I had put my money on her back; and she went over it like a bird. But there was a fence beyond that and a fence beyond that” (94). While Woolf emphasizes that Carmichael is “no genius,” she feels confident that she will become one in a hundred years’ time if given material support and social encouragement (94). The same hope is held out for Orlando, and, by extension, for every woman writer: if it was not possible for her to recreate the canon in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it might be so in the twentieth century and beyond.

The wild goose appears on Orlando’s horizon in the novel’s closing scene; it springs over the head of Shelmardine, who alights from an aeroplane in a parody of a deus ex machina. This whimsical utopian ending suggests a future in which both men and women could express themselves without being constrained by the gendered conventions of genres. The works of androgynous male geniuses like Shakespeare and Wordsworth would no longer dominate the canon; “womanly manly” and “manly womanly” minds would complement each other. However, while the ideal beckons to Orlando and to the reader, its fulfillment exceeds the novel, which is bound by its location in time and space: the clock sounds the twelfth stroke of midnight, and Woolf reminds us that she is writing on the eleventh of October in 1928.

Unlike Vita/Orlando, Woolf succeeds in catching the “wild goose.” Drawing from the tradition inaugurated by Cervantes, she inverts its paradigms of reading, identification, and desire, turning “the ancient conception of the knight and the world” into a woman writer’s quest for self-representation through the ages. Her androgynous
female quixote can be seen as Don Quixote’s ironic counterpart, her desire to liberate herself from patriarchal conventions contrasting with his desire to revive chivalry.

Subsequent generations of women writers in America and Italy would follow Woolf’s lead, using the figure of a quixote to reflect on their own search for sexual and artistic autonomy within a culture that excluded them.
CHAPTER TWO:
SEARCHING FOR THE BODY: KATHY ACKER’S POSTFEMINIST
DON QUIXOTE

At last, when his wits were gone beyond repair, he came to conceive of the
strangest idea that had ever occurred to any madman in the world. It now
appeared to him fitting and necessary in order to win a great amount of honor for
himself and serve his country at the same time, to become a knight-errant and to
roam the world on horseback, in a suit of armor; he would go in quest of
adventures, by way of putting into practice all that he had read in his books; he
would right every manner of wrong, placing himself in situations of the greatest
peril such as would redound to the eternal glory of his name.
Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quijote* (1605)

When she was finally crazy because she was about to have an abortion, she
conceived of the most insane idea that any woman can think of. Which is to love.
How can a woman love? By loving someone other than herself. She would love
another person. By loving another person, she would right every manner of
political, social, and individual wrong: she would put herself in those situations so
perilous the glory of her name would resound.
--Kathy Acker. *Don Quixote, which was a dream* (1986)

Plagiarizing Cervantes

Kathy Acker wrote the first scene of *Don Quixote, which was a dream* (1986)
while she was in a hospital in London, waiting to have an abortion. She had brought with
her an English translation of Cervantes’s *Don Quijote*. Her decision to model a narrative
after Cervantes’s classic was unpremeditated: “I couldn’t think while I was waiting, so I
just started copying *Don Quixote*. It was my version of a Sherrie Levine painting, where
you copy something with no theoretical justification for what you’re doing,” Acker
reflected in an interview (McCaffery 91). In “copying” Cervantes, however, she did not
stay faithful to her source: “all sorts of feminist issues,” including her own abortion,
made its way into her narrative about a sixty-six year old female knight and her attempt

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8 Throughout this chapter, I will use the Spanish spelling of Cervantes’s novel to
distinguish it from Acker’s fiction.
to “transform a fairly intolerable social reality into what is the grail, this totally romantic search” (Miller 10).

In an interview with Larry McCaffery, Acker explained that she had been appropriating male texts since she was a high school student, having found in this method a way out of the paralysis induced by the blank page: “I didn’t have a voice, as far as I could tell. So I began to do what I had to do if I wanted to write, and that was appropriate, imitate, and find whatever ways I could to work with and improvise off other texts” (91). While this strategy aligns her with Cervantes, as she has acknowledged to Lori Miller (“I write by using other texts…I’m playing the same game as Cervantes”), she uses it to address what it means to read and write as a woman within a male literary tradition. In the second part of her Don Quixote, “Other Texts,” Acker positions her female knight as a dead reader/writer of male fictions: Andrei Biely’s “Petersburg,” Catallus’s love poems, Lampedusa’s The Leopard, Wedekind’s “Lulu” plays, and an anonymous science fiction story. This part is prefaced with the following epigraph:

BEING DEAD, DON QUIXOTE COULD NO LONGER SPEAK. BEING BORN INTO AND PART OF A MALE WORLD, SHE HAD NO SPEECH OF HER OWN. ALL SHE COULD DO WAS READ MALE TEXTS WHICH WEREN’T HERS.

Reading male fictions becomes a way of rewriting them from a place outside of history, that is, the place of the feminine. As in her earlier works, Blood and Guts in High School (1978), Kathy Goes to Haiti (1978), Great Expectations (1982), and My Death, My Life by Pier Pasolini (1984), in Don Quixote Acker “hacks” into male texts, tampering with their themes and forms, incorporating her own experiences into the plot. In modeling a text after the Quijote, however, Acker plagiarizes a master plagiarizer, for it was Cervantes who inaugurated the novel as a self-conscious, metafictional genre by drawing
from and revising medieval and Renaissance texts such as *Amadis de Gaula*, *Lazarillo de Tormes*, and *Orlando Furioso*.

Perhaps because Acker emphasized that she was fascinated “with [Sherrie] Levine’s notion of seeing what happens when you copy something for no reason” (McCaffery 90-91), critics have avoided reading her *Quixote* in relation to Cervantes’s novel. For instance, Richard Walsh has written that “Acker’s use of material and motifs from Cervantes is even more dominated by her own purposes than with her other texts and functions as no more than a fine thread of allusions, points of anchorage in the host text” (149). Cristina Garrigós has challenged this view, arguing that “the connection between Acker’s narrative and the Spanish text runs deep” (116-117). For Garrigós, Acker’s text “satirizes many of the same elements that were the target of the Spanish author from her own contemporary and gendered perspective” (117). Yet Garrigós focuses less on Acker’s connection with Cervantes than on her relationship with other twentieth-century male authors who were inspired by *Don Quijote*. She relates Acker’s plagiaristic method to the quixotic project in Jorges Luis Borges’s short story, “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote” (1939). In Borges’s story, the translator and art critic Pierre Menard is obsessed with reproducing the original *Quijote*: an impossible task, he comes to realize, since even if he copies Cervantes’s novel word for word, readers will interpret its meaning through their own historical context, creating different versions of the same text. Although Acker had not read Borges’s story prior to copying Cervantes’s text, she, like Borges, emphasizes “the idea of the reader as a maker of layers of meaning in the text” (Garrigós 119).
Garrigós also sees a parallel between Acker’s and Miguel de Unamuno’s reading of the quixote myth. She references Harold Bloom’s assertion that Unamuno “understood what was most inward in the great book” (*The Western Canon* 124): Don Quijote’s search for freedom in exile, which required him to feign madness. “Madness,” both in *Vida de Don Quixote y Sancho* (1938) and in Acker’s *Don Quixote*, is a collective rather than an individual phenomenon, enabling communities of outsiders to fight against social injustice. Garrigós brings together Acker and Unamuno on the basis of their political views, situating both against Empire. Like Acker, who casts Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and the anti-pornography feminist Andrea Dworkin as America’s “Evil Enchanters,” Unamuno was an outspoken critic of his country’s government who wrote from a marginal position: he revised the third edition of his volume in 1928, after the Dictatorship of Primo de Rivera had exiled him to the Canary Islands. For Garrigós, Acker’s references to the Spanish Republic of 1931 in the third part of *Don Quixote* consolidate the link between Acker’s vision and Unamuno’s. “The Spain of the Spanish Republic of 1931” is Acker’s “dream or model” (Acker 204) because of its commitment to socialist and libertarian ideals which 1980s America was badly in need of.

While Garrigós’s analysis illuminates the transnational dimension of Acker’s work, it does not explore its subversive engagement with its parent text. Reading Acker’s *Quixote* side-by-side with an English translation of the Spanish original, I will show how Acker’s quixote narrative (or, more accurately, anti-narrative) can be seen as a postfeminist response to and adaptation of Cervantes’s classic. “Postfeminist” has come to mean different things since the term was introduced in the 1980s: the backlash against second-wave feminism in the media; the critique of feminisms which conceive of gender
in binary terms and cast women as victims of patriarchy, with a corresponding emphasis on women’s sexual autonomy\(^9\); the alliance of feminist theory with other academic disciplines that emerged during the latter half of the twentieth century, namely, postmodernism, poststructuralism, and postcolonialism. The second and third definitions are most relevant to my analysis of Acker’s text. I locate the postfeminist in Acker’s repudiation of Andrea Dworkin’s sex-negative feminism and in her portrayal of masochism as a form of rebellion against gender. However, while many sex-positive representations labeled “postfeminist” endorse neoliberal values, Acker’s fiction offers a scathing indictment of late capitalism and the bourgeois family it upholds. French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari influenced her approach: “in Don Quixote I worked with theories of decentralization,” she said, alluding to their two-volume work, *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Friedman 16). Both their notions of the rhizome book and the Body without Organs (BwO) are useful in understanding how Acker tampers with the form and content of Cervantes’s novel.

Acker’s lifelong love of reading may have been the basis of her identification with Cervantes’s novel. In “Seeing Gender” (1995), she recalls how she used to live vicariously through books about pirates, “the only living world” (78) she could find. These books gratified her passion for adventure when she was a girl growing up on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, enabling her to transgress the gendered codes of her upper-middle-class upbringing. By the time she was an adult, however, reading had become an inadequate substitute for living. She turned to the theoretical writings of Luce

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\(^9\) In *The Routledge Critical Dictionary of Feminism and Postfeminism* (2000), Sarah Gamble writes that “postfeminist debate tends to crystallize around issues of victimization, autonomy, and personal responsibility” (43).
Irigaray and Judith Butler, which articulated what she had always known: “that, as a girl, I was outside the world. I wasn’t. I had no name. For me, language was being. There was no entry for me into language” (34). From then on, she identified with female outsiders: for instance, Lewis Carroll’s Alice, who “falls” into books, patriarchal “mirror-worlds” that “try to teach her who she is” and render her “completely abject or object” (81, 83).

For Acker, Alice’s challenge is to find her body in language. Referencing Butler’s statement in *Bodies that Matter* (1993) that “if the body signified as prior to signification is an effect of signification, then the mimetic or representational status of language, which claims that signs follow bodies as their necessary mirrors, is not mimetic at all” (149), Acker writes:

> I am looking for the body, my body, which exists outside its patriarchal definitions. Of course, that is not possible. But *who is any longer interested in the possible?* Like Alice, I suspect that the body, as Butler argues, might not be co-equivalent with materiality, that my body might be deeply connected to, if not be, language (84, my emphasis).

Since there is no way of locating the female body outside of language, Acker/Alice’s quest is riddled with impossibility. Acker’s solution to this impasse is to surrender the “I”/eye of authorial control and to immerse herself in dreams, “languages of the body” which exceed subject/object distinctions. As Acker explains, “When I dream, my body is the site, not only of the dream, but also of the dreaming and of the dreamer. In other words, in this case or in this language, I cannot separate subject from object, much less from the acts of perception” (84).

In light of these remarks, Acker’s decision to frame *Don Quixote* as a dream suggests her intent to write Cervantes’s novel through her body, to inhabit multiple points in time and space. Towards this end she appropriates the aesthetic model expounded by
Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in the second volume of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Whereas in *Anti-Oedipus* Deleuze and Guattari sought to liberate desire from the Oedipus complex by placing it in the realm of the social, in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), they imagine the different forms its production might take. To distinguish between socially codified desire and anarchic, free-floating desire, they contrast the tree with the rhizome, a horizontal network of rootless stems that extends infinitely in different directions. The tree is emblematic of Western philosophy, with its emphasis on origins and significance; it is associated with “useless” questions like “Where are you going? Where are you coming from?” and is represented by the verb “to be” (25). In contrast, the rhizome is anti-genealogical and anti-teleological, “a short-term memory, or anti-memory” that “operates by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots.” Its structure is horizontal rather than vertical, discontinuous rather than linear; desire flows on lines instead of proceeding from point to point:

Unlike a structure, which is defined by a set of points and positions, with binary relations between the points and biunivocal relationships between the positions, the rhizome is made only of lines: lines of segmentarity and stratification as its dimensions, and the line of flight or deterritorialization as the maximum dimension after which the multiplicity undergoes metamorphosis, changes in nature (21).

A “rhizome book,” unlike a “root book” or a “fascicular book,” is a machinic assemblage that dismantles hierarchies. Lacking an “organized memory or central automaton,” it encompasses “the animal, the vegetal, the world, politics, the book, things natural and artificial” without attempting to impose an order on or create a meaning from signs. Composed of “plateaus” or planes of intensity, the rhizomatic text does not have a beginning or an ending (25).
Sylvère Lotringer introduced Acker to Deleuze and Guattari’s work as early as 1976, when she was immersed in the downtown punk scene. Her exposure to these theorists marked a turning point in her career, for they gave her a conceptual framework for understanding what she was already doing with narrative. In Acker’s words, their ideas were “grounded very much in the political and social world I saw around me” and “explained my anger, which was very much an anger against the centralization of the Phallus, to put it in academic terms” (McCaffery 90). With Don Quixote Acker creates a rhizomatic counterdiscourse to Cervantes’s novel. Most of Book I of the Quijote consists of digressions: familiar tales of lovers seduced and abandoned, cuckolded husbands plotting revenge, lovers reunited after many trials. As David Quint has noted, Cervantes borrowed the technique of narrative interlace, or the juxtaposition of multiple story lines with distinct generic registers, from Ariosto; in Don Quijote, as in Orlando Furioso, “episodes reveal their full meaning only when read as mirrors of other episodes” (241).

While Acker borrows the Quijote’s episodic structure, she lays it over a series of cut-ups, arresting the linear movement of Cervantes’s narrative, dismantling links between plots. Her Don Quixote could be read at any point: its nomadic protagonist wanders through a discontinuous landscape made up of dreams and short-term memories.

Acker uses Cervantes’s device of metafiction to reflect on her poetics in Don Quixote. In Chapter VI, Book I of the Quijote, Cervantes’s narrator interrupts his account of Don Quijote and Sancho Panza’s adventure to tell us that that an Arab historian, Cid Hamete Benengali, is the book’s original author; the narrator had it translated into Spanish by an unnamed morisco he had met at a marketplace in Toledo. This would have been impossible in inquisitorial Spain, where books in Arabic were regularly burned and
both Jews and Moors pretended to be cristianos viejos (Old Christians) to avoid persecution. Cid Hamete Benengali’s capacity for truthfulness is called into question throughout Books I and II. Through the outrageous fiction of the Arab historian, Cervantes underscores the artificiality of the conventions used by the chroniclers of romance to establish verisimilitude. Midway through the first part of her Don Quixote, in “Another Insert,” Acker parodies Cervantes by launching into a diatribe about Arab writers who have no qualms about “defacing traditions.” That Acker is the Arab writers she disparages is evident from her description of their poetics:

Unlike American and Western culture (generally), the Arabs (in their culture) have no concept of originality. That is, culture. They write new stories paint new pictures et cera only by embellishing old stories pictures…. They write by cutting chunks out of all-ready written texts and in other ways defacing traditions: changing important names into silly ones, making dirty jokes out of matters that should be of the utmost importance to us such as nuclear warfare. […] […] […] For this reason, a typical Arab text or painting contains neither characters nor narrative, for an Arab, believing such fictions’re evil, worship nothingness (25).

Acker subverts the influence of the father of the Western novel not only by “cutting chunks” from his text and altering its names, but also by refusing to develop coherent characters and plots. Moreover, through semantic play and grammatical violations, she privileges language’s expressive function over its communicative one. As Richard Walsh has rightly noted, Acker “wants art to confront culture unframed, rather than already contained by self-description or self-distancing” (154); she prefers the cry of “Help!” to the statement “I need help” and aspires to create that affective dimension in her own writing (“Models,” 64).

Acker’s Don Quixote draws attention to the feminist subtext of the Spanish original while indirectly commenting upon the limitations of Cervantes’s portrayal of female desire. Cervantes’s women serve as objects of male desire, uniting Don Quijote
with other lovesick male characters (e.g., Gristosomo, Cardenio, Eugenio) in a paradigmatic narrative structure (El Saffar, “In Praise,” 107). Yet they subvert the roles prescribed for them in male genres, often playing a crucial role in the plot. Marcela, who appears in Book 1, Chapter XII, exemplifies such a heroine. Cervantes positions her within the codes of the pastoral by introducing her through the poems of the dead shepherd Gristosomo, who laments her lack of love for him and blames her indifference for his suicide. Sought after by all the shepherds in the area for her redoubtable beauty, Marcela chooses a solitary life in the woods; in this respect she fits the arcadian paradigm of woman as inaccessible object of male desire. Unlike the mute shepherdesses of Sannazaro’s Arcadia, however, she speaks to the goatherds. Through a series of well-reasoned arguments she not only exculpates herself of Gristosomo’s death, but she also challenges her male audience’s assumptions that women who do not submit to men who desire them are coldhearted and vain:

“...if modesty is one of the virtues that most adorn both body and soul, why does she who is loved for her beauty have to lose her modesty, in order to reward the desire of a man who, just for his own pleasure, strives as hard and as forcefully as he can to make her lose it?” (I:14, 78)

After declaring her intention to live as a free woman in the woods, Marcela disappears into an impenetrable grove and never again resurfaces in Cervantes’s narrative.

If Marcela insists on her right to live outside of the patriarchal world into which she is born, Dorotea, whom we meet in Book I, Chapter XXVIII, plays tricks with patriarchal codes in order to survive. Seduced and betrayed by her father’s employer, the lascivious Don Fernando, Dorotea dresses as a male shepherd and wanders through the Sierra Morena. Having disgraced her parents by losing her virginity to a man who reneged on his promise to marry her, she cannot return home, nor can she risk being
recognized as a beautiful woman traveling alone; her male disguise functions as a protection against rape. In his portrayal of Dorotea, Cervantes borrows from and revises a romance tradition of transvestitism that reinstates gender norms when the damsel-in-distress is discovered beneath her male costume (Fuchs 22). Dorotea’s femininity is established as soon as the priest and the barber recognize her long blond hair, and she resorts to the role of the damsel-in-distress as she tells the men her story, offering them the challenge of resolving her dilemma. But when she offers to play the role of Princess Mimicona to lure Don Quixote from the Sierra Morena, where he is imitating Amadis’s penance, the naturalization of gender which the romance relies upon is called into question: how could a legitimate damsel-in-distress play her own part? Both Dorotea’s insistence that she would make a better damsel-in-distress than the barber, since she had many dresses suitable for the role, and her assurance that she “had read many tales of chivalry and knew precisely how damsels were supposed to beg boons of knights errant” (I. 29, 190) cast doubt on her earlier self-presentation as a vulnerable maiden in need of male guidance. In this scene, as in others, Cervantes overturns the conventions of romance by drawing attention to gender’s discursive status and its function as performance, as if anticipating Butler’s insights in Gender Trouble.

Whether Acker was inspired by the Quijote’s feminist subtext can only be a matter of speculation. However, she did say that, midway through her Quixote, she realized it was about “appropriating male texts and finding your voice as a woman” (McCaffery 92). Given that both Marcela and Dorotea appropriate male discourse for their own advantage, they seem likely models for Acker’s female quester. Like Marcela, Acker’s protagonist “thrives where madness, outlawry, desire and rage, repressed in
approved social discourse, make their home” (El Saffar, “In Marcela’s Case,” 158). Like Dorotea, she has been “forcibly excluded from male discourse” and laments “her lack of access to a viable language with which to re-insert herself into the society of her time” (Dudley 259). Cervantes invests Dorotea with the ability to create “a radically subversive feminist reconstitution of the language of chivalric Romance,” drawing from “the feminist resources of the pastoral and Byzantine novels as well as the unpredictable improvisations of the commedia dell’arte theatrical tradition” (Dudley 261). Acker’s Quixote, too, reconstitutes erotic genres, inserting a pornographic female voice into the margins of Catullus’s love poems, situating a sadomasochistic scene from Marquis de Sade’s Juliette in a schoolroom populated by girls seeking sexual knowledge of their bodies.

Yet Marcela and Dorotea represent two aspects of the same quandary, which Acker articulates in Don Quixote as “either a woman is dead or she is dying.” In a patriarchal society, a woman can exist only as an object of exchange between male rivals or as man’s other, mirroring back his desire. A handsome man whom Quixote sees in a dream becomes the representative of this society: “The man told her that he loved more strongly or possessively or madly than she loved.” Quixote reasons:

If this is true, then men’re more capable of love and vision and life than woman. If this is true, women can survive. For, as I’ve said, as soon as a woman loves, she’s in danger. Why? Because the man for whom she’d do anything because he beats her up makes her almost die: Because she’s the one who loves, not him, from not knowing whether or not he loves her, she becomes sick, yet she can’t give him up (33).

The woman who articulates her desire is spurned by her male lovers, who treat her badly. Since her active sexuality renders her a threat to an Oedipal economy of desire, she is abjected: “If a woman insists she can and does love and her living isn’t loveless or dead,
she dies” Acker’s heroine reflects (33). To avoid such a fate, woman must renounce her sexuality (“become normal,” in the handsome man’s words). Yet doing so is another form of death, as Acker’s Quixote discovers when she tries to give up loving for a year. This conundrum evokes the contrasting fates of Marcela, a virgin bride of Nature, and Dorotea, the jilted lover of Don Fernando. Although Dorotea manages to persuade Don Fernando to marry her, the latter’s repentance is as implausible as the posture of supplicant which she assumes before her husband-to-be; no satisfactory resolution to her dilemma is possible within the bounds of Cervantes’ narrative.

Acker’s heroine rejects Cervantes’s solution to the problem of female desire: she finds no freedom in renouncing her sexuality, as does Marcela, or in wifely submission, as does Dorotea. In a speech to Saint Simeon, who functions as an analogue for Sancho Panza, she casts the problem in Biblical terms:

In Our Bible or The Storehouse of Language, we tried to tell women who they are: The-Loving-Mother-Who-Has-No-Sex-So Her-Sex-Isn’t-A-Crab or The-Woman-Who-Loves-That-Is-Needs-Love So Much She Will Let Anything Be Done to Her. But women aren’t either of these. A woman is she who stuck the stake through the red heart of Jesus Christ (27-28).

Wanting the way out of the impasse of not loving/loving without being loved, she seeks it through her body, where her quest begins.

**Abortion as a Means to Knighthood**

In the first chapter of *Don Quijote*, Alonso Quesada becomes a knight by emulating the rites performed by Amadis de Gaul: he polishes his great-grandfather’s suit of armor, constructs a helmet out of cardboard, names himself and his horse, and decides on a lady to love. Although his horse is a skinny nag and his lady love a peasant’s daughter, he
assigns lofty names to both (Rocinante and Dulcinea del Toboso, respectively),
transforming them into objects of his fantasy. The image of himself as a knight gratifies
his ego, giving him pleasure: “The poor fellow already fancied that his courage and his
mighty sword –arm had earned him, at the very least, the crown of Emperor of
Trebizond. And in a transport of joy over such pleasant ideas, carried away by their
strange delightfulness, he hurried to turn them into reality” (15). Naming himself Don
Quijote de la Mancha, a name which “as far as he was concerned neatly explained his
lineage and his origins” (16), he sets off from home to pursue his first adventure.

In Acker’s rewriting, a nameless female protagonist (“she”) becomes a knight by
having an abortion, an act which renders her “crazy” by normative standards and links
her to a community of female outlaws. The ceremony unfolds in a hospital in London
rather than in an inn in Andalusia. Like the original Quijote, she meets prostitutes; but
whereas Cervantes’s hero bombards the women with courtly rhetoric they do not
understand, imagining they are of noble birth, Acker’s protagonist listens to their stories.
“I refused to be a woman the way I was supposed to be. I travelled all over the world
looking for trouble,” a receptionist/ex-prostitute begins, and ends with “Then I learned
the error of my ways. I retired.. from myself. Here…this little job…I’m living off the
income and property of others. Rather dead income and property. Like any good
bourgeois” (11). Through this brief speech Acker adumbrates the trajectory of
Cervantes’s narrative: the prostitute’s “redemption” as a receptionist parallels Don
Quijote’s “return to his senses” by the end of Book II. Normalcy under capitalism, death:
Acker’s Quixote escapes this denouement. She is continually dying and being reborn, her
idealism emerging from her disillusionment.
Rather than parody chivalric rites like Cervantes, Acker desanctifies them by reading them through the lens of her abortion experience, rendering visible the gendered dynamics of identity-formation. The names she assigns objects are far from exalted: her armor is the “pale or puke green paper” she wears from her neck to her knees, a flimsy garment which tears during the operation; her horse is a dilapidated wheelchair, a “hack,” which, as a truncated form of “hackney” and “hackneyed,” refers at once to the work horses used to draw cabs in London, to working-class prostitutes, and to cliché forms of writing. Acker plays on all three meanings: the wheelchair, her protagonist’s form of transportation, is “a full-time drunk” who “mumbled all the time about sex but never did it and didn’t have the wherewithal or equipment to do it, and hung around all the other bums” (9) and its name was ‘Hack-kneed’ or ‘Hackneyed,’ meaning ‘once a hack’ or ‘always a hack’ or “a writer’ or ‘an attempt to have an identity that always fails’ (10).

While becoming a knight in Cervantes’s text requires declaring one’s loyalty to chivalric codes written in books, in Acker’s text it is synonymous with “losing one’s mind,” letting go of culturally inherited values and assumptions: “When a doctor sticks a steel catheter into you while you’re lying on your back and you do exactly what he and the nurses tell you to; finally, blessedly, you let go of your mind” (9-10). The protagonist’s status as a female patient on an operating table presided over by a team of doctors and nurses enables her to take control of her destiny by naming herself, as Ellen G. Friedman has noted (“Now Eat,” 42). Parodying the original Quijote’s attempt to transform the base into the noble through speech acts, Acker has her protagonist name herself “catheter,” which she decides “is the glorification of Kathy.” Like quijote, which means “thigh-piece,” “catheter” is the name of an instrument and not a proper noun. Yet
Acker genders it male and writes “by taking on a name which, being long, is male, she would be able to become a female-male or a knight-night” (10). Assuming an androgynous identity does not solve the problem of how to love as a heterosexual woman, but it does allow Acker’s protagonist to purge emotions that her society has deemed unacceptable for women—“Catharsis is the way to deal with evil,” she thinks as she “polishes her green paper” (10)—and to repudiate male myths of femininity. After the doctor inserts a needle into her arm, she identifies with the woman who functions as the object of Quijote’s quest and whose desire is most conspicuously absent from Cervantes’s novel. Her last words before the abortion takes place indirectly challenge Quijote’s decision to elevate Aldonza into Dulcinea: she insists that her name is “Tolosa” and that she is a shoemaker’s daughter (13). That Acker chooses not to identify with the beautiful, wronged Marcela or Dorotea, but with a coarse, “vulgar” working-class woman is indicative her desire to desublimate the romance tradition and articulate a marginal female perspective that is missing from Cervantes’s narrative.

A comparison of the maternal imaginary in each work foregrounds Acker’s rejection of Quijote’s paternalistic romanticism. In Book I, Chapter 11, the Don makes a speech to the goatherds in which he links the revival of chivalry with the restoration of a pre-industrial, pre-linguistic Golden Age. Images of maternal plenitude abound in his evocation of an imaginary past:

> the heavy, curved plough had still not dared to dig open or penetrate the sacred entrails of our original mother, and she, under no compulsion of any kind, offered the children who then possessed her, and from every part of her fertile, spacious bosom, whatever might feed, sustain, and delight them (59).

The simplicity of women’s dress and speech is emphasized: damsels walked about wearing only “a few green burdock leaves or sprigs of twined ivy” and “they spoke their
thoughts of love from the soul, simply and unpretentiously, exactly as they thought them, not searching for elaborate verbal circumlocutions to beautify them.” Through this elegiac speech Quijote expounds his main argument for becoming a knights-errant: to protect the bodies of vulnerable women against male predators, so that they could roam the earth fearlessly as they once did, their virginity intact.

No nostalgic desire for a prelapsarian maternal order characterizes Acker’s Don Quixote. In “The Aftermath of the World,” Quixote tells Simeon: “The milk in the breasts of mothers all over the earth is dry; the earth is barren; monsters, instead of children, run through our nuclear wastes” (27). In contradistinction to the popular sixteenth-century metaphor of the earth as a beneficent mother, Acker’s text confronts us with the real of the maternal body in all its abject horror: at the end of “Other Texts,” Wedekind’s Lulu returns to her childhood home to find her mother’s suicided corpse. Unlike Cervantes’s hero, the self-appointed guardian of maidens’ sexuality, Acker’s heroine voices her opposition to cultural institutions that curtail the expression of female sexuality. In a speech to her “friends” (a leftist and a feminist) that parallels Quijote’s Golden Age speech, Acker’s protagonist explains that she has had an abortion to refuse “normalcy, which is the capitulation to social control. To letting our leaders locate our identities in the social” (18). Instead of channeling her libido into caring for a baby, a form of “normal good love” that American culture valorizes for women, she chooses to have erotic adventures. In Deleuzian parlance, the abortion is her way of deterritorializing her body from America’s “desiring-machines,” institutional forces that produce desire and circumscribe its movements. Loving someone else “beyond rationality, beyond a return (I love you you love me)” (18) is the antidote to the world’s sickness because it
defies the feminist-capitalist understanding of love as an equal exchange. If, in Part 3, Acker lumps Andrea Dworkin along with Ronald Reagan as the Evil Enchanters whom her protagonist hopes to defeat, it is because both place discursive limits on the expression of female sexuality: Reagan with his talk of family values, Dworkin with her sex-negative feminism.

It is significant that Acker’s protagonist is identified as Don Quixote only after she announces that she is having an abortion “in order to love” (10). Loving someone else, which is figured as an afterthought in Cervantes’s narrative—Quijote invents Dulcinea only after he recalls that “a knight errant without entanglements would be like a tree without leaves or fruit, or a body without a soul” (16)—replaces the revival of chivalry as the object of the protagonist’s quest. Acker’s Quixote contemplates an ideal of love as “sympathy or communication” and seeks “an object which is both subject and object.” Rejecting dualisms of mind and body through the rhetorical questions she poses (“Can a soul exist without the body? Is the physical separate from the mental?”), she affirms the interconnectedness of both: “Just as love’s object is the appearance of love; so the physical realm is the appearance of the godly: the mind is the body” (10). The link she makes between corporeality and divinity brings to mind Luce Irigaray’s notion of the sensible transcendental. In An Ethics of Sexual Difference (1984), Irigaray asks: “Why do we assume that God must always remain an inaccessible transcendence rather than a

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10 Dworkin’s polemical tract, Pornography: Men Possessing Women (1981), positions women as victims of pornography. Emphasizing that porn encourages acts of sexual violence against women, Dworkin writes: “Each woman who has survived knows from the experience of her own life that pornography is captivity—the woman trapped in the picture used on the woman trapped wherever he’s got her” (xxvii).
realization—here and now—through the body?” (148) In locating her body as a source of transcendence, Acker’s Quixote positions herself against the wishes of her community: “aghast at her femininity,” her friends “determined to burn it out.” Like Cervantes’s Quijote, she resists attempts to cure her, declaring “I want love. The love I can only dream about or read in books. I’ll make the world into this love” (18).

By making Don Quixote a woman, Acker explores the feminine impasse discussed earlier in this chapter: although woman’s recourse to adventures has been limited to the type of love she “could only dream about or read in books,” her status as an object of male desire precludes her ability to enter into a loving relationship with an other based on mutual recognition. Denied a subjectivity of her own, she is unable to inhabit the role of quester: “I’m your desire’s object, dog, because I can’t be a subject,” Quixote, who has turned into Medusa, hollers at her lover, who has turned into a dog. “Because I can’t be a subject: what you name ‘love’ I name ‘nothingness.’” (28) Abortion, then, is a metaphor for as well as a vehicle of her quest.

Part I closes with the image of the female quixote reading her will to her aborted fetus. Offered the ultimatum of “become normal” (renounce love) “or die” by a handsome man in a vision who evokes Cervantes’s Knight of the White Moon, Acker’s protagonist chooses death. However, while Cervantes’s hero repents his folly on his deathbed, Acker’s heroine flouts patriarchal moral codes. Her last words are as follows: “The mingling of genitals the only cure for sickness. It’s not necessary to write or be right cause writing’s or being right’s making more illusion: it’s necessary to destroy and be wrong” (37). Writing will not inaugurate the revolution that she seeks. Instead, she
must “destroy” her own illusion of subjectivity, adopting the practices of body liberation espoused by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*.

**Sancho Panza as Saint Simeon**

Acker introduces the theme of erotic liberation through Quixote’s relationship with Saint Simeon, her “cowboy sidekick.” Since Sancho Panza served as her model for Saint Simeon, some contextualization of Sancho’s role in the original *Quijote* is necessary to understand how Acker rewrites the Cervantean dyad, developing its homoerotic subtext while emphasizing the fluidity of the roles of master and slave, knight and squire.

Sancho Panza is a poor, illiterate farmer from an Old Christian background lured by Quijote into joining his expedition with the promise of an island governorship. Mounted like “some biblical patriarch” on a donkey, weighed down by saddlebags and a leather wine bottle, Sancho Panza cut as ridiculous a figure as Don Quijote to a seventeenth-century Spanish audience. Cervantes positions the two men as foils, setting Quijote’s book-inspired idealism against Sancho’s earthy realism: while Quijote consults books of chivalry, Panza obeys the dictates of his belly, eating and defecating with zeal.

As Soledad Fox has observed, the status-seeking, lazy, unschooled Sancho Panza emblematizes an Old Christian hidalgo class, while Don Quijote’s erudition and initiative represent new Christian attributes (*Flaubert* 9). Although Sancho attempts to enlighten Quijote about the status of his perceptions and dissuade him from his more dangerous

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11 As Carol Siegel has noted, by referring to Simeon as Quixote’s “cowboy sidekick,” Acker alludes to popular films such as Paul Morrissey and Andy Warhol’s *Lonesome Cowboys* (1969), positioning Simeon within an iconography of male prostitution and gender transgression.
pursuits, he allows himself to be carried away by Quijote’s fantasies of fame and glory. By Book 2, Quijote has become “Sanchified” and Sancho “Quixotized”: Quijote no longer mistakes inns for castles, and Sancho has adopted the pseudo-aristocratic speech of his master. Love for his master, not opportunism, motivates him to continue as Quijote’s squire. After Quijote has renounced books of chivalry on his deathbed, Panza voices his desire for the two of them to continue their adventures as pastoral shepherds.

With the character of Saint Simeon, Acker turns Cervantes’s Old Christian hidalgo into a source of sacrilegious wisdom. The name Saint Simeon evokes the story of sixth-century Syrian monk who feigned madness to become holy. According to one version of the legend, the saint passed through the gates of Emesia with the leg of a dead dog tied around his waist; he walked into a church, put out all the lights, and threw nuts at the women. Elements of the Arab legend surface in Acker’s text. Acker’s Simeon materializes after Quixote’s abortion and disappears after she has vowed to transform the world through love, morphing into a dog in the insert “Proving that True Friendship Can’t Die.” In his incarnation as a dog, he challenges Quixote’s assumption that he cannot love her because of his gender: “What is… by “love” you meant I was allowed to want you? Then we’d both be subjects and objects. Then sexual love would have to be the meeting-place of individual life and death” (28). Situated on the boundary between the human and the animal, Simeon is the vehicle of Quixote’s quest: he teaches the knight to search for her body outside of binary gender codes, offering a window onto different permutations of desire.
Critics have overlooked Simeon’s pedagogical function in the narrative. When he finds Quixote lying battered and bruised on a sidewalk that doubles as her bed, he asks “Who’s responsible for this lousy condition? (15),” echoing the farmer Pedro Alonso, who sees Quijote stretched out on the road after his beating by the muleteer (I.5). Quixote presents herself as a victim of a botched abortion, just as Quijote blames the horse for his wounds (I.5. 33), but Simeon, as “a highly intelligent young man, besides being holy,” is unconvinced: “Then who caused the abortion?” he asks (15). Carol Siegel interprets his response as evidence of his “inability to take responsibility for his contributions to her sufferings under patriarchy” (15), a reading that is not compatible with Acker’s repudiation of feminist ideologies of victimhood. Insisting that “somebody must be responsible for evil” (16), Simeon encourages Quixote to examine her motives in having the abortion; only then can she articulate her resistance to “normal good love” before the community. The saint, then, inspires in the knight a postfeminist awareness of her own responsibility in creating the conditions for her freedom.

Whereas in Cervantes’s novel the idealist Quijote mediates the earthly Sancho’s desires, in Acker’s book the reverse occurs: in his role as narrator, Simeon initiates Quijote into a carnivalesque world ruled by the body’s passions. For instance, in “Saint Simeon’s Story” he remembers being one of many working-class students who were flogged by a teacher in a Catholic boarding school. Although Simeon hates the school, he comes to associate the sound of flogging with love; and his discourse breaks down as he tells Quixote, ‘I want to be wanted. I want to be flogged. I’m bad’ (14). “Saint Simeon’s

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12 For instance, Richard Walsh views Simeon as “a series of largely undifferentiated dogs” who come to stand for the “crude, self-interested materialism” of the Nixon era (151-2).
Story” is followed by “The First Adventure,” which riffs on a similar episode in Cervantes’s novel. As in the original Quijote, the protagonist witnesses an old man beat a boy whom he has tied to a tree and orders him to stop in the name of justice. In Cervantes’s book a wealthy farmer is punishing his servant for neglecting to keep vigil over his sheep; in Acker’s version, a teacher is punishing his student for demanding payment for what he has learned in school. Cervantes’s hero extracts a promise from the farmer that he will restore the wages he has garnished from Andrés’s salary for the missing sheep, foolishly believing that Juan Haldudo the Rich will abide by the laws of knighthood, but Acker’s protagonist orders the boy to return to his teacher, interpreting the latter’s actions as a misguided attempt to help his pupil. Her original stance as the student’s protector, with its assumption of his victim status, seems false after Simeon’s admission that he wants to be flogged, that flogging and loving have become indistinguishable. Simeon’s story illustrates how capitalism’s master-slave dynamic can be eroticized by its victims, for whom masochism constitutes a limited form of agency. As in Cervantes’s novel the boy is whipped even more severely, and the episode ends on a note of resignation: “The boy tried to enjoy the beating because his life couldn’t be any other way” (15).

Simeon’s abandonment of the female knight serves as the catalyst for her voluntary madness, another theme which links Acker’s text with Cervantes’s. In Chapter 25, Book 1, Quijote announces his decision to imitate Amadis’s madness, to enact the role of “He Who Despairs, He Who Turns Fool, He Who Rages” (151). When Sancho Panza points out that his grief would be without provocation, since Dulcinea has not “committed any kind of stupidity with anyone, Moor or Christian,” Quijote replies, “My
idea is to become a lunatic for no reason at all, and to ask my lady, seeing what I do without cause, what she imagines I might do if I really had one?” (151) Further along in their dialogue, Quijote admits that his Dulcinea is a fiction. Positioning himself as one in a long line of male pastoral poets who have invented female muses to glorify their name, Quijote upholds imaginary truth over literal truth:

“…it’s enough to think and believe that your good Aldonza Lorenzo is beautiful and modest, and her ancestry doesn’t make much difference either, because no one’s going to come searching out her pedigree, in order to confer any titles on her, while as far as I’m concerned she’s the loftiest princess in the whole world.” (157).

Statements like these lend credence to Harold Bloom’s assertion that “Don Quixote goes mad as a vicarious atonement for our drabness, our ungenerous dearth of imagination” (The Western Canon 783).

In contrast, in Acker’s Quixote, the mad imagination is the only viable alternative to living in a loveless world. After frantically searching for Simeon on the streets of New York City, Quixote enters a dilapidated church and pretends that the first dog she sees is her cowboy sidekick: “Since I’m mad I can believe anything. Anyone can be Saint Simeon, for anyone can be a saint,” she thinks (19). Desperate “to find love in a world in which love isn’t possible” Quixote turns a dog into a god, just as Quijote turns Aldonza into Dulcinea. As in Cervantes’s novel, the protagonist’s knowledge that she has invented her beloved does not delegitimize her experience of loving: “St Simeon the dog may or may not be real because the St. Simeon in my heart is certainly my idea. In fact, I guess it doesn’t matter whether or not St. Simeon loves me,” she reflects (102). Hence, she transfers her affection from dog to dog: in Part 3, after Saint Simeon’s second disappearance, she turns the transvestite bitch Villebranche into her lover/companion.
Like Simeon, Villebranche assumes the role of narrator, telling Quixote her life story in two parts, “Heterosexuality,” and “A Dog’s Life Continued: Examination of What Kind of Schooling Women Need.” The most salient themes in Saint Simeon’s story—childhood isolation and masochistic rebellion—resurface in Villebranche’s narratives, which also prove instructive.

By the end of the book, “Simeon” has morphed into a pack of dogs who travel the world with Quixote, singing pirates who commiserate with her despair. In destabilizing the figure of Sancho Panza, Acker has converted the Cervantean dialectic between the knight and his squire into a non-hierarchal and protean relationship between a female knight and her dogs, who are rhizomatic extensions of each other. Don Quixote and her dogs constitute an assemblage which belongs to neither the church, the family, nor the state, to paraphrase Deleuze, who associates groups like these with “a politics of sorcery” inherent in “becoming-animal,” a nomadic mode of deterritorialization. Perpetually on the move, on “the fringe of recognized institutions,” they are a threat to society and to the state because they are “anomic,” unable to be categorized (A Thousand Plateaus 247).

**Masochism as a Form of Disenchantment**

In Part 3, “The End of the Night,” Acker’s “dead” female reader is resurrected as an Angel of Death who is determined to destroy America’s Evil Enchanters, “Ronald Reagan and certain feminists, like Andrea Dworkin, who control the nexuses of government and culture” (109). Unlike Cervantes, who wrote under the scrutiny of the inquisitorial censors, Acker politicizes the quixotic. While the enchantment motif in Cervantes’s novel signifies a faulty hermeneutic, a too-convenient way for the hero to
account for the discrepancy between what he experiences in the world and what he has been led to expect from books, in Acker’s text it is synonymous with “poverty, alienation, fear, inability to act on desire, inability to feel”(190), all of which are the effects of late capitalism. Enchantment, the ideological conditioning of the haves by the have-nots, the subjection of the former to a Hobbesian social order in which thinking is mechanical and feeling conditioned or instinctual, renders love an impossible dream and the quest for love subversive. As Acker’s knight explains to a dog-catcher at the beginning of Part 3: “as long as we stop being enchanted… human love’ll again be possible” (102).

Like the original Don, who thinks that the enchanters have abducted Dulcinea to undermine his chivalric mission, this Quixote believes the enchanters have separated her from Simeon “because they knew the only thing that’ll destroy me is to be apart from the dog” (102). Her sense of being persecuted strengthens her determination to “disenchant America.” First, she gathers information about the machinations of Nixon’s government and writes the President a retaliatory letter in which she assumes the persona of a Haitian. Then, having decided that “defeating Nixon isn’t defeating America” and that “to defeat America she had to learn who America is,” she sets about redefining America’s foundational myths. “Freedom was the individual embracement of nonsexual masochism,” she writes, and offers the Quakers’ election of Reagan as an example (118). Since her writing fails to have any impact on world events, she gives up all hope of saving America. Her dream of restoring the possibility of love dies, but the book does not end. Quixote travels with Villebranche, whose stories offer an alternative to the romantic love quest: adventuring through the body.
As the quest gives way to the adventure, male martyrdom gives way to female masochism. At the end of Part 1, in “Marriage,” the dog Simeon agrees to flagellate himself to death to save Quixote from the handsome man’s ultimatum of “become normal (dead, indifferent to love) or die,” a predicament that evokes Sancho Panza’s in Book 2, Chapter XXV, when he is informed by Merlin that he must inflict 3,300 lashes on himself to effect Dulcinea’s disenchantment. Acker frames Simeon’s masochism in the manner of a Christian sacrificial contract: the dog proceeds to flagellate himself “like a good Catholic,” whispering “Please beat me,” and requests eight hundred dollars in exchange for his suffering. Quixote is so moved by the spectacle of Simeon’s pain that she yanks the twisted halter out of his paw and declares: “I love you too much for you to hurt yourself. If I have to, I’ll be normal and dead.” It was in this way that Don Quixote’s quest failed.” (35) According to David Brande, who reads Acker’s text through a Deleuzian lens, Quixote’s quest fails because “desire remains constricted within the structures of church and state” (200). In order to love we must destratify ourselves from political and religious machinery; yet our experience of flight can only be ephemeral, as our bodies, being machines among other machines, are subject to restratification. Using Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the “Body without Organs,” Brande locates such a moment of freedom in the masochistic role-play of the two transvestite dogs in Villebranche’s story “Heterosexuality.”

What is the Body without Organs, or BwO? In A Thousand Plateaus, Deleuze and Guattari define it as “the field of immanence of desire, the plane of consistency specific to desire (with desire defined as a process of production without reference to any exterior agency, whether it be a lack that hollows it out or a pleasure that fills it” (154). The BwO
is the body when it is unplugged from desiring-machines, unregulated by social forms of desiring-production. Opposed not to the organs, but to their organization in a functional hierarchy, it impedes the flow of desire produced by capitalist institutions; its consistency is smooth, striated, and egg-like.

In “How Do You Make Yourself a Body without Organs?” Deleuze and Guattari identify masochism as a practice capable of producing a BwO:

…the masochist uses suffering as a way of constituting a body without organs and bringing forth a plane of consistency of desire. That there are other ways, other procedures than masochism, and certainly better ones, is besides the point; it is enough that some find this procedure suitable for them. (A Thousand Plateaus 155)

Deleuze distinguishes masochism from sadism on the basis of the latter’s association with regimes of power: “the sadist is in need of institutions, the masochist of contractual relations,” he writes (Masochism 20). While masochists can inflict punishment, they could never be considered sadistic because of their phantasmatic identification with pain. The masochist’s ideal is to not to disenchant the world, but to disenchant the self. In Deleuze’s words:

The masochist does not believe in negating or destroying the world nor in idealizing it: what he does is to disavow and thus to suspend it, in order to secure an ideal which is suspended in fantasy (Masochism 30).

Yet Deleuze and Guattari are skeptical of masochism’s effectiveness in producing a fluid and communicative BwO: they cite the masochistic body, along with the paranoid body, the hypochondriac body, and the schizo body, as examples of BwOs that have become “sucked-dry, catatonicized, vitrified, sewn up.” Asking why there should be such “a dreary parade” when the BwO “is also full of gaiety, ecstasy, and dance,” they caution us in our experimentation with the real to “keep enough of the organism for it to reform
each dawn;” that is, not to be too hasty to destratify ourselves. To construct a mobile and
communicable Body without Organs, we need a method, a way of using the strata to
liberate ourselves from them: “It is through a meticulous relation with the strata that one
succeeds in freeing lines of flight, causing conjugated flows to pass and escape and
bringing forth continuous intensities for a BwO” (161). Since “the BwO is always
swinging between the surfaces that stratify it and the plane that sets it free,” it is easy to
“botch” the BwO: to fail to produce it or to produce it as a blockage. This is exactly what
happens in the insert “A DOG’S LIFE, cont’d,” which follows “Heterosexuality.” The
bitch Juliette revolts against her teacher’s campaign to turn her body into an object of
knowledge through her masochistic experiment with Laure: “I’ll whip you by breaking
you down by breaking through your virginity or identity […] You’ll keep on leaking so
you won’t be able to retain any of their teachings,” she tells Laure (173). However,
Juliette’s lack of a method causes her to botch her BwO: clumsily strapping a dildo to
Laure’s waist, she succeeds only in making her beloved bleed and lose consciousness.

In This Sex Which Is Not One, Luce Irigaray remarks on the inadequacy of Deleuze
and Guattari’s model for women: “For them (women) isn’t the organless body a historical
condition? And don’t we run the risk once more of taking back from women those as of
yet unterritorialized spaces where her own desire could come into being?” (141)
However, for Acker, there were no “as of yet unterritorialized” spaces in woman; as she
told Ellen G. Friedman: “You can’t get to a place, to a society, that isn’t constructed
according to the phallus” ( “A Conversation,” 17). Acker’s deconstruction of the quixote
myth functions, in part, as a critique of sexual difference feminism: her Quixote’s
Irigarayan ideal of a love that allows for woman to be a subject is replaced by her dogs’
more “realistic” attempts to construct a Body without Organs. Villebranche and De Franville, the female and male transvestite dogs of “Heterosexuality,” succeed (albeit momentarily) in liberating themselves from gender by being attune to each other’s needs and adjusting their masochistic regimen accordingly. When they reverse roles, when Villebranche goes under the whip in the place of De Franville, they experience a vertiginous delight in each other’s alterity: “Being for a split second mirrors of each other, we had to be other than what we were,” Villebranche recalls (140). Although their method works, they become reterritorialized by the gendered violence of the master-slave dialectic, filling Don Quixote with disgust “that human heterosexuality had come to such an end, even though the dog wasn’t human, only female” (141). Since success in achieving a BwO is always provisional, the failure of the dogs’ experiments is besides the point. The implicit lesson in Villebranche’s and Juliette’s teachings are: abandon the telos for the event; replace salvation with the experiment. Disenchant yourself, if you can’t disenchant the world, and don’t expect any long-term results.

In moving from martyrdom to masochism and from quest to adventure, Acker writes against and beyond Cervantes’s Quijote. The physical torments which Quijote and Sancho are made to endure at the hands of others, particularly at the ducal estate in Book 2, is repeated in Acker’s narrative, but with a crucial difference: while Quijote and Sancho are victims of the duke and the duchess’s capricious cruelty, Quixote and her female dogs deploy pain as a weapon against gendered regimes of power. The masochistic body is to Acker’s heroine what the book of chivalry is to Cervantes’s hero: an alternate source of power/knowledge and a site of resistance.
The final scene of Book 3 can be seen as a postfeminist twist on the original Quijote’s mad visions. In a pornographic dream, Quixote confronts a self-denigrating God who mocks all forms of idealism: “I, God, don’t do anything directly. I promote morality while I lap at My Mother’s cunt” (207). Challenging Quixote’s assumption that s/he is male, this “Monster-Wonder” lays to rest any doubts she may have had about abandoning her love quest and gives her permission to fashion a BwO: “Since I am no more, forget Me. Forget morality. Forget saving the world. Make Me up” (207). These “teachings” are her “last memories” before she awakens, drunk, from her dream, and they are consistent with the lessons implicit in her dogs’ stories. Acker’s female knight has learned to stop blaming patriarchy for her problems, focusing instead on defining the conditions of her own freedom: a shift which prefigured the new direction Acker would take with her next book, *Empire of the Senseless*. While she draws heavily from other texts in *Empire*, her purpose is, in her own words, “constructive rather than deconstructive as in Don Quixote” (Friedman, “A Conversation,” 16). Pirates become dominant figures in her later work, for unlike the knight, the pirate creates new myths to live by.

So although it may have been merely fortuitous that Acker found herself with a copy of Cervantes’s novel on the day of her abortion, her discovery of *Don Quixote* paved the way for her development as an artist. Her postfeminist *Quixote* reflects her own theoretical transition from an Irigarayan critique of patriarchy to a Deleuzian project of deterриториализation: “hacking” replaces “catharsis” as a means of combating evil. Through her subversive appropriation of Cervantes’s classic Acker works through the problem of female identity, reimagining the conditions of her freedom.
CHAPTER THREE: QUIXOTISM AND BOVARYSME IN ELSA MORANTE’S MENZOGNA E SORTILEGIO

I have always been fascinated by the dark island people of the Mediterranean, and by writing about Arturo I could become one moi-même. And I’ve always wanted to be a boy, a boy like Arturo, who can hunt and fish and climb big rocks, and go about dressed badly, and have the dreams and illusions of a boy. And I always wanted to swim but [...]I never learn. Maybe that’s why Arturo is so much in the ocean. So you see, through writing I am like Don Quixote.

--Morante, Interview with Frederic Morton, 1959

Elsa/Elisa as a Literary Don Quixote

Elsa Morante is most known for her epic novel La storia (1974), which contrasts the official history of World War II with the lived experiences of an Italian mother and her epileptic son. However, she considered her first novel, Menzogna e sortilegio, her most accomplished work; it launched her career, earning her the prestigious Viareggio Prize in 1948. An anti-romantic portrayal of a poor southern Italian family steeped in romantic myths, narrated by a female protagonist (Elisa de Salvi) whom many see as a fictive representation of her author, Menzogna e sortilegio reflects the influence of Morante’s favorite classics, Don Quixote and Madame Bovary. Morante borrows from Cervantes the theme of book-inspired idealism and the device of the book-within-the book, while making bovarysme—defined by Jules Gaultier in his famous essay on Flaubert’s fiction as “the power given mean to see himself as other than who he is” (4) and associated with excessive fantasizing and daydreaming—the principal theme of her work. As Morante wrote in 1966, “le due parole del titolo, Menzogna e sortilegio, riassumono, in certo modo, la vicenda di questo romanzo; dove il contrasto fra la cronaca quotidiana e i mondi
favolosi dell’immaginazione porta quasi tutti i personaggi a una conclusione tragica.\textsuperscript{13}

[“the two words of this title, Lies and Sorcery, sum up, in a way, the task of this novel: where the contrast between the everyday life and the fantastic worlds of the imagination bring nearly all of the characters to a tragic conclusion,” my translation].

Although Morante has written that \textit{Don Quixote} was the principal model for \textit{Menzogna e sortilegio}, critics have neglected to explore the hypertextual relations at work. The metafictional elements of \textit{Menzogna e sortilegio}, which owe much to \textit{Don Quixote}, are thought to have emerged from the circumstances of the book’s composition. Originally entitled “Vita di mia nonna,” Morante began the novel in Rome but abandoned it in the fall of 1943, when she and her husband, the Italian novelist Alberto Moravia, were accused of antifascist activities. Leaving the manuscript with a friend, the director Carlo Lodovico Bragaglia, Morante fled with Moravia to the mountains in Ciociaria and remained in hiding until the Allies liberated Rome a year later. After she retrieved her manuscript from Bragaglia, she rewrote it from a different perspective\textsuperscript{14}. In an autobiographical text which Cesare Garboli traces to 1959, Morante reflects on how the war years played a formative role in her development as an artist:

\begin{quote}
Le mie immaginazioni giovanili—riconoscibili nei racconti del \textit{Gioco segreto}—furono stravolte dalla Guerra, sopravvenuta in quel tempo. Il passaggio dalla fantasia alla coscienza (dalla giovinezza alla maturità) significa per tutti un’esperienza tragica e fondamentale. Per me, tale esperienza è stata anticipata e rappresentata dalla Guerra; è lì che, precocemente e con violenza rovinosa, io ho incontrato la maturità. Tutto questo, io l’ho detto nel mio romanzo \textit{Menzogna e}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{13} See “Le Stanze di Elsa.” Unless indicated otherwise, all subsequent references to Morante’s notes are taken from this website, which features excerpts from Morante’s manuscripts, diaries, and letters.

\textsuperscript{14} Anna Banti shared Morante’s predicament. After Banti’s manuscript was destroyed in a 1944 bombing of Florence, she rewrote her biography of the seventeenth-century painter Artemisia Gentileschi, turning it into a self-conscious reconstruction of the artist’s life.
sortilegio, anche se della Guerra, nel romanzo, non si parla affatto (qtd. in Introduzione di Cesare Garboli, Menzogna e sortilegio, vi-vii).

My youthful imaginings—recognizable in the stories of Gioco segreto—were twisted by the war going on at that time. The passage from fantasy to consciousness (from youth to maturity) is for all a tragic experience, and fundamental. For me, such an experience was anticipated and represented by the war; and it is there that, precociously and with ruinous violence, I faced maturity. All this, I have said in my novel Menzogna e sortilegio, even though it does not speak of war at all (my translation).

Elsa’s passage “dalla fantasia alla coscienza” (from fantasy to consciousness) is reflected in Elisa De Salvi’s transition from a romantic daydreamer to the author of her family’s story, a transition which is narrated in the first three chapters, “Introduzione alla Storia della Mia Famiglia.” Hence, Sharon Wood has argued that Menzogna e sortilegio “can be seen as an essay by the younger writer on the art, purpose, and function of writing itself, and of her own position as a woman writing” (314). However, if we are to read Menzogna e sortilegio as a commentary on what it means to read and write as a woman, then Morante’s own literary influences need to be taken into account. Rather than overlook Morante’s partiality for Don Quijote and Madame Bovary, two novels about book-obsessed characters who become disillusioned, I consider it crucial to understanding Morante’s purposes in Menzogna e sortilegio. As this chapter will demonstrate through recourse to the Freudian notion of the family romance, Morante drew from her Cervantean heritage to represent her own quest for her identity as an author. While this aligns her with Virginia Woolf and Kathy Acker, Morante portrays her search for self-representation in intergenerational terms: Elsa/Elisa seeks knowledge about herself through her family members, whose stories she writes from a quasi-omniscient perspective. That the original title of her manuscript was “Vita di mia nonna” suggests that, for Morante, becoming an author required that she think back through her
mother. Yet the absence of a novelistic female tradition in Italy and the ubiquity of Oedipal paradigms of desire posed formidable obstacles to this mission, as her novel makes clear.

The youthful Morante was inspired by Cervantes’s spirit of innovation. She claimed *Don Quijote*, along with *Orlando furioso*, as her models because of their departure from preceding literary traditions. As she wrote on the cover of a 1975 edition of *Menzogna e sortilegio*, referring to herself in the third person:

> come quegli iniziatori esemplari della narrative moderna segnavano il termine dell’antica epopea cavalleresca, così, nell’ambizione giovanile di Elsa Morante, questo suo primo romanzo voleva anche essere l’ultimo possibile del suo genere: a salutare la fine della narrativa romantica e post-romantica, ossia dell’epopea borghese (*Opere* 1: lvi).

just as those exemplary initiators of modern narrative marked the end of the ancient chivalric epoch, in the youthful ambition of Elsa Morante, this first novel wants also to be the last possible of its kind: to herald the end of the romantic and post-romantic narrative, that is, of the bourgeois epic (my translation).

Her allusion to “l’epopea borghese” evokes Georg Lukács’ notion in *The Theory of the Novel* (1916) that “the novel is the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God” (88). Estranged from meaning, the hero of the novel can either retreat into his soul or he can pursue an ideal without much reflection; in either case, the inner life of the hero and the world in which he finds himself remain incommensurable. For Lukács, *Don Quijote*, emerging at a time when “the Christian God began to forsake the world,” represents the synthesis of these two possibilities as “the first great battle of interiority against the prosaic vulgarity of everyday life” (103, 104). Cervantes is “the intuitive visionary” of a “unique historico-philosophical moment” (130), for his vision gave form to the problematic that characterizes modernity: man’s desire for a higher purpose (Don Quijote
vows to become a knight in the style of Amadis de Gaul) and the impossibility of its fulfillment (the age of chivalry could never be revived in late sixteenth-century Spain). It is therefore not surprising that Lukács praised *Menzogna e sortilegio* as one of the most important works written in Italy in the twentieth century, for in this novel, Morante lays bare the myths and fantasies the characters construct to lend their prosaic lives a heroic grandeur, bypassing the emphasis on historical facts that nineteenth-century Italian novelists considered paramount. The familiar trajectories of “the bourgeois epic” in Italy, both romantic and post-romantic—the Christian notion of Providence which unites Renzo and Lucia at the end of Alessandro Manzoni’s *I promessi sposi* (1827), the vicissitudes which overwhelm the poor family in Giovanni Verga’s novel *I Malavoglia* (1881) and the changing fate of the Uzeda family in De Roberto’s *I viceré* (1894)—are abandoned in favor of a Cervantean “realism” that accounts for imaginary worlds and impossible desires. In Morante’s words, the novelist “rappresenta, nel mondo, la compiuta armonia della ragione e dell’immaginazione: […] l’intervento che riscatta la città umana dai mostri dell’assurdo” [‘represents, in the world, the complete harmony between reason and imagination: […] the intervention which redeems the human city of its absurd spectacles,” my translation]. (Opere II.1: 1498-1515).

Morante considered our relationship with reality our most grave existential problem. In a critical essay called “I personaggi” (1950), she outlines three major characters based on this relationship:

1) *il Pelide Achille*, ovvero il Greco dell’età felice. A lui la realtà appare vivace, fresca, nuova e assolutamente naturale;
2) *Don Chisciotte*. La realtà non lo soddisfa e gli ispira ripugnanza, e lui cerca salvezza nella finzione;
3) *Amieto*. Anche a lui la realtà ispira ripugnanza, ma non trova salvezza, e alla fine sceglie di non essere. (*Opere* II: 1467-8)
1) *Achilles the son of Peleus*, obviously the Greek of the happy age. To him reality appears alive, fresh, new, and absolutely natural;

2) *Don Quixote*. Reality does not satisfy him and inspires repugnance in him, and he searches for salvation in fiction;

3) *Hamlet*. Reality inspires repugnance in him as well, but he does not find salvation, and in the end he chooses not to be (my translation).

Don Quixote’s desires are mediated by books of chivalry. Modeling his behavior after his heroes, Amadis de Gaul and Orlando Furioso, Quijote sets off in search of adventures through which he can prove his valor by defending the honor of women and championing the rights of the exploited. Through fiction, he reinvents himself and his world, transforming from an ordinary, middle-aged man to a legendary hero who can slay giants and conquer kingdoms. His hope is to restore a code of ethics lost in King Phillip II’s Spain, when blood purity—an Old Christian lineage—mattered far more than noble deeds. Although he is aware of the discrepancy between the world of chivalric literature and the everyday world he inhabits, as his statements to Sancho Panza reveal, he persists in playing the role of the knight, choosing to see an inn as a castle and a prostitute as a princess (and perhaps half-believing in his fictions). Playing with the boundary between real and imagined worlds becomes an end in itself, in the absence of salvation.

In an interview with Frederick Morton, Morante referred to herself as “a literary Don Quixote.” That is, she reinvented herself through words rather than through deeds, creating characters who are quixotic altar egos and living vicariously through their adventures. Although she was born in Rome and spent most of her life there, she sets most of her fiction in the South, where she says, people “live closer with illusion.” The search for one’s genealogy through storytelling is a theme that dominates her oeuvre, from *Menzogna e sortilegio* to *Aracoeli* (1982). Both Arturo Gerace, the protagonist of
L’isola di Arturo and Manuele Gragnolati, the protagonist of Aracoeli, are, like their author, literary Quixotes: they construct family romances in the style of the books they read. Arturo, for instance, imagines his father as the hero in an adventure story. Only in her first and most autobiographical novel does Morante use the motif of quixotism to confront the riddle of female identity, of a frustrated mother-daughter bond.

How does Emma Bovary fit into a Morantean typology of character? Like Quixote, she seeks salvation in fiction (sentimental novels, pulp romances, and popular magazines); like Hamlet, she finds reality repugnant and ultimately chooses not to be. Jules de Gaultier has written of Emma that “the need to see herself as other than she is constitutes her true personality; it attains in her an incomparable violence and manifests itself by a refusal ever to accept or content herself with any sort of reality whatsoever” (14). He puts forward a chicken-and-egg theory of her bovarysme: it is impossible to say whether her “hatred of reality” determines or is the consequence of her desire to see herself as she is not (15). “Hatred of reality” for Emma is synonymous with hatred of the peasant class into which she is born. A farmer’s daughter who has never seen the world outside of a few provincial towns, Emma adopts the values and mannerisms of an aristocratic class that predates the French Revolution: she treats her wet nurse with haughty disdain and imagines Paris as a world of ambassadors and duchesses “who lived far above all others, among the storms that rage between heaven and earth, partaking of the sublime” (51). The accouterments of wealth seem to incarnate an ideal that cannot be attained in her married life with Charles Bovary, a simple-minded country doctor, as Flaubert illustrates in a passage of free indirect speech: “Why could not she lean over balconies in Swiss chalets, or enshrine her melancholy in a Scotch cottage, with a
husband dressed in a black velvet coat with long tails, and thin shoes, a pointed hat and frills?” (35) Her disillusionment with Charles becomes pronounced after he botches a surgery on Hippolyte’s leg, thwarting his prospects of advancement in the medical field, and she takes up an affair with the pseudo-aristocratic Rodolphe, whom she idolizes.

According to Alberto Moravia, Morante used literary archetypes to contrast their personalities: “Mi diceva che ero un misto di Achille e di Amleto, mentre lei era don Chisciotte o la Bovary” [“She said that I was a mix of Achilles and Hamlet, while she was Don Quixote or Madame Bovary,” my translation] (qtd. in Bardini 120). Elements of both Don Quijote and Emma Bovary converge in Elisa De Salvi, who is arguably Morante’s most autobiographical narrator-protagonist. Sequestered in a room in Rome after her parents’ death, many miles from the unidentified southern town where she grew up, Elisa nourishes her imagination on fantastic genres like Don Quixote: German legends, Scandinavian fables, Greek epics, and Oriental tales of love. Having inherited her family’s predilection for illusion, she reads the lives of her ancestors through the lens of these fictions: “Mia madre fu una santa, mio padre un granduca in incognito, mio cugino Edoardo un ras dei deserti d’oltretomba, e mia zia Concetta una profetessa regina,” Elisa recalls in the prologue (Menzogna 23) [“My mother was a saint, my father was a grand duke in disguise, my cousin Edoardo a desert sheik, my aunt Concetta a prophetess and queen (House 12)]. Such “menzogne” or falsehoods are likened to “Hidalge generose” [“generous Hidalgos”] who demand her devotion, coloring everything she perceives and isolating her from her peers: “Ese erano le mie consanguinee e le mie uguali; e nessuna Società era degna di me, fuorché la loro” (Menzogna 23) [“they were my blood comrades, my equals, and no company but theirs was worthy of me” (House 13)]. Unlike Don
Quijote, however, Elisa keeps her fantasies a secret and does not attempt to translate them into words or deeds. Instead, like Emma Bovary, she abandons herself to the state of mystical languor they induce:

Non occorre dirvi ch’io non comunicavo a nessun vivente le mie fantasie, che anzi ricevevano il loro maggior incanto, e veleno, proprio dall’esser segrete. E neppure fui tentata a imitare i miei prediletti scrittori fermando le mie visioni sulle carte; giacché la qualità più nefasta e aberrante del mio fantasticare stava in ciò, ch’esso, a somiglianza d’una droga, mi privava d’ogni potere d’azione, gettandomi in una stupefazione estatica, durante la quale il tempo, e le leggi naturali non esistevano più per me (Menzogna 23).

I need scarcely add that I did not breathe a word about my fantasies to any living soul; much of their charm came from their secrecy. I was not even tempted to imitate my favorite writers and to capture my visions in writing. Their most dangerous and harmful effect was that, like a drug, they robbed me of all ability to act, throwing me into a trance-like stupor in which time and natural laws did not exist for me (House 13).

Convinced of her impotence in the face of reality—“…io covo un acerbo disdegno verso la mia nullità, e proprio la mia convinzione d’esser nulla m’incoraggia a saziarmi dei trionfi altrui,” Elisa reports (Menzogna 22) [“…I feel bitter contempt for my own impotent nothingness. It is my conviction that I am a nonentity which encourages me to feed on the triumphs of others” (House 12)]—she nonetheless derives an illusory sense of power from her ability to fabricate lies, to be “la loro imperatrice, e quasi la loro dea” (Menzogna 24) [“their empress, their goddess” (House 14)]. However, upon the death of her adoptive mother, the prostitute Rosaria, Elisa attempts to exorcise the morbid spell her book-inspired fantasies have cast upon her. Relying on memory and imagination, she writes the story of her grandparents and parents, each of whom bears a resemblance to Don Quixote and/or Emma Bovary. In becoming the author of her family’s story, Elisa transitions from a bovaresque protagonist like her mother, a woman ruined by too much illusion, to a
literary Don Quijote like Elsa the author, who has turned her own life into fiction and whose works reflect how life and literature mirror each other.

Elsa/Elisa appropriates Cervantean narrative strategies to tell her family’s story, accounting for its anachronistic style. She divides her novel into six parts, each of which is titled: “L’erede normanno” (The Norman Heir), “La cuginanza,” (“The Cousins”), “L’anonimo” (“The Nameless One”), “Il butterato” (“Pock-face”), “L’inverno” (“Winter”), and “Il Postale” (“The Post”). These constitute a book-within-a book, one which, like the story of Don Quixote, is preceded by a prologue (“Introduzione alla Storia della Mia Famiglia”) and followed by an epilogue. As in Don Quijote, her book-within-a book has an episodic plot, and its chapters are labeled with subheadings that give the reader a summary of what will happen, such as “Mia nonna fa un matrimonio d’interesse” (“My grandmother has a wedding of some importance”) or “Il butterato ha qualche sfortuna in amore” (“Pock-face has some bad luck in love”). Though the plot moves forward in narrative time, there are occasional digressions in which Elisa, like Cervantes’s narrator, reflects on the book’s conception and highlights her unreliability. For instance, at the end of the fourth chapter in “L’anonimo,” Elisa admits her partiality for her cousin Edoardo, the object of her mother’s obsessive love.

By making Elisa an unreliable narrator, Morante distances herself from the tradition of verismo, rendering ironic her author-protagonist’s attempt to give a faithful account of her ancestors’ lives. While Elsa/Elisa distinguishes the story of her family members from the fantastic legends of saints and heroes that make up her library—her book, she informs the reader, “non tratta di genre illustre: soltanto d’una povera famiglia borgese” (Menzogna 29) [“…is not about famous people, only about a poor, middle-class
family” (House 17)—she also makes the extravagant claim that her ancestors dictated their story to her. Since the first four parts of Elisa’s book (roughly three hundred pages) narrate events that she neither witnessed nor experienced, her self-representation as Memory’s “fedele segretaria” (“faithful secretary”) appears as absurd as Cervantes’s claim that an Arab historian was the original author of the Quixote. Like Cervantes, Elsa/Elisa situates herself in an ambiguous relationship with truth. Rather than escape illusion, the alienating logic of specularity, her “romanzo” (an Italian word that means both “romance” and “novel”) holds up a mirror to all the mirrors in which she and her family members have seen themselves.

One of these mirrors is Madame Bovary. Elsa/Elisa models Anna Cerentano after Emma Bovary, a notoriously unloving mother, and she models herself after the sexless Berthe, Emma Bovary’s daughter, giving her a voice which she lacks in Flaubert’s novel. Highlighting the discrepancy between her romantic fantasy of her mother and the self-absorbed, narcissistic woman who raises her, Elisa grounds her authority as a narrating subject in the destruction of the former. As Valeria Finuccia has remarked, Elisa must “kill the mother, or kill in her the outsized romantic heroine living in her memory” in order to become the author of the book we read. However, I disagree with Finuccia when she posits the necessity of this symbolic matricide: “In order to find her mother… Elisa must paradoxically lose her; to resurrect her, she must confine her to the restrictive parameters which defined her existence; to reassert her closeness to her, she must refuse to be her extension” (312). Instead, referencing Marianne Hirsch’s critique of the feminist family romance, I argue that Elisa’s reliance on male narrative models renders her attempt to think back through her mother an impossible dream. Finuccia herself has noted “an
evident break in the novel” between Elisa “the omniscient narrator and reflective listener” and Elisa “the questioning biographer and possibly adequate interpreter of her family saga” (310). In the space between these two Elisas Morante leaves open the possibility of a different story, one in which mothers and daughters could communicate with each other.

**Bovarysme as a Family Romance**

Ma farsi addoratori e monaci della menzogna! Fare di questa la propria meditazione, la propria sapienza! rifutare ogni prova, e non solo quelle dolorose, ma fin le occasioni di felicità, non riconoscendo nessuna felicità possibile fuori del non-vero! Ecco che cosa è stata l’esistenza per me! Ed ecco perché mi vedete consunta e magra al pari dei ragazzetti mangiati dalle streghe di villaggio. Essi dalle streghe, e io dalle favole, pazze e ribalde fattucchieri (*Menzogna* 21).

To make oneself a worshipper, a disciple of illusion! Deliberately to make falsehood the substance of one’s thought and one’s wisdom—to reject all experience, not only painful experience but even one’s chance for happiness because one denies that happiness is possible beyond the confines of unreality. That is what my life has been. That is why you see me today wasted away like those children on whom village witches are said to feed, devoured by fantasies, by mad, vicious sorceresses (*House* 11).

Like Flaubert, Morante makes a pathological form of bovarysme the principal theme of her novel. All of her characters make themselves the disciples of illusion, sacrificing themselves on the altar of their imaginary gods. Unlike Flaubert, however, Morante represents bovarysme as a fatal family inheritance, “un morbo” [a disease] that is passed from one generation to the next: “Il male velenoso della menzogna serpeggia per i rami della mia famiglia, sia paterna o materna” (21) [the poisonous evil of the lie winds through the branches of my family, whether paternal or maternal].

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15 I denote this latter Elisa as “Elsa/Elisa.”
As in Madame Bovary, literature furnishes the models to which bovaresque characters aspire. Although Anna Cerentano, Elisa’s mother, is not an avid reader, her illusions of grandeur are derived from books. Morante makes this clear in an early scene in “L’erede normanno” (“The Norman Heir”), in which the child Anna reads out loud to her ailing father, Teodoro:

…Oppure, Anna tentava lettura ad alta voce. Si leggevano per lo più traduzioni di avventurosi romanzi francesi che costituivano, in massima parte, la biblioteca di Teodoro (molto ristretti, infatti, erano a quei tempi i pascoli letterari d’un gentiluomo del Mezzogiorno). E a simile storie di moschettieri e di regine, di malfattori magnanimi e di geniali segugi, di aristocratici fortunosi e di donzelle, Teodoro si ispirava per narrare alla figlia le sue proprie trascorse avventure. Egli era stato sempre un buon amico delle frottole; ma in queste occasioni, poi, non rifiutava nessuna invenzione che gli si offrisse alla mente per brillare agli occhi della figlia. Raccontava intrighi, duelli e congiure, dai quali sempre usciva col massimo onore, sia come vincitor trionfante, o sia come nobile vittima; e si esaltava in tali false memorie, e nel viso emaciato, divorato dalla barba che vi cresceva in disordine, un fulgore morboso gli accendeva le pupille, illuminando la sua fronte sconvolta (Menzogna 75).

Sometimes Anna read aloud. For the most part, they read translations of French romances and adventure stories, since such books formed the greater part of Teodoro’s library (limited, indeed, were the literary pastimes of a southern gentleman in those days). Such tales of musketeers and queens, of magnanimous bandits and their pursuers, of daring noblemen and beautiful maidens inspired Teodoro to recount his past adventures to his daughter. He had always been given to idle talk, but on these occasions he repressed no fantasy which might make him shine in his daughter’s eyes. He told of duels, intrigues and conspiracies, from which he always emerged with honor, whether as the triumphant victor or the noble victim. He became excited by these false memories; his emaciated face, covered by his unkempt beard, glowed and his eyes shone feverishly (House 56).

The disease of illusion is transmitted from father to daughter in a manner that evokes René Girard’s theory of triangular desire in Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure (1961). Inspired by his reading of French romances and tales of adventure, Teodoro, like Don Quixote, constructs an alternate version of his past, one in which he figures as a romantic hero. Girard would say that his desires are “externally
mediated,” since there is a gulf in time and space between Teodoro and his fictional heroes, his mediators. Teodoro attempts to bridge this gulf by mapping his life into the spatiotemporal coordinates of the romance, in turn mediating his daughter’s desires. Despite the internal inconsistencies in her father’s stories and the aleatory manner in which they are told, Anna does not doubt that they are true: “credeva ciecamente alle romanzesche memorie di suo padre, attribuendone le apparenti lacune alla propria ignoranza dell’alta società, e alla consuetudini irreali di coloro che avevan carrozza e cavallo” (Menzogna 75) [“(Anna) believed blindly in her father’s romantic memories, attributing their apparent confusion to her own ignorance of high society and the fantastic customs of those strange beings who possessed carriages and horses” (House 56)]. Paternal love makes Anna an impressionable listener of her father’s tales. Her desires are internally mediated by Teodoro, who flatters her ego with pet names and feeds her imagination with romantic descriptions of “Abroad:” Paris, Venice, Peking, Calcutta, New York, and St. Petersburg are “strane contamminazioni di opposte metropolis, nelle cui piazze imperiali la Leggenda e L’Utopia sedevano in mezzo a uno sciame di scherzose favole paterne” (Menzogna 63) [“strange composites of very different capitals, in whose imperial palaces legend and fairyland triumped in the midst of a swarm of fables” (House 46)].

Emma Bovary is the prototype for Anna and Cesira, Elisa’s maternal grandmother. Like Emma, Cesira comes from a modest background and sees herself as a heroine in a romance—“si credeva un’eroina simile alle protagoniste dei romanzi popolari che soleva divorare in passato, la sera, o la notte, nella propria cameretta di paese” (Menzogna 53) [“she saw herself as a heroine, like those in the popular novels she
used to devour late into the night in her little room in the country” (House 37)]. A naïve governess, she sees Teodoro Cerentano as a desirable marriage prospect because he comes from a distinguished family; little does she know that his eccentricities have alienated him from the Cerentano clan and that his extravagances have reduced him to penury. Like Flaubert’s heroine, she is led to the altar not by love, but by a vision of herself as a Lady riding in a diamond-studded carriage. Her awakening to the “menzogna” of marriage comes more swiftly than Emma’s, as her husband’s creditors seize most of the furniture in their nuptial home shortly after their honeymoon. While Teodoro’s gallantry and desire to sacrifice himself to an ideal evoke Don Quijote, he is a dissolute alcoholic by the time he courts Cesira, and their marriage engenders a mutual disillusionment that hastens his decline. Forced to work as a tutor to support her family, Cesira blames Teodoro for her lot in life and takes a perverse pleasure in her martyrdom. The contempt with which she treats her husband and her lack of empathy for her daughter recall Emma Bovary, along with her love of jewels and her fleeting delight in memories of courtships which may or may not have existed, qualities which Anna and Elisa will inherit.

Noting Morante’s reliance on Cervantean and Flaubertian models, Wood has argued that, in Menzogna e sortilegio, “the topoi of traditional novelistic fiction are absorbed and transformed… to delineate the historical and psychological gulf between the originating texts and Morante’s reinterpretation of them” (Under Arturo’s Star 97). For instance, although Cesira “is subject to the same delusions as Emma Bovary,” she “discharges her frustrations not through adultery, but through a brutish and brutal adherence to everyday duty” (97). Wood could also have added that Morante positions
her characters’ bovarylme within the Freudian topos of the family romance. Morante had read Freud’s A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis. Inspired by Freud’s approach to the unconscious and his theory of neurosis, she kept a “book of dreams” entitled Lettere ad Antonio (posthumously published as Diario 1938). It is likely that she was acquainted with “Der Familienroman der Neurotiker” (“Family Romances”) (1908), which appeared as an untitled section in Otto Rank’s The Myth of the Birth of the Hero (1909). In this brief paper, Freud explains how the child’s wish to liberate himself from his parents’ influence motivates his fantasy life. His struggle for autonomy follows two stages.

During the first stage, the child imagines that he is adopted or a stepchild as a compensation for feeling slighted by his parents. Not only must he compete with his siblings for their affection, but he is also beginning to perceive that they are not the infallible beings they once seemed. This realization has different consequences for boys than for girls: “...a boy is far more inclined to feel hostile impulses towards his father than towards his mother and has a far more intense desire to get free from him than from her” (298). Without recourse to rivalry with the father, the girl’s imagination is bound to be weaker. Since Freud links childhood fantasy with novelistic production (the German word “Roman,” like the Italian “romanzo,” means “novel” as well as “romance”), the implication is that male fictions are more powerful than female fictions.

In the second stage of the Freudian romance, the childimaginatively replaces his parents with those of a higher social standing. When he becomes aware of his parents as sexual beings, he realizes that paternity is always dubious (“pater sempre est incertus”) and his family romance “undergoes a curious curtailment: it contents itself with exalting the child’s father, but no longer casts any doubts on his maternal origin, which is
regarded as something unalterable” (299). A desire to displace the father dominates the child’s fantasy life, with the mother used as a means to this end: the child may imagine himself as the product of a secret affair, or, alternately, cast his siblings as illegitimate. This state of affairs, however, is not as hopeless as it may seem. At the conclusion of “Family Romances,” Freud’s notion of the family romance undergoes its own “curious curtailment:”

If anyone is inclined to turn away in horror from the depravity of the childish heart or feels tempted, indeed, to dispute the possibility of such things, he should observe that these works of fiction, which seem so full of hostility, are none of them really so badly intended, and that they still preserve, under a slight disguise, the child’s original affection for his parents. [...] If we examine in detail the commonest of these imaginative romances, the replacement of both parents or of the father alone by grander people, we find that these new and aristocratic parents are equipped with attributes that are derived entirely from real recollections of the actual and humble ones; so that in fact the child is not getting rid of his father but exalting him. Indeed the whole effort at replacing the real father by a superior one is only an expression of the child’s longing for the happy, vanished days when his father seemed to him the noblest and strongest of men and his mother the dearest and loveliest of women (500).

Our struggle to free ourselves of our familial origins masks our greater desire to return to them. The family romance—and, by extension, the novel—is motivated by nostalgia. Since Freud’s essay assumes a male subject, we can infer that nostalgia is the province of male writers.

Morante seemed to have Freud’s essay in mind when she created the character of Francesco de Salvi, Elisa’s father. Her own familial circumstances might also have accounted for her preoccupation with issues of paternity, legitimacy, and authorship: Augusto Morante, a probation officer in a boys’ reform school, raised Elsa and her three siblings but their biological father was Francesco Monaco, a Sicilian-born film producer. Irma, Morante’s mother, continued to see him on and off during her unhappy marriage
with the sexually impotent Augusto, who ate his meals alone in a small basement room (Lucamante 106-109). Morante fictionalized her family’s predicament in the fourth part of *Menzogna e sortilegio*, “Il Butterato” (“Pock-Face”), by making Francesco the illegitimate son of Nicola Monaco, a corrupt land administrator who managed the Cerentano estate. Like Morante’s biological father, the fictional Monaco makes sporadic appearances in his child’s life, using his business dealings with Damiano, an elderly village landowner, as a pretext to carry on his affair with Damiano’s young wife Alessandra. Francesco’s family romance follows a Freudian trajectory. Before he learns of his true paternity, he imaginatively replaces his legal father, Damiano, with that “quello splendido, arcano personaggio” (*Menzogna* 346) (“that splendid, arcane character,” my translation) who graces his home with occasional visits; he apes Nicola’s cosmopolitan airs and identifies with his irony and scorn for established conventions, qualities which none of the neighbors in his village possess. Nicola encourages Francesco’s idolatry by feeding the boy’s imagination with romantic tales: “…favoleggiava di dame e di principi, di palazzi, feudi e cavalli, come di due proprie signore, dimore, schiavi” (*Menzogna e sortilegio* 343) [“Nicola’s stories were of ladies, of princes, of palaces, of great estates, and of horses” (*House* 282)]. Like Anna’s father Teodoro, Nicola transmits the disease of bovarsme through storytelling, the effects of which are symbolized by the smallpox that afflicts Francesco after his mother confesses her affair with Monaco.

Although intended to bolster her son’s ego, Alessandra’s confession alienates Francesco, undoing their symbiotic union. While he empathizes with Alessandra’s preference for Nicola, the fact that she has betrayed Damiano makes her less trustworthy
in his eyes, turning all women into potential adulteresses. More significantly, his father’s absence in his life magnifies his sense of his own unworthiness: how could he live up to the legacy of a duke (Alessandra’s designation for Nicola)? Leaving his parents and their village behind, he enrolls in a preparatory school in the same city where his biological father lives and takes refuge in his studies; through book learning, he hopes to ennoble himself. When he realizes that he is poorer than his classmates, he adopts the paradoxical identity of a Marxist baron: as Morante writes, “egli s’innamorava di questa affascinante verità, distruttice di falsi reami; ma nel medesimo tempo, si restiva lui stesso di menzogna, e architetta reami falsi” (Menzogna 366) (“he fell in love with the intoxicating doctrine which could destroy empires; but at the same time he gave himself over to deception and invented empires of his own” (House 297). Later in life, he embarks on a quest for his father that is motivated less by love than by self-interest. His rivalry with Nicola is a rivalry with himself, and his desire to avenge his father for his own unrequited love is quixotic in the extreme:

Era una sfida ch’egli recava a Nicola: voleva un duello. Ma, come certi disperati romantici, lo sfidante in questo duello cercava non la caduta dell’avversario, bensi la sua propria: la caduta, cioè, di quella se stesso ch’egli era stato fino ad oggi, e del proprio innocente, rifiutato amore. Senonché, l’avversario, ahimè, non poteva più dargli soddisfazione: Francesco s’avvide d’avere sfidato, a somiglianza del Generoso Hidalgo, uno che da gran tempo era fatto polvere (Menzogna 473).

It was a challenge he brought Nicola: he wanted a duel. But like other desperate romantics, the challenger in this duel was not seeking the overthrow of his adversary but of himself, that is the overthrow of what he once had been, and of his own innocent, rejected love. But the enemy, alas, could no longer give him satisfaction and Francesco perceived that, like Don Quixote, he had challenged a man who had long since been dust (House of Liars 298).

Assuming the position of a wounded, vengeful knight, Francesco nonetheless harbors nostalgia for his early childhood, for his corporeal bond with his mother and his youthful
adoration of Nicola. This nostalgia motivates his actions as an adult. When he learns that his biological father is a thief who has been banished from the Cerentano household, he replaces him with the aristocratic Edoardo Cerentano, whose admiration he courts. Similarly, while he sunders his ties with his peasant mother, ignoring her letters and parcels from the countryside, he finds a surrogate mother in the prostitute Rosaria, who, like Alessandra, is an affectionate, illiterate peasant woman. Through his attempt to convert Rosaria from a “fallen woman” into an “angel of the house,” he attempts to restore the image he once had of his mother, before her confession of infidelity made her “fall” in his eyes.

Francesco’s marriage to Anna precipitates his transformation from a Don Quixote-like figure into a Charles Bovary. Having abandoned his youthful dream of becoming a lawyer, he works as a post office clerk to support his family. Like the hapless Charles, he worships his wife, tolerates her contempt and indifference towards him, and goes into debt to indulge her cravings for jewels. At the end of his life he is, like Teodoro, a disillusioned dreamer who takes refuge in lying about his past. His daughter, however, is less credulous than Anna was: “sembrava…un messaggero che celebra la propria vivente patria: scancellandosi per lui, nell’ artificio di quegli istanti, ogni intervallo fra le parole e le cose, fra il presente e il future” (Menzogna 669) [“a messenger who celebrates his actual existing homeland; under the spell of his own artifice, the distinction between words and facts, between the present and the future, disappeared for him” (House 414)]. Despite her own bovaresque tendencies, Elisa can see beyond the family romance that her father has constructed.
In *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (1989), Hirsch takes Freud’s “Family Romances” as a starting point for her investigation of plot dynamics in women’s fiction. She begins by considering the implications of Freud’s theory for girls. Unlike the boy, the girl cannot imaginatively replace a same-sex parent with one of a higher social standing (given that the mother’s identity is certissima); therefore, she must eliminate her mother from her fantasy life and focus on her relationships with father figures (uncles, brothers, cousins, and male friends as well as actual fathers) to avoid the pitfalls of a weak imagination. Moreover, since paternity is uncertain, the girl’s heterosexual erotic relationships are always fraught with incestuous potential: “All men are possible brothers or fathers” (56). This is not the case for the boy, who eroticizes his sister but not his mother (As Hirsch notes, Freud did not take into consideration Oedipus’s unusual circumstances). Whereas the boy seeks to appropriate the father’s place, the girl tries to gain access to male power through marriage, conflating eros with ambition. Hirsch references Freud’s earlier essay, “Creative Writers and Daydreaming” (1907), in which he had argued that girls channel ambitious wishes through erotic fantasies. She concludes that

Freud’s essay, in all its implications, allows us to see that maternal repression actually engenders the female fiction, a fiction which then revolves not around the drama of same-sex parent/child relations, but around marriage, which alone can place women’s stories in a position of participating in the dynamics of ambition, authority, and legitimacy which constitute the plots of realist fiction (57).

Hirsch demonstrates how two canonical nineteenth-century novels written by women—Jane Austen’s *Emma* (1815) and Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (1899)—converge with and depart from the female family romance implied in Freud’s essay. She finds that in both novels, the dynamics of maternal repression and paternal alliance are at
work. However, Austen and Chopin “do not simply hand down their heroine from mother to father;” rather, they replace authoritative fathers with men with nurturing qualities, fulfilling the female fantasy of what Adrienne Rich has called “the-man-who-would-understand.” These male figures “combine maternal nurturance with paternal power,” replacing both the mother and the father; as fraternal (and therefore incestuous) figures, they offer the heroine an alternative to a plot that culminates in marriage and motherhood (58). The marriage-and-motherhood plot that was so ubiquitous in nineteenth-century novels with female protagonists was naturalized by Freudian psychoanalysis: in his later essays, “Female Sexuality” and “Femininity,” Freud argued that girls become mature women by transferring their libidinal desire for the mother onto the father and replacing their wish for a penis with the wish for a child.

The female family romance depicted in *Menzogna e sortilegio* dovetails with the one which Hirsch extrapolates from Freud’s essay. Maternal repression and paternal identification enable Anna to engender her own romantic fictions of selfhood. Encouraged by her father into imagining herself as a princess because of her Cerentano name, Anna mourns Teodoro’s death but not Cesira’s, for Cesira lacks a distinguished birth and does not fill her daughter’s head with grandiose visions of “Abroad.” Anna makes no attempt to conceal her hatred of her mother; Cesira, with her oppressive martyrdom, must be banished from her psyche in order to set her imagination free. After Teodoro’s death, she becomes erotically fixated on her wealthy male cousin, who also bears the Cerentano name. Her incestuous desire for Edoardo does not, however, offer an alternative to a plot leading to marriage and motherhood; instead it becomes the source of her undoing.
Edoardo Cerentano is at the center of the novel’s family romance, a fiction linking the poor De Salvis (Anna, Francesco, and the young Elisa) with the more prosperous Cerentanos (Concetta, Edoardo, and Augusta). Since he dies young, he is as much a phantasm as an actual character, a site of other people’s false memories and narcissistic projections. For the De Salvis, he represents a world of aristocratic privilege from which they are excluded: he lives in a palace, rides a carriage, and commands the townspeople’s respect with his aura of elegance and refinement. Spoiled by his mother Concetta and favored over his sister Augusta (whose name is synonymous with health), he develops into a megalomaniac who takes pleasure in manipulating his admirers according to his whims. Like Shakespeare’s Iago, he controls the fates of others from behind the scenes, inventing fictitious affairs to drive a wedge between happy lovers (e.g. Francesco and Rosaria) and planting the seeds of his best friend’s ruin: I am referring to how he mediates Francesco’s desire for Anna, after he has seduced and abandoned her.

Thus, far from Rich’s “man-who-would-understand,” Edoardo is an emblem of patriarchal power at its most perverse. Morante alludes to the anti-Semitic ideal touted by the Nazi party by giving him an Aryan physiognomy—he is the blond, Nordic foil to the dark-haired, southern Francesco, whose origins may be Jewish—and by making him an atheist who rejects his mother’s religious training. Yet she also represents him as sickly and effeminate, undermining the Nazi fiction of the robust, virile Aryan constitution. Indeed, Edoardo is ashamed of how vulnerable his illness renders him. Although his ailing health underscores his mortality, his death immortalizes him in the eyes of his female admirers. Both Concetta and Anna become so invested in their illusions of Edoardo that the plot of their own lives unravel: Concetta constructs a shrine for her dead
son and decorates it with his effigies, while Anna composes love letters dictated by Edoardo’s ghost. The two women, the one rich and the other poor, neglect their families and waste away as they struggle to keep their beloved alive, fetishizing the most quotidian aspects of his earthly existence. Morante, then, presents the romances of Anna and Concetta as cautionary tales for the female reader: instead of being constitutive of mature femininity, as Freud would have it, maternal repression and idealization of male power lead to psychic disintegration and death.

**Bovarysme as a Feminist Family Romance**

While Morante traces the construction of a family romance that revolves around Edoardo, she also offers an alternative to this plot: what Marianne Hirsch has called “the feminist family romance.” Hirsch adumbrates the revisionary efforts of thinkers as diverse as Nancy Chodorow, Dorothy Dinnerstein, Jessica Benjamin, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray, all of whom placed the mother-child dyad at the center of identity-formation. Unlike Freud, who viewed the individual’s break from his parents as integral to his creative development, such revisionaries “allow(ed) for the possibility of a continued inter-relation,” one which could be defined “not by repetition or contradiction, but by an attempted re-vision of the past and of the individual’s relation to the past” (132-3). “The feminist family romance, as voiced in the texts of psychoanalytic feminism,” Hirsch writes is the romance of the daughter, entangled with her mother through identification and the struggle against it, increasingly distant from father, brother, and male lover, unproblematic only in the connection to her sister or female lover. It is located in the pre-verbal realm of the pre-oedipal, available to the writing consciousness not through memory but through fantasy and projection. The mother who possesses the recollection may well have to be eliminated as subject and
maintained in the position of the object of a “sustained quest” if the feminist family romance is to maintain, through fantasy, its imaginative and subversive vision of gender difference.

In the fourth chapter of *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, Hirsch looks at how mother-daughter relationships are portrayed in psychoanalytic feminist texts and in postmodern women’s narratives, illuminating connections and points of departure. In her view, Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing* (1972) exemplifies the dangers inherent in the feminist family romance—namely, the idealization of the pre-oedipal bond between mother and daughter and the denial of maternal subjectivity—while Christa Wolf’s *Kindheitsmuster* (translated as *Patterns of Childhood* in 1976) offers a model of mother-daughter subjectivity that transcends Oedipal frameworks. Drawing from Adrienne Rich’s notion of “re-vision” as a way of “entering an old text from a new critical direction,” Hirsch argues that it is not enough for feminist daughters to make their mothers the object of a “sustained quest;” instead, they must become mothers themselves and pass on a different knowledge of the past to their daughters (160). Whether we agree with Hirsch, hers is a valid critique of the tendency of second-wave feminists to romanticize their relation to the maternal while de-valuing “real” mothers and the institution of motherhood.

Written forty years before Italian feminists such as Luisa Muraro and Adriana Cavavero would emphasize the importance of loving, reciprocal bonds between women, *Menzogna e sortilegio* anticipates their work by linking a female subject’s desire for authorship with her need for maternal connection. Elisa departs from the pattern of the women in her family (and from Flaubert’s heroine, who sheds false tears at her mother’s funeral before forgetting about her entirely) by romanticizing her relation to the maternal. In her second introductory chapter, she makes it clear that her unrequited love for her
mother has been a driving force in her life: “Mia madre è stato il primo, e il più grave, dei miei amori infelici; e in virtù di lei, fin dalla mia prima infanzia io conoscevo le più amare prove degli innamorati negletti” [“My mother was the first and the most serious of my unhappy loves. Thanks to her, I knew from early childhood the bitterest agonies of the unrequited lover”] (Menzogna 18; House 9). Given that Elisa dedicates her epigraph, “La Favola” (“The Story”), to Anna, we can infer that this unrequited passion has motivated her to write her family’s story. Becoming an author is her attempt to master her first and most significant loss by symbolizing it, as Finuccia has argued (311); yet Anna’s subjectivity is displaced in her narrative, which, like many feminist family romances, highlights the daughter’s desire.

Elisa’s bovaysme, then, takes the form of a feminist family romance. In “L’Inverno” (“Winter”), she relates the onset of her book-inspired fantasies to her childhood desire for her mother’s attention. Ignored by her mother, she brings her books to a writing table, sits nearby the listless Anna and amuses herself by making up stories and daydreams “dai quali un medico avveduto avrebbe forse pronosticato il morbo fantasticare che doveva assalirmi più tardi” (Menzogna 501) [“from which an observant doctor might perhaps have prognosticated the disease of fantasy which was to assail me later” (House 409)]. Unlike Anna’s bovaysme, which is passed down by her father through his storytelling, Elisa’s is transmitted textually, in silence. Her imaginative activity fills the space between her mother’s body and her own:

Queste invenzioni, imitate dai libri di fiabe e di sante leggende ch’erano le mie lettere di allora, di distinguevano per avere a protagoniste sempre una madre e una figlia: le quali, attraverso cattiverie, guerre, e pericoli, si ritrovano sempre alla fine congiunte in una vittoria suprema, ch’era amore, riconoscenza, e riscatto (Menzogna 501).
My fictions were imitated from fables and legends I had read, and were notable for always having as protagonists a mother and a daughter who, despite conspiracies and perils and struggles, were always united in the end in triumphant love, gratitude, and vindication (House 405).

From fables and legends, Elisa constructs a mother-daughter romance, a lie which compensates for the maternal love she lacks. However, when she decides to become the author of her family saga, she steps outside her romance with her mother, viewing it critically. Her goal then becomes to solve the enigma her parents bequeathed her with, and, in so doing, to answer the riddle of her identity: “Chi è questa donna? Chi è questa Elisa?” This mission is doomed from the outset, because, in the words of Patricia Sambuco, the author of Corporeal Bonds: The Daughter-Mother Relationship in Twentieth-Century Italian Women's Writing (2012), “within the patriarchal system of values and references, no real space is left for woman to re-articulate her own sense of identity, her own difference” (71). Elisa’s textual representation of Anna is mediated by her reading of Madame Bovary: in writing Anna, Elisa aligns her fate with that of Flaubert’s heroine, maps her onto the same plot of the lovesick woman who neglects her husband and daughter to pine after an ideal beloved. Although Anna does not have affairs like Emma Bovary, she is unfaithful in her imagination; or rather, she is faithful to Edoardo’s ghost, who has usurped the place of her husband. She can make love to Francesco only if she imagines he is Edoardo, as she does after a fateful night at an opera house.¹⁶ As if in imitating the narrator of Madame Bovary, Anna trains a dispassionate

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¹⁶ The allusion to the opera substantiates my argument that Madame Bovary serves as a hypotext for Elisa’s family saga: in part 3, Charles Bovary takes his melancholic wife to see Donizetti’s “Luca di Lammermoor” in the hope of boosting her spirits and strengthening her commitment to their marriage. The subject of Donizetti’s libretto, a heroine driven to madness because she is forced to renounce her beloved (Edgardo) and
gaze on Anna when the latter is on her deathbed, characterizing her as “una creatura larvale, una insensata, fosca bambina senza cuore, che ancora si pasca di sogni” (Menzogna 503) [“an underdeveloped creature, an unthinking, somber, heartless child who still feeds on dreams” (House 405)]. She, too, subjects her to a prolonged, agonizing death that evokes a Christian penance: in the throes of a feverish delirium, Anna finally articulates remorse for the suffering she has inflicted on her husband.

Like Flaubert’s heroine, Anna discharges her passion through an epistolary correspondence that demonstrates the extent to which she is dominated by male discourse. While Emma pens love letters to her seducer Rodolphe, Anna takes on Edoardo’s identity and makes herself the recipient of his fervent messages. However, in both texts, the women are ventriloquists parroting the courtly male rhetoric of love, and their missives do not reach their intended audience: Charles Bovary discovers his wife’s secret correspondence with Rodolphe when he rummages in an attic after Emma’s suicide, and Elisa inherits Anna’s letters after the latter’s death. The feigned letters, like Edoardo’s diamond and ruby ring, are tokens of Anna’s madness, a fatal inheritance whose bequeathal Elisa must refuse to position herself as the author of the book we read. Although the letters remain in Elisa’s possession while she is writing her family’s story, she never reveals their contents to the reader, and she vows to burn them before she finishes the book: “Ma non passerà molto che, scritta appena la parola fine a queste memorie io darò alle fiamme l’Epistolario fantastico: in tal modo, spero, l’ombra materna sarà placata” (Menzogna 698) [“But not long after finis is written to these memoirs, I marry a man whom she does not love, mirrors Anna’s predicament more than it does Emma’s.
shall consign the fantastic correspondence to the flames; thus, I hope, my mother’s ghost will be appeased” (House of Liars 558)]. Burning her mother’s letters would signify the destruction of her romantic fantasy of Anna, marking the end of her “bourgeois epic” and heralding her culmination into a mature artist. However, her refusal to read her mother’s letters or to incorporate them into her book suggest her desire not to know the truth about her mother, to preserve, on some level, her feminist family romance, the wellspring of her writing.

Elisa can be seen not only as a representative of Elsa the author, but also as an avatar of Emma Bovary’s daughter, Berthe. Both are unwanted by their mothers, who would have preferred to give birth to a boy, and regarded as nuisances in an Oedipal family drama in which the father places the mother on a pedestal. They witness their parents’ unhappy marriage and survive their premature deaths. At the end of Madame Bovary, Berthe is adopted by a poor aunt who sends her to a cotton-mill to work for her keep. Presumably, Emma’s reckless handling of her husband’s finances and Charles’s lovesick blindness have consigned her to a life of drudgery; she is the Bovarys’ sacrificial lamb. Morante spares Elisa this grim fate by making a “fallen woman” come to her rescue. Elisa is adopted by her father’s mistress, a prostitute who has grown successful enough to pay off the de Salvi’s debts. The magnanimous Rosaria gives Elisa a Woolfian room of her own, the luxury of time and space with which to write.

Although Rosaria is the only woman to have shown her affection, Elisa does not mourn her death. In her prologue, she reflects that

…io non ho pianto alla morte della mia madre adottiva; poiché, per me, essa era morta da tempo nei miei affetti, e, in luogo di lei vera, io amavo un suo fantastico Doppio, una signora senza corpo che frequentava la mia camera. La
quale era identica a lei nell’aspetto, al par di lei gaia, esuberante e fastosa; ma era, a differenza di lei, fedele (Menzogna 25).

I could not weep for the death of my second mother. She had long been dead to my heart; in her place, I had loved her imaginary double. This ghost often visited me in my room and was like her in appearance, exuberant and brilliant, gay as she was gay but, unlike her, constant (House 14).

By making her aware of her tendency to romanticize the maternal, Rosaria’s death inspires Elisa’s attempt to use the pen to strip the veils of illusion. Yet she does not succeed in producing new knowledge about her mother or herself. Instead, she reproduces the Cervantean dualism between Dulcinea and Aldonza through her portrayal of her two mothers. The maternal in her novel is split between the carnal and the transcendental, with Anna and Rosaria as foils: Rosaria is earthy and vivacious, Anna cold and ethereal. The intertextuality of Elisa’s family saga with Madame Bovary and Don Quixote serves to underscore the quixotic nature of her attempt to construct a maternal genealogy in the absence of female narrative models. Moreover, as Hirsch would argue, since her ability to write her family’s story is contingent on her mothers’ deaths, her textual quest cannot deepen her understanding of herself as a woman: answers to the questions with which her book opened (“Chi è Elisa? Chi è questa donna?”) remain deferred.

Morante, then, rewrites the story of Emma Bovary from the daughter’s perspective, highlighting what is marginal in Flaubert’s novel: the missing connection between mothers and daughters, and by extension, between female writers and readers. At the same time, she ironizes the daughter’s search for the truth about her mother, anticipating Hirsch’s criticisms of the feminist family romance. Through her ingenious use of Cervantean narrative strategies and Flaubertian motifs, Morante created a
formidable work of feminist metafiction, becoming a symbolic mother to Italian women
writers who sought to redefine their relationship with their literary heritage.
PART II: REIMAGINING EMMA BOVARY
CHAPTER FOUR:  
REIMAGINING EMMA BOVARY: THE ADULTEROUS FEMALE 
READER IN ITALIAN AND AMERICAN WOMEN’S FICTION

Madame Bovary as a Hypotext to Feminist Fiction

Famous for its controversial heroine as well as for its innovative style, Madame Bovary influenced modernist and postmodernist writers worldwide. In a recent study, Patricia Novillo-Corvalán called Madame Bovary “a landmark novel which staked out new territory in the textual afterlife of Don Quixote” (1). Following the tradition of Cervantes, Flaubert made his protagonist a fiction addict who conflates the world’s reality with its representation in romance novels, but he also “reinforced a new gender dimension linked to androgyny, sexual desire, and eroticism, which has been continued and developed by Joyce and Puig in twentieth-century Irish and Latin American literature” (1). Paying close attention to the Nausicaa episode in Ulysses (1922) and to the plot of The Buenos Aires Affair (1973), Novillo-Corvalán positions Gerty MacDowell and Gladys D’Onofrio as modern-day descendants of Emma Bovary, insatiable readers of women’s magazines and sentimental fiction whose bibliomania gives way to erotomania. Gerty’s orgasmic raptures and Gladys’ predilection for genital stimulation scandalized their audiences, leading to censorship trials in America and Argentina reminiscent of the one faced by Flaubert in 1857 (13). Emphasizing Gerty’s and Gladys’s status as “lame female Quixotes”—Gerty walks with a limp and Gladys has lost her left eye after an attempted rape---Novillo-Corvalán suggests that Joyce and Puig have inherited Flaubert’s tendency to pathologize transgressive female sexuality.

That twentieth-century women writers created a counterdiscourse to the novelistic tradition known as Bovarysm has been overlooked in studies of Madame Bovary’s
influence. This chapter corrects this oversight by positioning *Madame Bovary* as a hypotext to four major works of Italian and American feminist fiction: Alba de Céspedes’s *Dalla parte di lei* (1949), Dorothy Bryant’s *Ella Price’s Journal* (1972), Erica Jong’s *Fear of Flying* (1973) and Dacia Maraini’s *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucricia* (1990). *In Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (1982), Gérard Genette uses the term “hypertextuality” to describe “any relationship uniting a text B (hypertext) to an earlier text (hypotext), upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not one of commentary.” Although Genette subsumes intertextuality within hypertextuality, he also emphasizes that “text B (the hypotext) may not speak of text A at all but is unable to exist without text A, from which it originates through a process called transformation or imitation” (5). While *Dalla parte di lei* and *Ella Price’s Journal* position their female author-protagonists as resisting readers of *Madame Bovary*, neither *Fear of Flying* nor *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucricia* mentions Flaubert’s novel. However, both novels draw from the Flaubertian theme of the unhappily married woman who awakens to her erotic desires through literature. The heroine’s erotic quest does not lead to suicide, as it does for Emma Bovary, or to disability, as is the case for Gerty MacDowell and Gladys D’Onofrio; instead, it initiates her search for her voice as an artist, a significant departure from the male-authored tradition of Bovarysm.

Several motifs from *Madame Bovary* recur in twentieth-century Italian and American women’s fiction. First and foremost, there is the formative role that books play in shaping female imagination and desire. *Madame Bovary’s* first scene of reading unfolds when Emma Rouault is a young woman at a convent who is intoxicated more by its sensual décor than by Christian precepts of virtue and modesty. An old maid with
roots in the pre-Revolutionary aristocracy lends Emma and other girls forbidden books. Although these were sentimental novels penned by women in the first decades of the nineteenth century, they are unnamed by Flaubert, reduced to their Romantic formulae:

lovers, sweethearts, persecuted ladies fainting in lonely pavilions, postilions killed at every relay, horses ridden to death on every page, somber forests, heartaches, vows, sobs, tears and kisses, little boatrides by moonlight, nightingales in shady groves, gentlemen brave as lions, gentle as lambs, virtuous as no one ever was, always well dressed, and weeping like fountains (I:VI. 32).

Elissa Marder has proposed that Emma Bovary suffers from a temporal disorder: a paradigmatic modern subject, she is unable to remember or to forget the past (49). I would argue that her disordered relation to time must be understood in historical, rather than ontological, terms; that she longs for the independence allowed women in court society, before the Napoleonic Code of 1804 made marriage and motherhood women’s destiny. The literature which shapes her youthful imagination—*Paul et Virginie* (1787), the novels of Sir Walter Scott, the exotic poetry of Lord Byron—belong to the Revolutionary and Romantic periods; they induce dreams of living “in an old manor-house, like those long-waisted chatelaines who, in the shade of pointed arches, spent their days leaning on stone, chin in hand, watching a white-plumed knight galloping on his black horse from the distant fields” (I: VI, 33). It is no surprise that as a mature woman she gravitates towards dandyism, for the dandy “retains the androgynous character of court society and consequently rejects the bourgeois differentiation between the sexes” (Birken 617). The anxious self-regard she displays at La Vaubyessard ball and her coldness towards her husband and daughter link her with the *femme à la mode*, while her transvestitism and insatiable erotic appetites evoke the figure of the *lionne*. Used to refer to courtesans at the beginning of the nineteenth century, by the 1830s the term *lionne*
conjured up the fashionable female aristocrats of the July Monarchy, who insisted on equality with their male peers. Discourse on femmes à la mode and lionnes circulated through physiologies, small books which offered the reader an intimate knowledge of Parisian lifestyles. This genre enjoyed a wide readership from 1830 to 1845, influencing the novels of Sand, Stendhal, Balzac, and Barbey d’Aurevilly (Gill 169). During her married life with Charles, Emma reads the novels of Sand and Balzac and subscribes to the Corbeille and the Sylphe des Salons, two fashionable Parisian women’s magazines; we can infer that she borrowed her androgynous personae from the literature of the period.

In Sexuality and the Reading Encounter (1996), Emma Wilson argues that the activity of reading “privileges identification as scopic activity dependent on the recognition and assimilation of an (alien) image of series of images which will become constitutive of the self” (5). This Lacanian model of reading is exemplified in Madame Bovary. Emma’s imaginary consists of a series of tableaux that fuses images of female martyrs with the painted plates of Louis XIV, English ladies in carriages with Sultans, Tartar miniarets, and Roman ruins. Her absorption in fictional words predisposes her to be dissatisfied with her life as the wife of a small-town doctor whose conversation is “as flat as a sidewalk.” Flaubert makes explicit the connection between reading and adultery: after her seduction by Rodolphe, a pseudo-aristocratic rake, Emma gazes into a mirror and murmurs, “I have a lover!” identifying with the legions of adulterous heroines that populate her novels. Although books mediate her desires, these do not follow a strictly mimetic trajectory: she is less seduced by the image of herself as a philandering wife than she is intoxicated by a novelistic atmosphere of sensual abundance. Her desire to embody
abstract nouns like “passion,” “bliss,” and “ecstasy” distinguishes her from Cervantes’s Quijote, who is motivated by the abstract idealism of chivalry.

This brings me to a second trope from Madame Bovary that has informed feminist fiction: that of adultery as a vehicle for self-discovery. For Naomi Schor, Emma Bovary “seeks a lover not only to become a novelistic character, but especially to become an author” (500). In the early stage of her marriage, while waiting for “something to happen,” she equips herself with writing utensils and fantasizes that the name of Bovary is displayed in all the bookstores and newspapers. When her affair with Rodolphe gets underway, she takes to writing letters, a form recognizable to her from eighteenth-century novels. Schor speculates that she has affairs in order to have something to write about. Although she initially writes to receive letters from Rodolphe, by the end of the novel, when she has taken up her affair with the poet/law student León, she is no longer motivated by the pleasure of a clandestine epistolary exchange. Having “found again in adultery all the platitudes of marriage,” she writes to revive the passion she lacks for León. Schor relates Emma’s “apprenticeship as a writer” to her “virility apprenticeship,” or her tendency to dress and behave like a man in her affair with León (506). Through acts of transvestitism—smoking cigars, wearing a tight-fitting black waistcoat, buying her lover gifts—she obtains, by proxy, the phallus linked with writing, a path that can only lead to death for the female artist.

In “Why Emma Bovary Had to Be Killed” (2008), Jacques Rancière offers a different perspective on the issue of Emma’s suicide. In Rancière’s view, Emma had to be sentenced to death by Flaubert as “a bad artist” who “handles in the wrong way the equivalence of art and non-art” (240). She tries to incarnate her aesthetic enjoyment in
objects: “Art in her life means nice curtains on the windows, paper sconces for the candles, trinkets for her watch, a pair of blue vases on the mantelpiece, an ivory work box with a silver gilt thimble, and so on” (239). Her conflation of “the material enjoyment of material goods” with the “spiritual enjoyment of art, literature, and ideals” is emblematic of a time in France when excitement about democracy and mass consumer culture rendered obsolete prevailing orthodoxies about what belonged to the realm of art and what belonged to the realm of life: the Aristotelian opposition between “noble” and “ignoble” subjects and between poetic truth, which relies on “combinations of actions,” and historical truth, which lacks a purposeful plot. Emma is the enemy of Art, for the true artist (Flaubert) uses style as “an absolute way of seeing things,” transcending the dualism of art and life. Rancière explains:

The “absolute manner of seeing things” is the manner of seeing things when you are no longer a personal subject, pursuing individual aims. Consequently, it is the manner of seeing them when they are released from all the ties that make them useful or desirable objects. It is the manner of enjoying sensations as pure sensations, disconnected from the sensorium of everyday experience (241).

To illustrate how Flaubert’s style abandons “a poetics of action in favor of an egalitarian poetics of life” (242-243) Rancière selects passages from his work in which nothing and everything happens. From Madame Bovary he isolates this sentence: “The draught beneath the door blew a little dust over the flagstones, and he watched it creep along.” At this point in the novel Charles has fallen in love with Emma, and the implications of this event are linked with the motion of dust particles.

Despite their different interpretations, both Schor and Rancière overlook the more subversive implications of Bovary’s erotic quest. Her attempt to incarnate transcendence recalls Luce Irigaray’s notion of the sensible-transcendental as a bodily experience of the
divine. Viewed from an Irigarayan perspective, Bovary poses a threat to a literary-
philosophical tradition in which there is no place for the female body and its desires. To
locate the body as a source of knowledge is to undermine the male artist’s view of
himself as God, detached from life and art: the figure which Flaubert strived to emulate
through his writing, and which Rancière has arguably made of Flaubert.

The relationship of twentieth-century Italian and American women’s fiction to its
French hypotext is complex. On one hand, by portraying female reading as a form of
adultery and adultery as a means, albeit limited, for a woman to pursue her writerly
ambitions, Flaubert unwittingly laid the foundation that would come to be known as
feminist metafiction: novels that explore what it means to read and write as a woman
within a male literary tradition. On the other hand, twentieth-century Italian and
American women writers have reimagined the plight of the adulterous female reader,
endowing her with a sexual and a textual agency which Flaubert’s heroine lacks. The
hypertexts do not imitate Madame Bovary; they transform it in ways that have yet to be
described by Flaubert scholars and feminist literary critics.

Hypertextuality is a useful tool in my analysis of feminist metafiction, allowing
me to trace a transtextual relationship of which the authors themselves were unaware.
Dorothy Bryant and Erica Jong, both of whom I have had the opportunity to interview,17
have not only denied being influenced by Madame Bovary, they seemed to resent having
their novelistic protagonists compared to Emma, whom they saw as trivialized by her
author. Rather than obviate the connection between their novels and Madame Bovary,

17 I have had an email exchange with Dorothy Bryant and questioned Erica Jong about
the influence of Madame Bovary on her fiction at a pre-Valentine Day’s discussion at the
Y called “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love.”
however, their reluctance to acknowledge Flaubert’s influence supports my hypothesis that they have unconsciously modeled their heroines against Emma Bovary, using fiction to work through their anxiety about a tradition that has had such a powerful hold over women.

Dacia Maraini shared with Bryant and Jong a distrust of Flaubert’s portrayal of his heroine. In *Cercando Emma: Gustave Flaubert e la signora Bovary* (1993) [*Searching for Emma: Gustave Flaubert and Madame Bovary* (1998)], she relates how her perception of Emma changed once she became a more discerning reader of Flaubert’s text:

Anch’io, da lettrice ingorda e ingenua, alla prima lettura ho visto in Madame Bovary un personaggio di donna coraggiosa e appassionata a cui mi piaceva accompagnarmi nelle mie passeggiate mentali, come ci si accompagna con una donna dai pensieri decisi, dai piedi forti e leggeri. Solo dopo anni, rileggendo il bellissimo e sensuale romanzo di Flaubert, mi sono resa conto di quanto sia malvoluta Emma Bovary, di quante miserie la carichi il suo autore, tanto da non poterle trovare neanche una qualità, una sola (2-3).

Juxtaposing Flaubert’s letters to his mistress, the poet Louise Colet, with close readings of scenes from *Madame Bovary*, she presents compelling evidence that Flaubert had used Colet as a model for Emma, and that, despite his pretensions to an aesthetic of impersonality, his portrait of his heroine was biased by his own misogynistic perspective. In Maraini’s view Emma is not meant to be a sympathetic locus of identification. Her duplicity is her main characteristic: she is an actress vacillating between the roles of wife, mother, and mistress. Flaubert’s elusive narrator and eloquent prose mask the antipathy he felt for his heroine, an antipathy that is pronounced in a scene that confirms her indifference towards her daughter Berthe. Rebuffing her toddler’s pleas for affection, Madame Bovary pushes Berthe away from her, and the girl scrapes her cheek against the
brass handle of a chest of drawers. Rather than show remorse, Emma passes off her
daughter’s injury as an accident when her husband and her maid question her, alarmed by
the girl’s shrill cries (II: VI, 95).

It can be argued that Maraini overlooked the role that Flaubert’s stylistic
ingenuity played in creating competing perceptions of Emma. Free indirect style, a
narrative technique Flaubert pioneered with *Madame Bovary*, offers the reader a window
into what characters think or feel without the use of tags such as “he thought” or “she
felt.” Dominick La Capra has rightly argued that it “cannot be seen exclusively as a ‘free’
technique to report indirectly a character’s ‘subjective opinion’ or ‘inner thought,’” that
“it is itself a dual mode involving both proximity and distance—empathy and irony—in
the relation of the narrator to the character or narrated object” (476). For the most part,
Flaubert’s use of free indirect style in *Madame Bovary* serves to underscore the distance
between an omniscient male narrator and his romantic female subject, whose efflorescent
rhetoric he mimes. Yet the narrator is as chameleon-like as Emma Bovary. While in the
opening scene he is an intradiegetic “nous” who witnesses the young Charles Bovary
being humiliated in the classroom, throughout the novel, he is an extradiegetic presence
who alternates between free indirect style, narrative report, and narrative commentary.
Such shifts in perspective obviate reading Flaubert’s attitude towards his heroine as
wholly sympathetic or antipathetic: if in one passage he indicts Emma for a sentimental
notion of love, in the next he slips into her textual body, evoking the intoxicating
sensation of waltzing with a viscount from the perspective of a farmer’s daughter.

In decentering his narrative subject, Flaubert undermines his function as a moral
authority in whose statements the conventional bourgeois reader could find a
confirmation of his own worldview (La Capra 476). He not only parodies a sentimental feminine perspective, he also exposes the sterility of Western male philosophy through the bombastic speeches of Homais, an opportunistic pharmacist who quotes Rousseau and Voltaire and who is positioned as Emma Bovary’s foil (The novel ends with the announcement that he has just been awarded the Legion of Honor, a victory which serves as an ironic counterpoint to Emma’s suicide). What Victor Brombert has called Flaubert’s “binocular vision”—his ability to juxtapose competing ideologies and show them to be equivalent, collective forms of stupidity—enlarge his critique of provincial life in nineteenth-century France. The opposition between the man of science (Homais) and the man of religion (Father Bournisien) proves specious in Madame Bovary, much like the opposition between marriage and adultery.

In La Capra’s view, the counter-ideological operation effected by Flaubert’s stylistic machinations posed a greater threat to French society than the sexualization of his heroine. And yet, I would argue, the impersonality of Flaubert’s style also served to reify bourgeois distinction between the sexes. Consider the four sentences which follow the narrator’s account of Emma’s desire for a boy and precede the announcement of Berthe’s birth:

A man, at least is free; he can explore all passions and all countries, overcome obstacles, taste of the most distant pleasures. But a woman is always hampered. Being inert as well as pliable, she has against her the weakness of the flesh and the inequality of the law. Like the veil held to her hat by a ribbon, her will flutters in every breeze; she is always drawn by some desire, restrained by some rule of conduct (74).

*Man is free, yet everywhere woman is in chains.* Since we do not know whether Flaubert’s narrator or Emma Bovary (or both) espouse this naturalistic view of the sexes, it takes on the appearance of a universal truth, one which Linda Urbach’s *Madame*
Bovary’s Daughter (2011) undermines. Urbach uses Madame Bovary’s famous childbirth scene as the epigraph of her novel while omitting Flaubert’s deterministic discourse on sexual difference:

She hoped for a son; he would be strong and dark; she would call him George; and this idea of having a male child was like an expected revenge for all her impotence in the past…. She gave birth on a Sunday at about six o’clock, as the sun was rising.

“It’s a girl!” said Charles.
She turned her head away and fainted.

The omission is telling, for Madame Bovary’s Daughter eschews a nineteenth-century trajectory of feminine destiny. Motivated by sympathy for the doomed Berthe, who is sent to work in a mill after her parents’ death, Urbach “adopts” her as her orphan heroine and inscribes her in a feminist fantasy. Urbach’s Berthe is a beautiful version of Jane Eyre, a dreamy but hard-working and determined young woman who manages to make her fortune as a fashion designer in fin-de-siècle Paris despite the considerable odds against her. Neither heredity (“the weakness of the flesh”) nor social circumstances (“the inequity of the law”) hampers Berthe’s ambition or impedes its fulfillment.

A similar revisionary impulse motivated the four authors of this study. Although they did not necessarily have Flaubert’s novel in mind while writing their novels, their reading of Madame Bovary played a crucial role in determining the direction their own fictions would take. Alessandra Corteggiani, Ella Price, Isadora Wing, and Marianna Ucría, are “bovaresque” subjects who seek in literature a way out of the dismal plot of their lives, but they are also writers who are aware of their own capacity for romantic escapism and of the necessity for social change. Endowed with a feminist consciousness, they articulate a resistance to cultural conventions that deprive women of control over their bodies and their speech.
Madame Bovary has no control over either. Her story, inscribed within Charles Bovary’s, takes the form of an anti-bildungsroman: from her youth in the convent to her suicide in her early thirties, she is doomed to repeat romantic discourse and to reenact the fate of the typical adulterous heroine. In contrast, in Dalla parte di lei, Ella Price’s Journal, and Fear of Flying, the protagonist is the author of her own story, the confessional book we read. Although La lunga vita di Marianna Ucria is narrated in the third person, the trajectory it charts for its mute-deaf heroine runs counter to Bovary’s: from self-ignorance to self-knowledge and from silence to speech. In giving their adulterous female readers a voice, de Céspedes, Bryant, Jong, and Maraini write against Flaubert.

Resisting Readers of Madame Bovary

1. De Céspedes’s Alessandra Corteggiani

While feminist metafiction appeared in the U.S. in the early seventies and was influenced by the Women’s Liberation Movement, in Italy, it emerged in the later years of the Second World War. A literary female resistance accompanied the male-dominated Resistance Movement. Rejecting the sexist labels “scrittrice” and “femminista,” writers such as Anna Banti, Elsa Morante, and Alba de Céspedes articulated their own struggle for self-representation through the plight of their female author-protagonists.

Italian women’s participation in the Resistance offered them a freedom in exile that enabled them to reflect on their aims as writers. Both Elsa Morante and Alba de Céspedes spent the later half of 1943 and part of 1944 in hiding from fascist authorities. Morante had left her manuscript “Vita di mia nonna,” with a friend in Rome, but while
she was cloistered in a hut with her husband, Alberto Moravia, she began to write an alternate version of the book which would become *Menzogna e sortilegio*. Meanwhile, in Bari, de Céspedes assumed the personality of Clorinda on a radio program for partisans called “L’Italia combatte.” Both authors returned to Rome after the Allies liberated the city in 1944. Morante continued to work on *Menzogna e sortilegio*, and de Céspedes founded *Il mercurio*, a literary journal which featured fiction by major partisan writers, including Moravia.

Resistance to fascism informed de Céspedes’s career. Her first novel, *Nessuno torna indietro* (1938) [There’s no turning back (1941)], was censored by the Ministry of Popular Culture for not upholding a Fascist ethic; it told the story of eight young women living in a boardinghouse in Mussolini’s Rome, their agency circumscribed by the regime. *Dalla parte di lei*, de Céspedes’s first postwar novel, is, like Elsa Morante’s *Menzogna e sortilegio*, framed as a book written by a female protagonist who could be a fictive representation of its author (Alessandra/Alba; Elsa/Elisa). However, while Morante’s Elisa reconstructs her ancestors’ history to counterbalance their romantic fictions with her remembered truths, de Céspedes’s Alessandra bears witness to her own life story, recording intimate details of female experience which count for nothing in an Italian court of law. As we learn by the end of the novel, she is, in fact, testifying before a male judge and an all-male jury, who have already decided her guilt.

Given that Morante and De Céspedes were not in contact in the 1940s, the resemblance between their postwar novels is striking. Like Elisa de Salvi, Alessandra Corteggiani is a ghostly female subject writing in an enclosed space (a prison cell) and the daughter of a woman who died for love. Both protagonists experience themselves as
inadequate substitutes for the sons their mothers wanted. Sharing the predicament of Emma Bovary’s daughter, Berthe, they lack a positive identity of their own. Alessandra lives in the shadow of her dead brother, Alessandro, from whom she received her name. Although he was only a toddler when he drowned by accident in the Tiber, his mother believes that he is extraordinarily gifted, a second Mozart. Alessandro becomes the yardstick for all of Alessandra’s accomplishments:

quando mi si rimprovera era per farmi notare che avevo tradito, nonostante il mio nome, le speranze che mi erano state affidate; ne si tralasciava di aggiungere che Alessandra mai avrebbe osato agire in tal modo; e finanche quando meritavo un buon voto a scuola, o davo prova di diligenza e lealtà, mi si toglieva metà del merito insinuando che fosse Alessandro ad esprimersi attraverso me (Dalla parte di lei, 9).

My parents never scolded me without observing that I had failed to live up to my name. And vice versa, whenever I actually did get good marks or displayed any other commendable quality, they virtually gave Alessandro the credit (The Best of Husbands 3-4).

In a society that accords girls the symbolic status of inferior boys, being female can only be a burden. Alessandra writes that “quest’abolizione della mia personalità mi fece crescere forastica e taciturno” (9) [“the obliteration of my personality made me grow up shy and rebellious,” my translation]. In fact, her symbolic erasure fills her with a rage against her patriarchal society that she never acknowledges directly. When she strikes a male classmate who has insulted her girlfriend, or wrings the neck of a rooster whose arrogance mirrors her father’s, she attributes her actions to the evil spirit of Alessandro, whom she feels lives on inside her. In so doing, she projects onto her dead brother the anger she disavows in herself.

Alessandra’s rebellion against her subordinate status takes place through literature. Like Elisa de Salvi, and like her archetypal predecessor, Emma Bovary,
Alessandra is a devout reader of poetry and novels who fabricates romantic myths of love. As in *Menzogna e sortilegio*, bovarysme is an intergenerational female phenomenon, a symptom of women’s dissatisfaction with the gendered conditions of their everyday lives. Alessandra has inherited her romantic literary nature from her Nordic mother, Eleonora, a piano teacher who plays intoxicating renditions of *Rustling Spring*; Eleonora’s mother Editta, an actress who gave up the stage for marriage, had named her daughter after Ibsen’s heroine.

Whereas in *Menzogna e sortilegio* we find bovaresque men and women, in *Dalla parte di lei* bovarysme is the province of women. The men in Alessandra’s childhood belong to the public sphere: they discharge their duties in the office with brutal efficiency and assume the role of patriarch at home, expecting their wives and daughters to wait on them. Ariberto, Alessandra’s father, harbors no mysteries or secrets; his conversion is as prosaic, his tastes as conventional, as Charles Bovary’s. He reads the newspapers for advertisements and provincial news, and places this quotidian knowledge on a higher level than book knowledge: “Leggere il giornale era doveroso, secondo lui, per essere al corrente di quanto per accadeva in patria e nel mondo; leggere libri, invece significava perdere tempo” (55) [“Everyone should read the paper, he thought, but to read books was a waste of time” (33)].

Alessandra acquires her literary education from her mother, who introduces her to Shakespeare’s plays when she is three years old. Reading enables mother and daughter to travel away from their working-class, gender-segregated Roman neighborhood, to partake of an aura of elegance and sophistication denied by their squalid surroundings. Their allegiance to high art allies them against Ariberto, whose lack of erudition is linked
to his Southern roots and his peasant background. When he finds his daughter reading, he subjects her to a mocking inquiry:

“Che fai?” egli domandava, interrompendomi nella lettura.
“Non lo vedi?” rispondevo aspramente.
“Già. Di che si tratta?”
Malvolentieri gli mostravo il frontespizio.
“Ti piace leggere, eh?” Poi aggiungeva: “Sei come tua madre.”
Nel tono della sua voce correva una vena di sottile disprezzo; sempre assumeva quell tono quando diceva “tua madre” invece di dire “tua mamma.”
“E cioè?”
“E cioè non siete come le altre donne alle quali piace andare al cinematografo, sedere al caffè, e quando sono in casa cuciono, lavorano, rassettano la casa. Siete principesse” (57).

“If Ariberto lives in the here and now, anchored to the mundane, Eleonora and Alessandra inhabit a space between life and literature, simultaneously aware and non-aware of the coincidence between the two realms. Like Emma Bovary, Alessandra is usually seated by a window, a threshold between inside and outside.

For Anna Maria Torriglia, Eleonora’s and Alessandra’s literary leanings are a logical extension of their oxymoronic status as ghosts within a male symbolic order. On one hand, there is no place for women within this symbolic, for “within the Western philosophical tradition, women is… marked by “a-topia;” she is “extraneous to the process of conceiving that set of rules through which patriarchy oversees its own
symbolic order” (158). On the other hand, “women do express themselves in and through
language: they speak and write” and “despite the constraint of an idiom that erases their
sexual difference” they “struggle to create a place of self-substantiation” (158).

Referencing the Italian feminist philosopher Adriana Caverero’s statements from “Dire la
nascita,” Torriglia writes that

> …since a woman partakes of the symbolic order only as subsumed into the
> androgynous position of the universal neuter—therefore as an absentee--- she
> experiences her existence as inherently fictional. This is why it is easy for women
to fully identify with the characters of novels or to exchange feelings and qualities
with them (159).

My problem with Torriglia’s assessment is that it ontologizes female bovarysm: women,
because of their symbolic “a-topia,” are more prone to indulge in book-inspired fantasies.

Given that much of De Céspedes’s work belies the essentialist constructions of femininity
that informed fascism, I think it would be more useful to historicize Eleonora and
Alessandra’s predicament. In Mussolini’s Italy, woman’s role as mother was idealized;
women were expected to bear a lot of children and raise them to be exemplary citizens of
the regime. Although women were valued for their procreative function, they were denied
participation in legal and judicial arenas. Eleonora and Alessandra’s identification with
Shakespearean heroines put them at odds with fascist expectations for women: Ophelia,
Desdemona, and Juliet are childless women who defy patriarchal authority in their single-
minded devotion to an ideal of love that transcends political hierarchies.

The attempt of an older, conservative woman to cure a younger one of her
bibliomania is a trope in most novels of bovarysm: in *Madame Bovary*, Charles’s
mother advises Charles not to let Emma read any novels, and even suggests notifying the
police. In *Dalla parte di lei*, both of Alessandra’s grandmothers are wary of bovarysm, identifying it as an obstacle to woman’s happiness. According to Eleonora,

mia madre tentava a tutti i costi di staccarmi dalla musica, dai romanzi, dalla poesia: avrebbe voluto che io mi distraessi, fossi più forte di lei. Ero ancora piccolo ed ella mi raccontava fosche e sanguinose vicende d’amore, sperando che in me nascesse un istintivo senso di difesa: era racconti cupi, terribili, allucinanti, ed ela me li narrava con un tono di voce basso, tragico, manifestando la sua vocazione d’attrice. Io non potevo ascoltarla: piangevo, volevo andarmene e lei mi tratteneva per i polsi. (48)

My own mother tried hard to tear me away from music and novels and poetry; she wanted me to amuse myself and grow up stronger than she. When I was small she spoke of love in dire and violent terms, hoping to impress me with the necessity of defending myself against it. The stories she told were tragic and haunting, and she told them with all her actress’s art. I could hardly bear to listen and struggled to get away; but she held my wrists fast (30).

In a similar pattern, Alessandra’s paternal grandmother counsels Alessandra against indulging in sentimental notions of love. Born and raised in the Abruzzi, she renounces her artistic passions after her marriage, relegating her harmonica to the attic and devoting herself to the management of her family and farm. The view of womanhood she espouses in her attempt to convert Alessandra accords with the ideal of womanhood touted by Mussolini: “La casa è nostra, i figli sono nostril, siamo noi a portarli, nutrirli: dunque la vita è nostra” (245) [“The home is ours, the children are ours, it is we who bring them into the world, who nourish them: therefore life is ours” (my translation)]. Hers is an essentialist discourse that locates women’s strength in their capacity to give birth and rear children. Just as Eleonora rejects her mother’s advice, awaking in the middle of the night to read *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and studying piano “con tanta passion da averne, una volta, un grave collasso nervosa” (48) [“with so much passion that I narrowly avoided a nervous breakdown,” my translation], Alessandra refuses the model of
femininity offered by her grandmother: she does not want to marry a local boy she does not love and inherit the Corteggiani farm. Staring at the foreboding portraits of her paternal female ancestors, in which she reads the mundane triumph of having slaughtered a pig, she thinks: “non era quella la mia storia. La mia storia era nella scatola dove la mamma conservava gelosamente i veli di Giuletta e di Desdemona” (210) [“No, their story was not mine. My story was written in the box where my mother had kept the veils of Juliet and Desdemona” (125)].

Earlier I mentioned that Naomi Schor reads Emma Bovary’s adultery as a path to her apprenticeship as an artist. This motif is made even more explicit in Dalla parte di lei. Eleonora—who identifies with Emma Bovary—pursues her artistic ambitions through her romance with Hervey, a celebrated pianist whom she meets shortly after accepting a position as his sister’s music teacher. Working for the aristocratic Pierce family liberates her from her role as unhappy housewife and gives her the opportunity to have her talent recognized in a concert held at their home. Her apprenticeship, however, is limited by her identification with Shakespearean heroines. Ophelia, Desdemona, and Juliet all die for love, and Eleonora is doomed to repeat their destiny: unable to live with her lover, she drowns herself in the same river where her son had drowned. In a climactic turn of events reserved for the end of the novel, Alessandra resists this orthodox ending: she turns her rage not against her own body, but against the body of her husband, Francesco Minelli, who, as a professor of law, functions as a representative of a social order that has denied Alessandra a symbolic existence.
Although Alessandra inherits Eleonora’s bovarysme, she reads *Madame Bovary* differently than her mother. Eleonora’s identification with Emma Bovary fills the young Alessandra with apprehension. As she reflects:

Ricordo benissimo che, quel giorno, stava leggendo la storia di Emma Bovary. Era un libro che mia madre doveva aver riletto più volte perché appariva molto usato e alcuni passi erano sottolineati. Quei passi talora rivelavano impulsi e sentimenti dei quali ella, nonostante la nostra confidenza, non mi avrebbe mai ardito parlarmi. Inciampare in una di quelle involontarie confessioni, mentre seguivo l’intreccio di un romanzo, mi metteva spesso a disagio facendomi temere di aver compiuto una grave indelicatezza. Oltretutto non avevo nessuna simpatia per la signora Bovary—banché questo personaggio piacesse molto a mia madre—e non volevo conoscere le remote affinità che ella scopriva in costei, così come non volevo conoscere le cause che l’avevano spinta a sposare mio padre (*Dalla parte di lei*, 88).

[That day, I remember distinctly, I was reading Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*. My mother must have read it over and over again because the book was worn and many pages were underlined. Every time I came upon one of these tacit confidences I felt highly embarrassed. I heartily disliked the figure of Madame Bovary, and I had no wish to explore the affinity that my mother felt for her, any more than I wanted to know why she had married my father (*The Best of Husbands*, 67)].

Why does Alessandra dislike Emma Bovary? Why is she reluctant to explore her mother’s identification with her? Unlike Shakespeare’s heroines, Emma Bovary is a mother, and an unloving one at that. She regrets not having given birth to a boy, whom she would have named George, and is indifferent towards her daughter Berthe. Her priority are her love affairs; in only scene in the novel does she demonstrate affection towards Berthe, but Flaubert makes it clear that she is playing a role: her show of maternal devotion leaves the maid “dumbfounded” (77) and her sentimental feelings are most likely inspired by her romance with Rodolphe. When she makes preparations to elope with Rodolphe, she avoids mentioning Berthe, even though she had originally proposed that they take her daughter with them; it can be inferred that she inserted Berthe
into their plans to avoid appearing heartless when Rodolphe protested “Your little girl!”

Emma’s blind pursuit of passion leaves Berthe motherless and destitute. Alessandra shares a similar fate: like Berthe, she is sent to her paternal relatives’ farm after her mother’s death. The parallels between Alessandra and Berthe and between Eleonora and Emma, both of whom identify with adulterous heroines and kill themselves for love, belies Alessandra’s romantic idealization of her mother and undermines her credibility as a narrator. Although Eleonora’s imitation of Emma is the source of her and her daughter’s undoing, Alessandra is chagrined when Francesco suggests that Hervey was not worth dying for and that Eleonora harmed her only daughter with her actions. The gaps and contradictions in her account become more apparent as the novel progresses. Is the reader to believe, as Alessandra would have it, that Eleonora’s relationship with Hervey is purely platonic, a union of soulmates? More importantly, how do we reconcile the Eleonora that regards her daughter as Alessandro’s inferior successor—that is, the Eleonora De Céspedes presents us with at the beginning of the novel—with the loving, protective mother she becomes before her death?

By now it should be clear that Alessandra is testifying not only on her own behalf, but also on Eleonora’s. She takes pains to absolve her mother of responsibility for her own destiny, yet in so doing, she implicates her:

Forse io potrei rimproverarle di avermi fatto vivere continuamente in una clima di esaltazione che mi aveva reso devota, innanzi tutto, al mito del grande amore, e così avermi ridotto, pur senza volerlo, alla dolorosa condizione di oggi. Potrei rimproverarglielo, forse, se non avesse scontato lei per prima i suoi ambiziosi propositi. In realtà ella non fece che precedermi in una ribellione alla quale tuttavia io sono giunta attraverso esperienze totalmente diverse. No, onestamente io debo confessare che ne allora ne oggi ho potuto riconoscere mia madre in qualche modo colpevole verso di me. E se ora sono costretta a scrivere queste cose di lei, e a
ricercare i più intimi e drammatici momenti della nostra vita in commune, non è davvero per accusarla di avermi fatta quale sono, ma per spiegare ad altri certe mie azioni che altrimenti resterebbero chiare soltanto a me stessa (95).

I might tax her with encouraging me to dwell in the mythical climate of a “great love.” Quite unintentionally she had caused me to fall into a state of mind which may be responsible for the plight in which I find myself today. I might tax her with these things, I say, were it not that she herself had paid the full price for having aimed too high. And if at this point I call up the most intimate and dramatic moments of our life together it is not in order to blame her for what I am today, but simply to explain certain of my actions that otherwise would be inexplicable (55).

As in *Menzogna e sortilegio*, bovarysme takes the form of a feminist family romance: the daughter idealizes her bond with her mother and excludes her father, who in *Dalla parte di lei*, is identified with the law. In both novels the daughter’s impossible desire for her mother’s love leads to her attempt to establish a maternal genealogy through storytelling: the mother becomes the object of the daughter’s textual quest. Both Elisa and Alessandra depict their mothers as victims of bovarysme. Trapped in unhappy marriages, Morante’s Anna Cerentano and de Céspedes’ Eleonora Corteggiani build “castles in the air,” romantic fantasies that revolve around a dead or unattainable male beloved. However, in *Menzogna e sortilegio*, Elisa has ceased to romanticize her mother by the time she is on her deathbed; she assumes Flaubert’s stance of ironic detachment as she watches her mother vacillate between lamenting her love for Edoardo, her dead male cousin, and repenting for the suffering she inflicted on her husband. In contrast, in *Dalla parte di lei*, Alessandra’s romantic myth of Eleonora takes on flesh after her mother’s suicide. While Elisa tells the story of her grandmother and her mother from a place of disillusionment, Alessandra is still under Eleonora’s spell when she writes. After recalling her trip to the Tiber with her mother, she acknowledges that her portrayal of Eleonora may not be reliable:
[...] Temo di aver narrato la sua favola piuttosto che la cronaca fedele della sua vita. Forse ella non fu sempre così perfetta come io la vado descrivendo, non sempre così aerea nei gesti, armoniosa nel tono della voce; forse ebbe talvolta qualcosa parola dura, qualche sentimento maschino; forse parlava sovente di cose practice, in casa, danaro, faccende, come usano tutte le donne (143).

I fear I have interpreted her myth instead of her day-to-day life story. Perhaps she was not so perfect as I describe her; perhaps she did not always have such airy gestures and such a harmonious voice. Perhaps she spoke harsh words and had petty thoughts, like other women (84).

Yet she insists that her myth of Eleonora is the most faithful account she can give of her mother:

Ma io non ricordo nulla di tutto ciò: lei è rimasta, nella mia memoria, proprio con questa rara favola di grazia e di candor alla quale mi piace accordare, in tono sommesso, la mia. Sicché tutto il periodo della mia infanzia e adolescenza—che terminò bruscamente con la morte di lei—dondola nel mio ricordo, conchiuso e felice come una bolla di sapone. Un palpito ardente, un magico lievito è alle radici di ogni ora in quel tempo vissuto. E anche se gli avveniment furono, nei particolari, un poco diversi da come li vado narrato, tuttavia posso giurare in tutta fede che non è in me alcun desiderio di alterarli né di abbellirli con la fantasia (144).

But I do not remember any of this: she remained, in my memory, only with this myth of rare grace and candor which I like to grant, in a submissive tone. So that the entire period of my childhood and adolescence—which ended abruptly with her death—swaying in my memory, seemed happy and encased as a soap bubble. An ardent throb, a rising magic is at the roots of each hour in that lived time. And even if the events were, in their details, a little different from what I am narrating, I can swear in all faith that I have no desire to alter them or to embellish them with fantasy (my translation).

In reconstructing Eleonora, Alessandra attempts to define her against Emma Bovary, with her duplicity, her delight in the corporeal satisfactions of adultery, and her indifference to her daughter. Unlike Emma, Eleonora has no desire for a sordid affair: “… non saprei adattarmi a una vita spiritualmente mediocre né a un amore mediocre,” she tells Sandi (142) [“I would not know how to adapt to a spiritually mediocre life nor to a mediocre love affair,” my translation]. Hervey, in Alessandra’s retelling, is the kind of man who
understands women without their having to explain, who intuits their emotion in a glance. Associated with poetry and music, he never materializes in the narrative except as the object of Alessandra’s fantasies; he is the foil to the dense Ariberto, who has the law on his side. Although he agrees to give Eleonora her freedom, in refusing to yield custody of Alessandra he presents her with a dilemma similar to the one faced by Anna Karenina.

When Alessandra suggests to Eleonora that they run away together, she objects: “Io non voglio compiere azioni sleali. Tutto il disegno della mia vita ne sarebbe travolto” (142) [“I don’t want to do anything dishonest. The whole pattern of my life would be askew” (830)]. Yet the nature of her affair with Hervey and the contents of her confession to Ariberto are left ambiguous. Moreover, in drowning herself in the Tiber Eleonora leaves her daughter forever, joining her fate with that of the son whom she had always preferred. Despite Alessandra’s defense of her mother’s actions, the reader suspects that Eleonora is less like the ethereal Ophelia enshrined in Alessandra’s memory and more like Flaubert’s Emma, a woman determined to pursue her desires at any cost.

Unlike Elisa de Salvi, then, who is ironically aware of the family romance she has constructed, Alessandra writes from a bovaresque perspective. As a young woman she literally follows Eleonora’s footsteps, returning to the same path along the Tiber where Eleonora had walked with Hervey; she attempts to reenact her mother’s romance with Hervey through her relationship with Francesco, a philosophy professor and a member of the Italian Resistance. Francesco is more like Ariberto than her sensitive, intuitive male ideal (in fact, the two men bond almost immediately): he has to be reminded by Alessandra’s best friend to order flowers for their honeymoon, and he prefers sex and sleep to heartfelt conversations and romantic strolls along riverbanks. Preoccupied with
his partisan activities, he has little patience for Alessandra’s constant need for validation. Like Emma Bovary in the early years of her married life with Charles, Alessandra hopes to inject passion into her marriage through her adherence to romantic conventions. Her dissatisfaction with married life links her with the women of her childhood, all of whom bear traces of bovarysme:

Tuttavia esse solevano tirare avanti la gravosa vita quotidiana senza neppure lamentarsi. Né più rammentavano al marito le ragazze che erano state, e le promesse che avevano ricevuto di una vita armoniosa e felice. Avevano tentato, sul principio: avevano trascorso molte notti piangendo, mentre i mariti dormivano al loro fianco…. Le più evolute avevano tentato di appassionare i loro compagni alla musica, ai romanzi, li avevano condotti nei giardini dove usavano andare a passeggiare al tempo dell’amore, sperando che potessero comprendere e ravvedersi. Ma altro non avevano fatto che distruggere quei cari luoghi nel ricordo poiché li, dove erano state dette le prime trepidanti parole e scambiati i primi baci ancor tutti pervasi di desiderio insoddisfatto e curiosità, altro i coniugi non avevano trovato da dirsi che cose indifferenti e trite (22).

[Still the women went on from one day to the next without complaint. At first they had wanted to remind their husbands of their girlish aspirations, and had spent many a night in tears while their husbands slept unfeelingly at their sides. They…had even taken their husbands for walks in the shady lanes where they had once walked together as lovers. But this last stratagem usually turned against them, for in the very place where the betrothed had exchanged vows and kisses, where they had trembled with amorous curiosity and desire, husband and wife now had only the most indifferent things to say to each other (15)].

To console themselves for their loneliness, these women take up affairs with younger men, a crime for which Italian women could be prosecuted in fascist Italy. Female adultery is depicted as a collective resistance against a judicial and legal system that makes women’s bodies the property of men. The elderly women in Alessandra’s flat witness the younger women depart for their rendezvous and remain complicit with their erotic betrayals through their silence.

Although readers may empathize with the disparity between Alessandra’s romantic expectations of their marriage and its sordid reality, some might be annoyed by
her tendency to put her ideal of love on the same plane as the ideals that inspired the
Resistance. Her battle to save her marriage eclipses the reality of war: although
Alessandra delivers bombs to the Allies by bicycle, smuggling them under a crate of
vegetables, her primary motive is to win Francesco’s approval when he is in prison. In
her view, participating in the Resistance requires less courage than rejecting the advances
of her husband’s best friend, who showers her with the amorous attentions she craves.
To surrender to Tomaso would be to give up fighting for Francesco: to be like Emma
Bovary and not like Eleonora, whom she imagines as resisting the temptations of
adultery. The second allusion to Madame Bovary occurs in the context of this struggle:

Mi aggiravo nella casa, come impazzita: la parola “adulterio” mi perseguitava,
l’aveva continuamente negli orecchi. Ricordavo mia madre e la preferenza che
aveva per la storia di Emma Bovary: vedevo quel libro sul suo commodino, le
pagine segnate in margine con l’unghia. Forse lo leggeva di notte, mentre stava
sveglia dietro il muro. Così la lotta sostenuta da mia madre si aggiungeva alla mia,
sembrandomi che mi avesse affidato la responsabilità di vincere la battaglia per
entrambe (478-479).

When the spurned Tomaso compares himself to Natalia, a Jewish classmate of
Alessandra’s who was dragged off with her infant son by the Nazis, screaming,
Alessandra does not contradict him. The absurd nature of such a comparison weakens her
love-as-war analogy, making her struggle (“la lotta”) appear pathetic rather than heroic:

“…Natalia, Natalia Donati, venga portata via sul camion, col suo bambino, in
obbedienza a una legge contraria a tutte le leggi che sono nel diritto di ogni uomo.
E così non è giusto che io vada via, stasera. Eppure Natalia è stata portata via
anche se s’aggrappava, gridava. E, io me ne vado, anche se adesso mi aggrappo a
lei, e poi griderà, dentro di me, per tutta la vita…” (493)
“It’s unjust, isn’t it, that your childhood friend, Natalia—what’s her name?—Donati should be carried off with her baby because of a law contrary to the natural rights of man? Well, it’s equally unjust of me to go away tonight. Natalia was carried away, though she protested and clung to anything she could lay her hands on. And I’ll go, even if at this moment I’m hanging onto you. But I promise I’ll protest all my life long…” (302)

After Francesco’s release from prison, Alessandra loses faith in her dream of marital bliss. A prisoner of war, he receives accolades for his bravery, tokens of symbolic recognition; he is published in influential journals and appointed to a more prestigious position at the university. In contrast, Alessandra, a prisoner of love, retreats into her role as the invisible Signora Minelli, downplaying her role in the Resistance and serving tea to their many guests. The liberation of Rome serves as an ironic counterpoint to her burgeoning consciousness of herself as enslaved, and of slavery as the female condition in a patriarchal state:

Poiché c’è più libertà per uno schiavo che per una donna. E se io avessi usato della libertà del mio corpo, non avrei avuto soltanto frustrate, come gli schiavi, ma addirittura il carcere e il disonore. L’unico modo in cui potevo disporre del mio corpo era quello di gettarlo nel fiume (516).

Yes, even a slave was freer than a woman. If I were to act as if my body belonged to me the law could sentence me to jail and dishonor. The only thing I was free to do with this body of mine was to throw it into the river (318).

The turning point in the novel occurs when she confesses that she is afraid of winding up like her mother. Francesco challenges the basis of this identification: “Tu sei molta diversa da tua madre,” he says {“You are very different from your mother,”}, describing his wife as “tranquilla, seria, ragionevole” [calm, serious, reasonable’] while offering a tentative assessment of Eleonora as “un po’ esaltata” [“a bit exciteable,” my translation]. In depicting Eleonora as hysterical and attributing the masculine virtues of
sobriety and restraint to Alessandra, he invalidates the basis of her sympathetic
identification with her mother and aligns himself with Ariberto’s values. Alessandra
describes her reaction to her husband’s words as follows: “Poi tacqui e l’ira mi colmava:
ero simile a un lago liscio, di ghiaccio, sotto il quale l’acqua scorre veloce, torrentizia”
(538) [“I was silent but raging, like a lake covered by a smooth sheet of ice with turbulent
waters below” (334)].

Alessandra’s rage resurfaces in dream imagery. On the night of her final
encounter with Francesco, who predictably cuts short her attempts to communicate with
him, she dreams of being “un cane rabioso” (an angry dog) reduced to begging for scraps
from people’s kitchens. The dream reveals her romantic myth of Eleonora to be a
reaction formation against the rage she harbors against her mother and, more broadly,
against a society that has imposed a male identity on her since birth. Lying awake behind
the wall of her husband’s back, she cannot shake off the sensation that she is a dog, and
that Francesco is her father, Ariberto. This hallucination is the prelude to a matricidal
dream. Alessandra hears her mother and Hervey laughing from behind a wall. “You
didn’t know how to walk with me,” Eleonora tells her. In her incarnation as a dog, she
finally manages to confront her mother. Like Emma Bovary, Eleonora is too absorbed in
her romance to attend to her daughter’s needs: “Bastava un morso e li vedevo cadere in
terra, sdraiarsi nella morte: erano fermi nella stagione della loro giovinezza, nella castità
del loro amore senza scadimento, o colpa” [“All that sufficed was a morsel and I saw
them fall to the ground, sprawled out as if in death: they were enclosed in the season of
their happiness, of the chastity of their love without decline or blame,” my translation].
Furious, Alessandra claws at her mother’s face and eyes: “Seguitavo a graffiare per ore,
raspavo, mi pareva di scavare la sabbia del fiume, la mota grigia, dura” (543) [“I scratched for hours and hours, trying to dig up the caked mud at the bottom of the river” (337)]. Having destroyed her myth of Eleonora, she is abject. She reaches for a revolver, vows without determination to kill herself—but empties it into Francesco’s back.

It would be tempting to argue that De Céspedes writes beyond the plot of *Madame Bovary* in making her narrator-protagonist kill her husband rather than herself. Yet Alessandra’s murder of Francesco is not the catalyst of a deepening self-awareness; she never emerges from a pathological state of bovarysm. In murdering Francesco the unloving husband, Alessandra keeps alive her ideal Francesco, the tender, devoted man she thought she had married. Perhaps inspired by Flaubert’s binocular vision in *Madame Bovary*, De Céspedes underscores the discrepancy between Alessandra’s romantic and realistic perceptions of Francesco throughout the novel. Beginning with her recollection of their wedding night, Alessandra juxtaposes accounts of the unsympathetic Francesco with the monologues of an ideal Francesco. This exemplary husband affirms his love for her; he claims that his egotism and indifference to her needs mask his extreme concern for her well-being. When Alessandra is in prison, she fantasies that he visits her each evening and they communicate without being interrupted, reveling an intimacy they had not experienced since their courtship. The final sentence of *Dalla parte di lei* reveals the extent to which Alessandra is deluded, highlighting her unreliability as a narrator:

“Sicché mi viene fatto di sospettare che solo il gesto violento da me compiuto gli abbia dato la consapevolezza del suo amore e il modo di riconoscermi per quella che, amara da lui, avevo ambito di essere” (549) [“I suspect that my act of violence alone could have made him so aware of the depth of his love, and of its transforming power in me” (343)].
As in *Madame Bovary*, a trial functions as an intertext in *Dalla parte di lei*.

Flaubert begins his novel with an encomiastic epigraph to his lawyer, Antoine Marie Jules Sénard, who had cleared *Madame Bovary* of obscenity charges by arguing that it incited virtue “by the horror of vice” (336). Emma’s suicide by arsenic and the grotesque spectacle of her death seem to confirm its status as a cautionary tale directed at women who stray from feminine norms of propriety. Yet the novel exceeds Sénard’s reading.

Consider Flaubert’s description of the priest’s last rites, which ironically consecrates Emma Bovary and her desires:

> First upon the eyes, that had so coveted worldly goods; then upon the nostrils, that had been so greedy of the warm breeze and the scents of love; then upon the mouth, that had spoken lies, moaned in pride and cried out in lust; then upon the hands that had taken delight in the texture of sensuality; and finally upon the soles of the feet, so swift when she had hastened to satisfy her desires, and that would now walk no more. (III: viii, 256)

*Dalla parte di lei* is also framed as a response to a trial, but the reader is unaware of its existence until the end of the book. Addressing her interlocuters, Alessandra challenges a legal-judicial system that judges women without attempting to understand their point of view:

> Io credo, perciò, che nessun uomo avrebbe il diritto di giudicare una donna senza saper di che materia diversa dagli uomini le donne sono fatte. Non ritengo giusto, ad esempio, che un tribunale composto esclusivamente di uomini decida se una donna è colpevole o no. Poiché se esiste una morale comune che vale per gli uomini e per le donne, e alla quale è consuetudine attenersi, come potrà mai un uomo comprendere veramente le sottili ragioni che conducono una donna all’entusiasmo o alla disperazione e che sono connaturate in lei, tutt’uno con lei, dal suo nascere? (73-4)

[In my opinion no man has the right to judge a woman without knowing of what totally different stuff she is made. Why should a jury composed entirely of men decide whether or not a woman is guilty? There is, of course, a moral code before which it is customary for both men and women to bow. But how can a man
understand the subtle motives that plunge a woman into enthusiasm or despair, motives that have been an intrinsic part of her since she was born? (55-56)]

Unlike Flaubert, de Céspedes invites us to sympathize with her heroine, and, by extension, with all women who are misunderstood and maligned by their husbands and fathers, who take refuge in art and extramarital affairs. Alessandra is a prisoner of the neutrouniversale, Cavarero’s term for woman’s non-existence within a signifying system whose speaking subject is presumed to be male,18 and Francesco is a casualty of her battle for self-affirmation. By demonstrating the tragic consequences of a Resistance leader’s inability to communicate with his wife, de Céspedes writes a cautionary tale directed at men, even as she underscores the limitations of a feminist family romance constructed through identifications with male-authored heroines.

2. Dorothy Bryant’s Ella Price

Set in San Francisco during the Vietnam War protests, Dorothy Bryant’s first novel belongs to the genre known as “the consciousness-raising novel.” It tells the story of an intelligent American housewife who is married to a man who does not understand her, a man who boasts that “I’m happy if I can eat, drink, and screw” (Bryant 213). At the age of thirty-five, Ella Price enrolls in an English course at the local community college. Her cynical yet charismatic instructor, Dan Harkan, requires his students to keep a journal and to write in it every day. Ella Price’s Journal reads as a mélange of autobiography, literary criticism, and sociological observations. Through its succession of dated entries,

18 See “Per una teoria della differenza sessuale.” Cavarero is indebted to the French philosopher Luce Irigaray for her concept of the neutrouniversale.
the reader witnesses Ella’s evolution from a naïve reader and complaisant housewife to a feminist literary critic searching for an identity outside of marriage and motherhood.

The hypertextual relationship of *Ella Price’s Journal* to *Madame Bovary* seemed obvious to me: Joe Price is an American Charles Bovary—“He is a very good man. He loves me and Lulu. He doesn’t have any bad habits. He’s always happy […] His needs are simple, and he doesn’t concern himself about things he can’t do anything about,” Ella writes (39)—and Ella Price, with her passion for books and spells of depression, is Emma Bovary rewritten from an American feminist perspective. Like the Bovarys, the Prices have a daughter, Louise (the above-mentioned “Lulu”), from whom Ella is estranged; like Emma, Ella reads novels about adulterous heroines and has an affair (predictably enough, with Dan Harding). Yet when I asked Dorothy Bryant about the influence of *Madame Bovary* on *Ella Price’s Journal*, she responded that her main source of inspiration were the adult women students in her classes at Contra Costa College, many of whom first began attending junior college classes in the late 1960s. According to Bryant, these women were treated “as if they were just killing time when their children went off to school and the world,” yet “their small earnings were a necessity to provide upward opportunities (fulfillment of the so-called American Dream”) for their children” or to enable them to become self-sufficient in the event of divorce. “Looking back, I think I was trying to correct the false image of these American women who were working outside the home as well as raising a family,” she concluded. There was “no intent to
imitate Emma Bovary,” who was “not a serious scholar,” who belonged to “a more privileged class” and was “sentimentalized and disrespected by Flaubert.”

Bryant’s novel exceeds, and in some ways, contradicts its author’s intentions. Ella Price enrolls in Bay Junior College not in order to increase her earning potential, but to fill her spare time since her fifteen-year-old daughter, a pom-pom girl who is popular in high school, no longer needs her as much. Once her studies are underway, she becomes addicted to learning for its own sake and cannot drop out of school, even though the demands of her courses conflict with her ability to supplement her husband’s income by taking a job during the holiday seasons. Ella’s background is no more privileged than Emma Bovary’s: both are daughters of farmers who marry middle-class men. Since Joe Price’s government position enables them to live in the coveted suburban neighborhood “on the hill,” she does not need to work to survive; rather, her emotional survival depends on her education.

Bryant shares with Dacia Maraini a distrust of Flaubert’s impersonal style and a desire to unmask the man behind his authorial pretensions: in her play Dear Master (1991), which is based on the thirteen-year-old correspondence between Flaubert and George Sand, she portrays Flaubert as a lonely, cynical man preoccupied with what critics think of Madame Bovary. In Ella Price’s Journal, she engages in an agonistic dialogue with Flaubert by portraying Ella (whose name evokes one of Doris Lessing’s “free women” from The Golden Notebook) as a resisting reader of Madame Bovary and as Emma Bovary’s foil. Ella is as sensible as Emma is reckless, particularly when it comes to money. The latter has no qualms about seizing the power of attorney and

\[19\] These statements are taken from an email exchange I had with Dorothy Bryant. See “Re: Dear Master/Madame Bovary.”
forging her husband’s name on promissory notes; she lives way beyond her means, plunging her family into a debt that could never be repaid. As if defining her protagonists against Flaubert’s, Bryant makes Joe the spendthrift in the marriage and Ella the one who frets over unpaid bills. She takes umbrage at Dan’s statement that America is “a matriarchy where men work themselves to death to provide useless domestic frills for women,” clarifying in her journal that

it’s my husband, not me, who has to have a new car every two years, and color TV, and now he’s talking about a pool—all for me, he says, but it’s really what he wants, and I’m just the excuse. And I’m the one who goes to work at temporary office jobs to pay for these things when we get them (23).

Nor does Ella partake of the pathological form of bovarysme that afflicts Flaubert’s heroine. Hers is a different model, best described by Jules de Gaultier in his philosophical treatise. In Part III of Bovarysm (1919), Gaultier rehabilitates the concept he takes from Flaubert’s novel, insisting that “to see oneself different is to live and progress” (117). Bovarysme is destructive when it diverts our energy from our talents and sets up insurmountable obstacles between our real and our imaginary selves; but when we conceive of ourselves other “by means of education” and create attainable models, it can be an “elevating power” that links the individual with the best minds of humanity. Ella is invested in her own becoming, her literary education having set in motion her mind’s capacity to abandon old ideas and engender new ones. Her models are real and imaginary women who struggle to live on their own terms: George Shaw’s Lavinia, Doris Lessing’s female characters in The Golden Notebook, and her neighbor Denise, a lonely divorcee who is pursuing a degree at the University of Berkeley. The future she imagines is within her reach: “I’ll get a degree. Maybe I’ll major in English. There are so many
tremendous books to read and talk about and write about. Maybe someday I’ll even teach” (108).

Ella’s literary education unfolds through her apprenticeship with Dan. He mediates her desire by making a list of all the books he thinks she should read and inviting her to write about them in her journal. Like Alessandra Corteggiani, Ella takes an immediate disliking to Emma Bovary: she thinks her “a very stupid woman who created most of her problems” and tells Dan “I don’t see why you thought I’d enjoy the book or identify with a woman like that” (68). Ella finds Emma’s attitude towards her daughter objectionable: she considers it “unnatural” that Emma should turn her face to the wall after giving birth and neglect Berthe while she is growing up (69). Dan, who claims to identify with Emma’s “illusions and silly fantasies and ridiculous love affairs,” challenges Ella’s assumption that motherhood is a natural condition for women. Pointing out that Ella has chosen to have only one child, he asks her “how did you really feel when you had your kid?” (69) Revisiting her memories, Ella concedes that “some of Emma Bovary’s hatred for it all was there too.” Her journal entry concludes with a negative assessment of Flaubert’s heroine: “I still think Emma was a stupid woman who would have done better to stick to her dull husband than to get herself in such a mess that she had to swallow arsenic. Isn’t some kind of life better than death?” However, the question is not merely rhetorical; Ella is no longer sure. As in Dalla parte di lei, intertextuality with Madame Bovary serves to delegitimize essentialist myths of motherhood.

For Ella, as for Emma, literacy is a form of adultery: when she reads, she is betraying her husband, becoming excited by notions with which Joe is unwilling to engage. “You never feel like it anymore,” Joe complains when Ella rejects his sexual
advances. “You’d rather read a book or something” (40). Yet as readers, Ella and Emma could not be more different. For Emma, reading is an escape from the prosaic, a transcendental experience that is represented in spatial terms: “a blue space surrounded her and ordinary experience appeared only intermittently between these heights, dark and far away beneath her” (131). For Ella, reading is a form of critical engagement with the world; it deepens her connection with social realities. One of the first texts Ella reads in Harkan’s class is The Autobiography of Malcolm X and it alters her view of the black freedom fighter as a commie” and a dope-dealing thug. In a later entry, she relates the early Christian marytrs in Shaw’s Androcles and the Lion (1912) to the anti-war protesters of her time: “Shaw makes the early Christians a bunch of misfits and oddballs, like hippies; maybe he’s right in saying that people who start a new movement always appear to be freaks and misfits” (113).

Unlike Dalla parte di lei, Ella Price’s Journal traces a female reader’s evolution into a feminist literary critic. A month after her initial conversation with Dan about Madame Bovary, Ella challenges his view that society destroyed Emma Bovary and Anna Karenina, arguing that Flaubert and Tolstoy did not want their heroines to succeed in their rebellion:

They liked their heroines, but being men, they were prejudiced about what a woman ought to be. Soft and weak and all. So they couldn’t make their women strong enough to make a go of their rebellion. They couldn’t imagine a woman like that. They couldn’t go on liking them as women, feminine, you know. So they had to destroy them (79).

Without encouragement from her mentor, who quickly shoots down her idea, countering that Stendhal and Wright also destroyed their rebellious male heroes, Ella reads “like a woman.” Her approach to canonical male texts anticipates the insights of feminist literary
critics Adrienne Rich (“When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,” 1972), Judith Fetterley (The Resisting Reader, 1978), Annette Kolodny (“A Map for Rereading: Gender and the Interpretation of Literary Texts,” 1980), and Patricinio Schweikart (“Reading Ourselves: Towards a Feminist Theory of Reading,” 1985). Like these critics, Ella reflects on the role that gender plays in a text’s reception. Dan Harkan, because he is a male, is at a safe remove from Anna Karenina; thus he can pity her plight and reads her destruction as an indictment of her society. However, Tolstoy’s novel has a different message for the female reader:

But what if the reader is Anna Karenina? If she sees herself in the book, and the author shows her being destroyed one way, then rebelling only in order to be destroyed another way…. What does that do to the reader? I think it destroys the reader in a third way—it teaches despair (78).

This metafictional commentary foreshadows Bryant’s own departure from literary conventions: rather than destroy her rebellious female reader, she will leave her reborn.

Ella’s participation in a peace protest marks a turning point in her development. Up until that point, Ella has lived through her journal, tenuously constructing her identity through writing. But the march, as she reflects on March 4th, “was an act, not a thought, not an idea safely written down in a notebook and tucked away in a drawer” (139). Inspired by Shaw’s Lavinia, who rejects the pagan Roman gods at the cost of her life, she risks the disapproval of her conservative family and community by joining an anti-war demonstration in Oakland. The march, she tells Dan, “was the most real thing that has ever happened to me.” However, shortly after her discovery that reading and writing can translate into social change, she begins to develop erotic feelings towards her mentor.
Just when Ella is beginning to emerge as a subject, the romance plot intervenes, derailing her progress. Subsequent journal entries focus on what it means to fall in love:

All the stupid songs, all the poetry, all the junk written, I understand it now, I excuse it now. It’s all an attempt to explain this feeling, it’s all a hope to have this feeling which I can’t even describe, but that makes everything else seem pale, a substitute, a way of keeping busy in emptiness. All this sounds stupid. All right, it is stupid (149).

Although she is aware of its stupidity, she steps into the Emma Bovary plot. The temptation of adultery strengthens her connection with Emma: she decides that she would sacrifice her marriage with a good man for her ability to experience passion. As in *Madame Bovary*, adultery proves to be as disappointing as marriage: Dan is an unsatisfying lover and Ella’s heightened self-consciousness around him destroys their earlier intimacy, which was based on an intellectual exchange. In one entry, after his hasty climax, Dan sits in bed talking student politics; Ella, who has trouble registering what he is saying, thinks “I really must be an Emma Bovary--- narrow and petty and worrying about ‘my love affair’” (170). Through this ironic reflection Bryant may have intended to underscore Ella’s difference from Emma, who unambiguously identifies with the “lyric legion” of adulterous women after her seduction by Rodolphe (II;IX, 131). Yet the resemblance between the two characters remains: their awareness of their bovarysm does not prevent them from generating romantic illusions. Even as Emma realizes her romantic fantasies are lies, she still continues to write hackneyed love letters to Léon (III: VI, 231); despite Ella’s burgeoning self-awareness, she continues to channel her desires into “the love affair.”

Emma Bovary experiences her first great romantic disappointment when her lover Rodolphe reneges on their appointment to elope together. After receiving his letter of
rupture, she faints and falls into a convalescent state. Although she is attended by
Charles, the pharmacist, a doctor, and the priest, it takes her months to recover; Charles
exhausts his financial resources trying to nurse his wife back to health (II:XIV, 168-169).
Ella Price, too, plunges into a state of despondency after Dan loses interest in her, when
she learns that her mentor has a predilection for seducing and abandoning his middle-
aged female students. She goes to a therapist in Berkeley to sort out her feelings for Dan
and goes to work to pay for her therapist. The job leaves her too tired to write much in
her journal, and the sessions with the patronizing Dr. Redford convince her that she is
maladjusted to her femininity. She stops reading fiction and tries to be a better wife and
mother, much like Emma during the “good Christian” phase that follows her
convalescence. By the end of the fourth notebook, it seems as if Ella is going to follow
Redford’s advice. She announces her pregnancy and her decision to quit writing in the
same journal entry, insisting that she is “very happy.” Her love affair with literature is
over. “In ending this, I remove the last obstacle between Joe and me,” she writes on the
final page of the fourth notebook.

Emma’s “conversion” is short-lived and so is Ella’s. Emma succumbs again to the
temptations of reading and adultery, until her passion for life—and the Bovary’s
finances—are exhausted. Ella, on the other hand, discovers her will to live. It is as if
Flaubert’s plot intervened so that Bryant could write beyond it, underscoring the
difference of Ella’s destiny from her hypotextual model’s. Rereading her journal entries,
Ella realizes that she does not want to have a baby, that Dr. Redford has it all wrong: her
recurrent dream of giving birth to a baby girl is an index not of her maternal desire, but of
her own desire to begin a new life. In her fifth and final notebook, Ella shows the courage
of Lavinia in her personal life. She decides to have an abortion, enduring the vociferous disapproval of her husband, her daughter, her Catholic in-laws, and her parents. Scheduled on Christmas Day, Ella’s abortion becomes a symbol of her rebirth. “Health” for Ella consists not of adjusting to a male psychiatrist’s definition of femininity, but of finding a plot outside of marriage and motherhood, adultery and suicide.

In the unwritten pages of Notebook Six, there is no place in her life for her husband and her daughter. Ella’s rupture with Joe occurs when she responds to his usual “I’m happy if I can eat, drink, and screw” with an unexpected outburst: “So is a pig!” (213) Like Charles Bovary, who undergoes a strange metamorphosis after Emma’s death, becoming an unrepentant romantic, Joe Price turns out to be a more complex character than he seems. In one of his last conversations with Ella, he admits that he impregnated her to keep her in their marriage; he had sensed that she was growing away from him through her education. Attracted to Ella because of her emotional intelligence, he needed her to compensate for what he lacked; but he needed her “neurotic,” dependent on him. He needed, in Ella’s words, to “own” feeling (223). Leaving Joe is crucial for Ella’s recovery.

Struggling against her remorse for leaving her husband, Ella packs her bags and heads to Denise’s apartment in Berkeley, which is a hotbed of civil rights activism. She avoids thinking about how her departure will affect her daughter: “I mustn’t think about her now” (225). Given that Emma’s indifference to her daughter once constituted the basis of Ella’s dislike of her as a character, this ending reads as ironic. In retrospect, Ella’s rejection of Emma’s absence of maternal love appears to have masked her unconscious identification with it. Although Ella tries hard to communicate with Joe, she
makes no such attempts with Lulu. Indifferent to books, concerned only with the superficial, Lulu figures mainly as an extension of Joe and as his co-conspirator. There is nothing likeable in Ella’s description of her: she sits on her father’s lap, wheedling him into giving her money for a new outfit; she turns up the radio when her mother tries to educate her about the peace protests; finally, she sides with Joe in his attempt to make Ella feel guilty for having an abortion, even though she had considered her mother’s pregnancy “obscene.”

Despite or because of its absence of a satisfying mother-daughter narrative, *Ella Price’s Journal* held out a mirror to female readers across America. When *Redbook* issued an excerpt from the novel, its editors received two hundred letters, fifty times as many as usual. American women identified with Ella in a way they could not with Emma, for in writing Ella, Bryant unwittingly transformed Flaubert’s uncritical heroine into a woman who is capable of deep thinking and feeling; the last sentence of her journal reads “I feel.” She also transformed the adultery plot of the nineteenth-century novel into a detour in a twentieth-century woman’s literary quest for selfhood. Ella’s story, unlike Emma’s, teaches hope, and through its telling Bryant subverts Flaubert’s influence.

**Sexual/Textual Seductions**

1. **Erica Jong’s Isadora Wing**

*Fear of Flying* (1973) secured Erica Jong’s reputation as a scandalous writer; to date, it has sold twenty-seven million copies. A semi-autobiographical novel that is the first volume of a trilogy, it recounts the comic misadventures of Isadora Wing, a twenty-nine-year-old poet from an upper-middle class Jewish background who has come of age in
1960s America. Isadora follows her husband, the Freudian analyst Bennett Wing, to a psychoanalytic convention in Vienna, falls in love with a Laingian analyst, Dr. Adrian Goodlove, and takes off with him on a road trip across Europe. Although the narration of Isadora’s present is episodic, it is embedded with extended flashbacks in which Isadora recalls her romantic relationships with books and men and her struggle to find her voice as a writer.

Unlike *Dalla parte di lei* and *Ella Price’s Journal*, *Fear of Flying* does not mention *Madame Bovary*. It does, however, allude to *Madame Bovary* indirectly. Consider the following passage, taken from a section in the novel in which Isadora Wing describes her adolescent self and her best friend Pia:

….Beneath the wise-ass cynicism and pseudosophistication was the soupiest romanticism since Edward Fitzgerald impersonated Omar Khayyam. Pia and I both wanted someone to sing in the wilderness with, and we knew that John Stock and Ron Perkoff were not exactly what we had in mind.

We were both bookworms, and when life disappointed us we turned to literature—or at least to the movie version. We saw ourselves as heroines and couldn’t understand what had become of all the heroes. They were in books. They were in movies. They were conspicuously absent from our lives (94).

Emma Bovary’s name need not be mentioned for American readers to make the connection. What other heroine is as famous, or as infamous, for her “soupy” book-inspired “romanticism”? For identifying with fictional heroines and searching for her heroes?

In a Salon.com article “Fiction victim” (1999), Jong identifies Emma Bovary’s “fondness for reading” and Flaubert’s “clinical style” as the aspects of *Madame Bovary* which she most admired. Unlike Dacia Maraini, she reads Flaubert’s famous statement that “Madame Bovary c’est moi” literally, emphasizing Flaubert’s identification with his
heroine: “A novelist mocking a heroine besotted by novels? Then this must be a writer mocking himself! And indeed, Flaubert memorably said that he had drawn Madame Bovary from life—and after himself. ‘I have dissected myself to the quick,’ he wrote.”

Both Flaubert and Jong complicate the identity of their heroine. Just as there are three Emmas in Flaubert’s narrative—Emma Rouault, a farmer’s daughter who comes of age in a convent in Rouen; Madame Bovary, the scornful wife of the unsuccessful Charles Bovary and unloving mother; Emma the desiring mistress—so there are three Isadoras in Fear of Flying: Isadora White, the daughter who inherits the burden of her artistic mother’s unfulfilled ambitions; Isadora Wing, an aspiring poet married to the phlegmatic Dr. Bennett; Isadora, the fictional author of the book we are reading. Isadora the author continually mocks Isadora White and Isadora Wing; she dissects their fears and fantasies with ruthless precision, adopting an ironic stance towards her heroine that recalls Flaubert’s narrative method in Madame Bovary. When Isadora the author presents Isadora White’s fear of being unmarried, she distances herself from this self by shifting, abruptly, from the first to the third person:

….the woman (unhappy though she knows her married friends to be) can never let herself alone. She lives as though she were constantly on the brink of some great fulfillment. As if she were waiting for Prince Charming to take her away from all this. All what? The solitude of living inside her own soul? The certainty of being herself instead of half of something else? (10)

Jong, qua Isadora, ridicules herself for fears that do not become a modern, liberated woman: a fear of being alone, unmoored to a man who will teach her how to live; of aging, and becoming undesirable to men; of writing, a transgressive activity for women in 1960s America. Among these, her fear of writing is most pronounced. Isadora Wing struggles with what Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert have called “an anxiety of
authorship,” or “a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a “precursor” the act of writing will isolate or destroy her” (*The Madwoman in the Attic* 49). In Gubar and Gilbert’s view, women’s anxiety of authorship stems from a lifetime of social conditioning, of being made to feel their biological destiny was to beget children, not to inscribe their thoughts “upon the (female) body of the muse.” Freudian psychoanalysis, with its biology-as-destiny model, served to reify the culturally constructed notion of women as inferior artists, turning the pen into a “metaphorical penis” and “male sexuality” into “the essence of literary power” (4). Although Isadora Wing challenges the sexist assumptions of her Freudian shrink, she is as terrified before the blank page as she is before her plane takes off. For she is aware that “throughout all of history, books were written with sperm, not with menstrual blood” (22); her fame as a poet means nothing to her sisters, who consider her a failure for not having children. As a writer, she has to find the courage to “redefine the terms of her socialization,” in Gubar and Gilbert’s words; she engages in a battle “not against her (male) precursor’s reading of the world but against his reading of *her*” (49). Sexuality is the ground upon which this battle is waged. As Isadora reflects, until she was twenty-two, she measured her orgasms against Lady Chatterley’s and wondered what was wrong with her. It never occurred to her that Lady Chatterley was a man, that she was really D.H. Lawrence (22).

Unlike D.H. Lawrence, Jong uses transgressive sexuality as a weapon in her battle for artistic self-creation. Noting that the French word for “to fly” (voler) also means “to steal,” Susan Rubin Suleiman has argued that Jong has appropriated the male voice in the novels of Henry Miller and Norman Mailer in an attempt to “rewrite and rethink the female body and female sexuality” (8). For Suleiman, Jong’s ribald humor, her
scatological references, and her obscene language makes her novel more appealing to a male audience without robbing it of its subversive force. Her style proves that women can write about sex and love without getting mired in sentimentalism. They are not wired to be monogamous, as Isadora’s fantasy of a “zipless fuck” demonstrates. Since biological differences between the sexes were the basis of men’s denial of female creativity, by impersonating a male voice Jong positions women on an equal creative footing with men.

Jong’s ventriloquism of her male contemporaries brings to mind Flaubert’s impersonation of a female voice. If *Madame Bovary* parodies pulp romantic fiction, *Fear of Flying* parodies “cosmetic ads, love songs, advice columns, whoreoscopes, Hollywood gossip, and moral dilemmas on the level of TV soap operas” (8). Jong, qua Isadora the “author,” comments on the stupidity of these discourses, deconstructing a popular myth of romantic love in a Flaubertian fashion:

> What all the ads and all the whoreoscopes seemed to imply was that if only you were narcissistic enough, if only you took proper care of your smells, your hair, your boobs, your eyelashes, your armpits, your crotch, your stars, your scars, and your choice of Scotch in bars—you would meet a beautiful, powerful, potent, and rich man who would satisfy every longing, fill every hole, make your heart skip a beat (or stand still), make you misty, and fly you to the moon (preferably on gossamer wings), where you would live totally satisfied forever (8).

Jong’s appropriation of Flaubert’s style corroborates Suleiman’s insight that *Fear of Flying* rewrites female sexuality. Venturing even further than Suleiman, I would argue that Jong’s first novel can be considered an American feminist revision of *Madame Bovary*.

Conceding with Vargas-Llosa’s view of Emma Bovary as an alienated consumer, Jong writes in “Fiction victim:” “Perhaps we identify with Emma because we too feel an emptiness at the center of things—an emptiness we try to fill with books, with fantasies,
with sex, with things. ” Her sympathetic identification with Bovary informed her fictional self-portrayal in *Fear of Flying*. Educated in a convent, Emma Rouault derives her knowledge of life from sentimental eighteenth-century novels; Isadora White is led astray by “the sardonic, bittersweet vocabulary of Cole Porter love songs, the sad, sentimental Rodgers and Hart lyrics, all the romantic nonsense you yearned with half your heart and mocked bitterly with the other half” (8). At the height of her provincial misery with her country doctor husband, Emma “longed for lives of adventure, for masked balls, for shameless pleasures that were bound, she thought, to initiate her to ecstasies she had never experienced” (I:IX, 57). After five years of living with Bennett Wing, a Freudian psychoanalyst, Isadora is equally restless, beset with

the longing to be filled up—to be fucked through every hole, the yearning for dry champagne and wet kisses, for the smell of peonies in a penthouse on a June night, for the light at the end of the pier in *Gatsby*…. Not those things really—because you knew that the rich were duller than you and me—but what those things *evoked* (7-8).

Setting up an ironic tension between Isadora the fictional author and Isadora Wing, Jong juxtaposes the romantic sensibility of an Emma Bovary with the anti-romantic awareness of Flaubert.

For both Emma Bovary and Isadora Wing, reading engenders adulterous desire by furnishing models to which the heroines aspire. At the beginning of her affair with Rodolphe, Emma

recalled the heroines of the books that she had read, and the lyric legion of these adulterous women began to sing in her memory with the voice of sisters that charmed her. She became herself as if it were an actual part of these lyrical imaginings; at long last, as she saw herself among those lovers she had so envied, she fulfilled the love-dream of her youth (II:ix, 131).
Before she runs off with Adrian Goodlove, abandoning her husband at a psychoanalytic convention in Vienna, Isadora thinks

…of D.H. Lawrence running off with his tutor’s wife, of Romeo and Juliet dying in their search for love, of Aschenbach pursuing Tadzio through plaguey Venice, of all the real and imaginary people who had picked up and burned their bridges and taken off into the wild blue yonder (168).

Adultery promises freedom from the constraints of being a doctor’s wife and a potential path to authorship, as both Emma and Isadora become heroines in their own romantic narratives: “I have a lover! a lover!” Emma Bovary repeats, “delighting at the idea as if a second puberty had come to her” (II: IX, 131); Isadora thinks, “I was one of them! No scared housewife, I. I was flying” (168).

Isadora Wing inherits Bovary’s desire to incarnate transcendence, as evinced by her cinematic fantasy of a “zipless fuck” as a “platonic ideal” (10). In the “one scenario” of the zipless fuck Jong offers us in Fear of Flying, a handsome soldier boards a train and wordlessly seduces a beautiful widow, transfixed by the image of the cross bouncing between her breasts. When the widow gets out of the train, the man spring after her, but a long freight train blocks his view: they will never see each other again. Anonymity and brevity are required for the encounter to generate its magic. The zipless fuck is “pure” because it allows Isadora to transcend heterosexual power dynamics, to access her desire in a way she cannot when men have faces, names, and life histories: “There is no power game. The man is not ‘taking’ and the woman is not ‘giving.’ No one is attempting to cuckold a husband or humiliate a wife. No one is trying to prove anything or get anything out of anyone” (13).
Needless to say, both heroines are misguided in their search for adventure. After the initial excitement of adultery wears off, they rediscover the banality of marriage. Flaubert is unsentimental in his description of the final stages of Emma’s affair with her second lover: “They knew one another too well to experience any of those sudden surprises which multiply the enjoyment of a possession a hundredfold. She was as sick of him as he was weary of her” (III:VI, 231). Similarly, after a two-week road trip through Europe, Isadora and Adrian have reached “that second stage of love which comes when you desperately feel you are falling out of love and cannot stand the thought of another loss” (256). In “keeping with the notion that a woman must write to her lover,” Emma continues to write love letters to Léon, resurrecting her phantom lover. Isadora and Adrian continue to use terms of endearment that reveal the ennui they attempt to conceal: “How are you, love? Fine, love.” However, unlike Flaubert’s heroine, Isadora “files” her lover away in her notebook, “for future reference” (256). Emma and Isadora learn the same lesson—that, in Isadora’s words, “the man under the bed can never be the man over the bed” (256)—but Isadora, unlike Emma, will put this lesson into her writing, “fil(ing) away” her lover “for future reference.”

In her foreword to the 2013 edition of Fear of Flying, Theresa Rebeck has written that the novel’s “true subject” is “the silencing of the woman artist” and that “the zipless fuck” “serves as a metaphor” (xiv). Indeed, the non-coincidence of life with literature---the principal theme of Madame Bovary and its predecessor, Don Quijote---is given a feminist twist in Jong’s novel: if Emma is disappointed that her life is nothing like the romances she reads, Isadora is troubled by the discrepancy between women in life and women in art. The adolescent Isadora idolizes male writers, regarding them as
“authorities, as gods who knew and were to be trusted completely” (151). Her romance with the Western canon is problematic because it requires the subordination of her will:

I learned from Shaw that women never can be artists; I learned from Dostoevsky that they have no religious feeling; I learned from Swift and Poe that they have too much religious feeling (and therefore can never be quite rational); I learned from Faulkner that they are earth mothers and at one with the moon and the tides and the crops; I learned from Freud that they have deficient superegos and are ever “incomplete” because they lack the one thing worth having: a penis (151).

Isadora White is aware that these images of womanhood do not correspond to her own reality: “What did the moon and tides and earth-mothering and the worship of the Lawrentian ‘phallos’ have to do with me or with my life?” (151) Yet when she and her best friend Pia turn to women writers for inspiration, they are equally disappointed: Simone de Beauvoir “never makes a move without wondering what would Sartre think?” and Doris Lessing’s Anna Wulf “can’t come unless she’s in love, which is seldom” (97, 98). While she wants women to live as bravely as their art would suggest, she does not hold male writers to the same standards. Lacking female role models—her own mother, Judith, is a thwarted artist who could not reconcile marriage and motherhood with her commitment to her work—Isadora asks, “Where was the female Chaucer? One lusty lady who had juice and joy and love and talent too?” (98)

Isadora’s marriage to the staid and predictable Bennett creates the conditions necessary for her to overcome her anxiety of authorship and create a Woolfian “room of one’s own.” While Bennett mourns his grandfather’s death, Isadora immerses herself in the works of other writers and imitates an author’s style every few months (111). She subscribes to the New Yorker, her “shrine since childhood,” and creates a “New Yorker world” peopled with the likes of John Updike, Nabokov, and Muriel Sparks, positioning
herself as a voyeur of their dinner table talk. Like Virginia Woolf’s Orlando, Isadora creates phantoms of authors; she imagines them as “a mysterious fraternity of mortals who walked around more nimbly than other people—as if they somehow had invisible wings on their shoulders” (113). Determined, at first, to write like a man—“’No lady writer subjects for me. I was going to have battles and bullfights, and jungle safaris” (114)—she begins two novels in Heidelberg with male narrators, a fruitless endeavor. Struggling with her culturally ingrained notion that the subjects she knows most about are “trivial” and “feminine,” she nonetheless manages to produce three books of poems over the next three years. She stops imitating male authors and searches for her own voice, exchanging a mimetic model of desire for a non-mimetic one. Writing erotic poetry from a female perspective, Isadora defies a literary tradition that positions women as objects of male desire. She proves that her body is not an impediment to creativity, as Freud would have it; that she can write from it like a man, breaching cultural taboos. Yet she is not satisfied with her achievement; it is not enough for her to write bravely and live timidly. Like Bovary, she wants her life to live up to the promise of her writing, for the two realms to converge. “If I had learned how to write, mightn’t I also learn how to live?” she reflects (115). Her spontaneous decision to leave her husband and travel Europe with Adrian Goodlove is her attempt to make her life converge with her art, or to make the transcendental sensible.

Adrian Goodlove appears to serve a function analogous to that of Flaubert’s Devil in his first draft of The Temptations of St. Anthony, who, in Rancière’s words, “made him (St. Anthony) discover what life is when our sensations are released from the chains of

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20 See Chapter 1.
individuality” (241). He tempts Isadora into leaving her husband to travel across Europe with him, without telling her that he loves her or promising her any security; she is persuaded by his insistence that she will never amount to much as a writer unless she finds the courage to act on her fantasies (136). A disciple of Laing, he tries to teach her to live without preconceptions. During their two-week tour of Germany, Italy, and France, he forbids her to make plans, to mention the word “tomorrow.” Life is to be experienced in the here and now, without a plot; guilt is to be bracketed away, the moment savored.

I have emphasized that Adrian “appears” to serve a function analogous to Flaubert’s Devil because, on closer inspection, the analogy does not hold. Adrian is a pseudo-Devil, just as he is a pseudo-existentialist. Isadora wryly notes the contradiction between Adrian’s principles and his lifestyle: he can play at being an existentialist only because he has a girlfriend willing to assume responsibility for his two children (121). He does not succeed in banishing Isadora’s guilt: Isadora repeatedly asks him to drive her to the nearest airport, where she plans to catch a plane back to New York and Bennett (but never does), and the two fuel themselves with alcohol to blur the edges of their anxiety. Moreover, while they try to escape the future they get stuck in fictionalized versions of their pasts. The precondition for the zipless fuck is that its participants do not talk; but Isadora and Adrian continually rehash memories of their childhoods and ex-lovers. In the process, they fall back into the trap of aestheticizing experience, as Isadora is aware:

Of course, we pretended to be telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth; but nobody (as Henry Miller says) can tell the absolute truth; and even our most seemingly autobiographical revelations were partly fabrications—literature, in short. (171)
Through the failure of her experiment with Goodlove, her “anti-hero,” Isadora achieves the insight necessary for her to write *Fear of Flying*. By the end of Chapter 11, “Existentialism Reconsidered,” she recognizes that her life exceeds anything that could be said about in narrative:

> Life has no plot. It is far more interesting than anything you can say about it because language, by its very nature, orders things and life really has no order. Even those writers who respect the beautiful anarchy of life and try to get it all into their books, wind up making it seem much more ordered than it ever was and do not, finally, tell the truth. Because no writer can tell the truth about life, namely, that it is much more interesting than any book. And no writer can tell the truth about people—which is that they are much more interesting than any characters (179).

Isadora’s epiphany informs Jong’s poetics in *Fear of Flying*, where a teleology of plot is abandoned in favor of an episodic narrative structure that conveys “the beautiful anarchy of life.” Real life is messier than a feminist novel: women know too well they need to stop searching for love and try to live their lives, yet they continue to betray their ideals. Awareness, Isadora reiterates throughout the novel, is not enough for a woman to change her situation: “Why doesn’t my knowing ever change anything?” Isadora despairs in a conversation with Goodlove (243).

Like Bovary, Isadora Wing never stops searching for salvation through men; she literally flies from man to man in *How to Save Your Life* and *Parachutes and Kisses*, the respective sequels to *Fear of Flying*. For this reason, Jong’s novel has disappointed some feminist critics. Gayle Greene has argued that Jong confuses “liberation with sexual liberation” and that she does not challenge ‘the old story,’ women’s dependence on men for their identity (91). Ellen Spaldo, whose dissertation situates *Fear of Flying* in the picaresque tradition, concurs with Greene’s assessment of the novel while offering a
different reading: while for Greene “Isadora’s ‘search for the impossible man’ turns into a search for the self, which itself fails,” for Spaldo “the search for the self in Jong’s work turns into a search for the perfect man, through whom she hopes to perfect her feminine self, and this is precisely why her feminism fails” (206). What both critics overlook is how Isadora/Jong’s sexual misadventures serve as a vehicle for her to “fly,” that is, to write.

In her fifteenth-anniversary introduction to Fear of Flying, Jong wrote that she felt “considerable pressure” to kill off her adulterous heroine and “contemplated the heroine’s suicide à la Madame Bovary” (1988, xiii). Unlike Flaubert, however, Jong keeps her heroine alive and endows her with a determination to survive, writing beyond the nineteenth-century novel of adultery. Seduced and abandoned by Adrian in Paris, Isadora defines herself against women like Emma:

I knew I wouldn’t screw up my life for the sake of a self-destructive passion. There was a part of me that wanted to and another part of me that despised Isadora for not being the kind of woman who gives her all for love. But there was no use pretending. I was not that sort of woman. I hadn’t the taste for total self-annihilation. I would never be a romantic heroine maybe, but I would stay alive (my italics, 290-291).

Although Isadora returns to her husband in the final chapter, which is ironically entitled “A 19th Century Ending,” it is ambiguous whether she will return to their marriage. Jong ends the novel with an image of Isadora as a modern Wife of Bath, soaping herself in a hotel bathroom in London and contemplating an uncertain future through a literary lens: “In nineteenth-century novels, they get married. In twentieth-century novels, they get divorced. Can you have an ending in which they do neither?” (299) By leaving the ending open—the last two sentences read “I hummed and rinsed my hair. As I was soaping it
again, Bennett walked into the room”---Jong rejects both possibilities, liberating her heroine from the constraints of closure.

Jong’s ending foregrounds Isadora’s desire to write as a woman. In Chapter 17, after her abandonment by Adrian, she dreams of being a graduation ceremony attended by three husbands: Bennett, Adrian, and a faceless man (her zipless fuck). The matron of the ceremony, Millicent McIntosh, prevents her from receiving her degree on the grounds that she has too many husbands; one cannot be both a sexual woman and a writer, she implies. Her presence is soon replaced by an Africanized Colette. Colette tells her that graduation has nothing to do with the number of husbands she has, and hands Isadora a book with her name on the cover. The dream ends with Isadora making love to Colette, which turns out to be “the real graduation.” It is not surprising that in the next chapter, Isadora relinquishes her fantasy of the zipless fuck, repulsed by the advances of a male stranger on a train from Paris to London. The lesbian dream has already replaced the heterosexual fantasy: it is Colette, and not an anonymous French man, whose body gives Isadora permission to “own her own soul,” to fly/write.

It is not entirely accurate, then, to say that Isadora does not change. If as a woman she keeps chasing the Phallus, as an author, she moves from male to female models, from bullfights and jungle safaris to menstrual blood and baths. Although like Emma Bovary she conflates liberation with sexual liberation, she turns her foolish quest for love into the material for a hugely successful novel, transcending her bovaryaisme. By giving her adulterous female reader the ability to write with irony about her experiences, to laugh at herself for being so literary, Jong rehabilitates Flaubert’s doomed heroine, underscoring the links between the sexual and the textual in a woman’s quest for freedom.
2. **Dacia Maraini’s Marianna Ucrìa**

*La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa* (1990) [*The Silent Duchess*, 1992] is one of Maraini’s most successful novels. It received the prestigious Premio Campiello in Italy and England’s Independent Foreign Fiction Award, and has been translated into fourteen languages. A historical bildungsroman, it tells the story of Marianna Ucrìa, a mute-deaf noblewoman in eighteenth-century Sicily who was based on Maraini’s ancestor. Marianna’s silence is imposed on her by the patriarchal aristocratic society into which she is born. Raped at the age of five by her mother’s brother, Duke Pietro, a crime with which her father is complicit, Marianna loses her ability to speak and hear. She communicates with others through letters; her body is a mobile writing desk, with a little folding table hanging from her belt and writing implements attached to a chain around her waist. At the age of thirteen she is offered in marriage to this same uncle, her family’s dominant concern being to avoid a large dowry and to increase their estate holdings. Every Sicilian noblewoman of a certain age faced the same prospect: marriage to a nobleman or, if she were not deemed beautiful enough, life in a convent. Resisting the emergence of a new bourgeois, noblemen often arranged marriages with the goal of keeping money and property within the family; hence it was not uncommon for a thirteen-year-old girl to be set up with one of her male relatives. Incest was the inevitable result of a feudal class system in decline. Marianna does not remember her childhood trauma until she is in her forties, when both her father and her uncle-husband are dead. By then, she has evolved into a self-aware woman who is determined to live her life on her own terms.
My analysis of Maraini’s novel will focus on the role that reading plays in Marainna’s quest for selfhood. Like Ella Price, Marianna Ucria is rescued from her dreary provincial existence through her relationship with books. Her handicap serves as an advantage because it allows her to engage in a dialogue with foreign minds without incurring the suspicion of her community; others consider her bibliomania foolish and eccentric, but not dangerous. In a Sicily where the Inquisition was very much alive, she would have been condemned as a heretic had she made her book-inspired revelations known to others. Her secret reading of David Hume’s *Treatise on Human Nature* constitutes a turning point in her development as a woman, since it introduces her to two ideas which challenge the orthodoxies of the Church and the feudal class system: that reason is a slave of passion, and that our most deeply cherished values are effects of habit, or blind obedience to longstanding cultural conventions and practices. Through her encounter with Hume Marianna experiences an awakening that is both erotic and intellectual, developing a mode of subjectivity which Cinzia Sartini Blum has called “the thinking body.” This mode of subjectivity can contribute to the subversion of the dualisms that structure Western philosophy and the wisdom of the Church fathers: mind and body, self and other, and language and history are interconnected.

The subversive effect of reading on the female imagination and its association with erotic desire are central themes in *Madame Bovary*, a novel which obsessed Maraini for many years. While Maraini professed admiration for *Madame Bovary’s* style, she was repelled by Flaubert’s patronizing attitude towards his heroine: *Cercando Emma*, which was published three years after *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucria*, was her attempt to separate the heroine from its author, to trace where the one begins and the other ends. Her
historical novel may very well have paved the way for her investigation of *Madame Bovary’s sources*, for in *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucria* she seems intent on *not* repeating the Flaubertian hypotext. She eschews the naturalistic style of which Flaubert was enamored, with its laborious description of places and objects, for a phenomenological investigation of her reading subject. As early as 1987, in “Riflessioni sui corpi logici e illogici delle mie compagne di sesso” [“Reflections on the logical and illogical bodies of my sexual compatriots”], she had repudiated naturalism for its pretense of objectivity and insisted on the sexed, historically conditioned nature of the imagination. In *La lunga vita*, she turns her poetics into a praxis: language becomes a form of embodiment. Because she can neither speak nor hear, Marianna houses images and smells that are reflected in Maraini’s prose. From the beginning of the novel, when Maraini narrates the young Marianna’s journey with her father to an auto-da-fe in Ficarazzi, she offers a corporeal perspective of the surrounding countryside that stands in stark contrast to Flaubert’s narration of the Bovarys’ journey to Yonville (II:i):

Ora ha abbassato le palpebre per riposare un momento le pupille, e le narici hanno preso a sorbire l’aria riconoscente e catalogando gli odori con pignoleria: com’è prepotente l’acqua di lattuga che impregna il panciotto del signor padre! Sotto, si indovina la fragranza della cipria di riso che ci mescola all’unto dei sedili, all’acido dei pidocchi schiacciati, al pizzicore della polvere della strada che entra delle giunture degli sportelli, nonché ad un leggero sentore di mentuccia che sale dai prati di casa Patagonia.

But now she has lowered her eyelids so as to rest her eyes for a while, and her nostrils have begun to draw in the air, recognizing the smells and meticulously noting them in her mind: the overpowering scent of lettuce water that impregnates her father’s waistcoat, below that the scene of rice powder mingled with the grease on the seats, the sourness of crushed lice, the smarting from the dust on the road that blows through the joints of the doors, as well as the faint aroma of mint that floats in from the fields of the Villa Patagonia (Silent Duchess, 10-11).
Maraini’s use of synaesthesia illustrates how her protagonist makes sense of the world, positioning Marianna as a translator who mediates between the symbolic world of language and her sense-impressions.

There are moments when the author of *Madame Bovary* uses synaesthesia in a similar fashion, for instance, to record how Emma’s body registers sensations after the first sex scene in the woods with Rodolphe. Yet Maraini’s theory of language is at odds with Flaubert’s. Anticipating Lacan’s notion of the subject as alienated in language, Flaubert writes that “human speech is a cracked kettle on which we tap crude rhythms for bears to dance to, while we long to make music that will melt the stars,” a simile so clumsy that its form performs its content. Maraini, in contrast, writes that

*Writing is tongue, and the tongue is not limited to moving in the mouth, producing, as if by a miracle, sounds more or less beautiful, more or less bold. There are tongues that have lain like little corpses in the tombs of their mouths, and if we believe that the dead are capable of thought, we might imagine a thought made of torn phantasms, of buried and gangrenous desires (27).*

Unlike Flaubert, who hears the silence in every speech, Maraini hears speech in silence, which in *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucria* becomes synecdochal of the mute and inarticulate condition of womanhood in eighteenth-century Sicily. She articulates the language of the tongue that does not move in its mouth:

*Il silenzio è un’acqua morta nel corpo mutilato della bambina che da poco ha compiuto i sette anni. In quell’acqua ferma e chiara galleggiano la carrozza, le terrazze dai panni stessi, le galline che corrono, il mare che si intravvede da lontano, il signor padre addormentato.*

The child is just seven years old. In her disabled body the silence is like dead water. In this dead still water float the carriage, the balconies hung with washing, the hens scratching about, the sea glimpsed from afar, her sleeping father.
Marianna’s deafness heightens her visual and olfactory senses and makes her capable, at times, of reading other people’s minds. Such extrasensory perceptions render the silent duchess a quasi-omniscient subject on par with Flaubert’s narrator, a screen through which characters’ thoughts filter, unwanted: from the mundane speculations of her maid Innocenza to the far weightier reflections of her brother, the libertine priest Carlo, from whom she discovers the origin of her muteness in incest.

Initially, like Emma Bovary, Marianna lives vicariously through the adventures of fictional characters. Trapped in a loveless marriage to a much older man who takes her by force, she has never known erotic pleasure; she can only feed on “centinaia di storie d’amore, di allegria, di disperazione, di morte, di godimenti, di assassinii, di incontri, di addii” (*La lunga vita* 123) [“hundreds of stories of love, of happiness, despair, death, joys, murders, encounters, farewells” (*The Silent Duchess* 148)]. Books take the place of flesh-and-blood lovers. Reading far into the night, alone in the library of the Villa Ucrìa, she reflects that

_Uscire da un libro è come uscire dal meglio di sé. Passare dagli archi soffici e ariosi della mente alle goffaggini di un corpo accattone sempre in cerca di qualcosa è comunque una resa. Lasciare persone note e care per ritrovare una se stessa che non ama, chiusa un una contabilità ridicola di giornate che si sommano a giornate come fossero indistinguibili (*La lunga vita* 125)._ 

To leave a book is like leaving the better part of oneself. To pass from the soft and airy arcades of the mind to the demands of a graceless body is in any case a surrender: a renunciation of characters one has studied and cared for in favour of a self who does not love, confined within a stupid succession of days, each day indistinguishable from the last (*The Silent Duchess*, 149).

However, after her fateful encounter with Hume, Marianna is no longer content to live a secondhand life. Hume’s insistence that “curiosità sta alle radici dell’inquietudine” (*La lunga vita*, 151) [“curiosity lies at the root for a thirst for knowledge” (*The Silent...
Duchess 151) inspires Marianna to spy on her servants and half-siblings Fila and Saro, who engage in amorous games behind a closed door. In this scene, Maraini literalizes the metaphor of reading as an act of voyeurism, “uno spiare i respiri degli altri” (La lunga vita 123)” [“spying on the life breath of others” (The Silent Duchess 147)]. As Marianna falls more deeply in love with the ideas of Hume, she begins to question the aristocratic values of her clan and loses her resemblance with Emma Bovary, who, we should remember, romanticizes dukes and duchesses.

The contents of Marianna’s library reflect her evolution as a thinker. When she inherited it from her father it was stocked with reading material befitting a woman of her rank: books about saints and “alcuni romanzi per signorine che parlano d’amore con ipocrita licenza” (La lunga vita 124) [“a few romances for young ladies that speak of love with hypocritical license” (Silent Duchess 148)] occupied the lower shelves, while classical works by Plato, Dante, and Ariosto sat on the uppermost shelves, within a man’s reach. During the years of her marriage she frequented the library so often that she doubled its collection, adding French and English dictionaries, travel literature, modern novels, books about history, and philosophy. Unlike Emma Bovary, she outgrows the romance. Orlando Furioso articulates the fantasies of her fellow aristocrats, who pride themselves on their idleness and take refuge in carriages emblazoned in gold (137). To think about thinking, to question the ontological and epistemological assumptions of her clan, is a far more transgressive, and thus pleasurable, activity for Marianna: “Pensare il pensiero, ecco qualcosa di spericolato che la tenta come un esercizio a cui indulgere segretemente” (108) [“To think thoughts—
here is something daring that tempts her as an exercise she can secretly indulge in” (128)]. For Duke Pietro, an aristocrat obsessed with tracing his lineage,

i pensieri sistematici hanno qualcosa di ignobile, di volgare. Il confronto con altre intelligenze, altre idee, è considerato per principio una resa. I plebei pensano come gruppo o come folla; un nobile è solo e di questa solitudine e costituita la sua gloria e il suo ardimento (53).

logical thought has something ignoble, even vulgar about it. To confront other minds, other ideas, is considered in principle an act of perfidy. The common people, with their crowd mentality, behave like flocks of sheep; only the nobleman stands alone, and out of this aloofness comes his glory and his daring (59).

Pietro regards his young wife as “una bambina di un secolo nuovo, incomprehensible, con qualcosa di triviale nella sua ansia per i mutamenti, per fare, il costruire” (53) [“the child of a new century, incomprehensible, with something trivial in her passion for change, for action, for building” (49)]. Hume’s voice further dislocates Marianna from the geography of her husband, enabling her to travel north before she physically leaves Bagheria. His notion that God was “a disposition of the mind” made him an unpopular figure in England; had he been born to a working-class family in Sicily, he would have been executed in an auto-da-fe.

A young man by the surname of Grass introduces Marianna to Hume’s A Treatise of Human Understanding (1738). Born in Venice of English parents, he has traveled half the world by foot; he and Marianna discover they like the same books and engage in a lively epistolary correspondence while he is a guest at her house in Bagheria. Before he departs for Messina, “in un viaggio di ‘ragionamento’” (104) [“on a journey of self-discovery” (123)], he copies Hume’s writings in a notebook and leaves it in Marianna’s library as a secret present, not without having attributed the words to “Davide Hume, un
amico, un filosofo troppo inquieto per essere amato se non dagli amici fra cui mi lusingo
di annoverare anche la amica della parola tagliata” (105) [“David Hume, a friend and a
philosopher, too disturbing to inspire love except from his friends, among whom I take
the liberty of including the friend who cannot speak” (125)]. Presumably Grass has
intuited that Duke Pietro occasionally inspects his wife’s library (104).

Like the other book-inspired heroines referenced in this study, Marianna
romanticizes her mediator: “Lei piacerebbe conoscere quel signor Hume col turbante
verdolino, le sopracciglia folte e nere, lo sguardo sorridente, il doppio mento e le giubbe
fiorite” (107) [“She would like to get to know this Hume, with his light-green turban, his
thick black eyebrows, his smiling expression, his double chin and his flowered waistcoat”
(127)]. She could not possibly have known that the same man who had written “To have
the sense of virtue, is nothing but to feel a satisfaction of a particular kind from the
contemplation of a character” would go on to write, in a footnote in a posthumously
published essay that “I am apt to suspect the negroes to be naturally inferior to the
whites” (Miller 629). Although Hume did not apply his skepticism to his inherited
prejudices, his treatise nonetheless inspires Marianna to examine her own, to scoff at the
idea that a grown woman (Fila) could be given to her as a present by her father and to
quarrel with Duke Pietro in her head: “Che babbasunante dici,” scriverebbe il signor
marito zio, “forse che Dio non ha fatto il nobili e i viddani, I cavalli e le pecore?”(108)
[“What nonsense!” uncle-husband would have written. “Are you suggesting that God has
not created noblemen and peasants, horses and sheep?” (129)] Moreover, it leads her to
wonder about her own capacity for originality, to indulge in a spirit of anti-bovaryaism:
““Di suo poi cosa ha che non sia la suggestione di alter menti, alter costellazioni di
pensieri, altre volontà, altri interessi?” (108) [“Can she then retain something of her own which does not originate from other minds, other constellations of thoughts, other wills, other interests?” (129)

Reading Hume also unsettles her Oedipal family romance. In the beginning of the novel Marianna’s love for her father borders on the incestuous: in her dreams he is a knight leading a horse to Paradise. When he dies she thinks she sees “il suo corpo amabile fra le palme nane” [“his loving body amongst the dwarf palm trees”]; she thinks of “‘un cavalliere niveo’” (76) [“‘a knight errant white as snow’” (76)]. Hume’s speculation that “the connection between our ideas, the links, the efficacy are merely in ourselves and none other than a disposition of the mind” leads Marianna to think back through her mother, whose death she never mourned, whose body she disdained. Her mother, the Duchess Maria, is a corpulent woman who dislikes writing and lives in a haze of snuff and laudanum, passively resigned to her destiny. From her grandmother Giuseppa Marianna knows that Maria was married, against her will, to the Duke Signoretto; that she fell hopelessly in love with him and never recovered. Maria’s indifference towards her daughter, her lovesickness, and her melancholic torpor render her a lame Emma Bovary, a figure against whom Marianna defines herself: “non diventerò mai come lei, si dice, mai, neanche morta” (8) [“I shall never be like her, she says to herself. Never. Not even when I am dead” (2)]. Under the spell of Hume Marianna wonders what her mother thought about and tries to imagine her voice; she recognizes Maria as a subject with desires of her own for the first time. As Marianne Hirsch has written in a different context (27), recognition of maternal desire is crucial for the daughter to construct a positive self-identity.
Grass, the pilgrim, foreshadows the woman Marianna will become after uncle-husband’s death, when she embarks on her own search for self-knowledge. On a trip to Palermo, she questions her brother Carlo about her disability and learns the truth by “reading” his thoughts. Through Marianna, the reader learns not only of her uncle’s rape, but also of her father’s concealment of his crime. The knowledge of her father’s betrayal does not destroy her; instead, it frees her to act on her desire for Sarò, her servant and illegitimate half-brother. At the age of forty-three, she discovers that her body can be a source of pleasure rather than a site of violation; she lives Hume’s decree that “pleasure is, and ought only to be, the slave of the passions.” Her erotic awakening is anomalous by the standards of a culture that deny women a sexuality, viewing their bodies as vessels for future male heirs. A Sicilian woman’s life is considered over after her children are grown, but Marianna’s is just beginning.

Although Marianna recovers her status as a desiring subject after her uncle-husband’s death, her journey of “ragionamento” is incomplete. She never learns to integrate the demands of her intellect with her bodily desires. Her conflict between reason and passion is reflected in her relationships with men: while her courtship with an erudite praetor is purely cerebral, involving an epistolary correspondence that alludes to Plato and Locke, Ariosto and Cervantes, her affair with the semi-illiterate Sarò is corporeal. Nor does she learn how to turn her talent into reading minds into an art, “come avrebbe suggerito David Hume” (202) [“as David Hume has suggested” (242)]. A gifted painter, she neglected her talent after the birth of her children, acquiescing to her family’s unspoken expectations. Torn between “voci degli avi che le chiedono ossequio e fedeltà (219) [“ancestral voices that ask for respect and loyalty” (262)] and
“altre voci petulanti come quella di signor Hume col suo turbante verde le chiedono di osare, mandando al diavolo quella montagna di superstizioni ereditarie (219)” [“other petulant voices like that of Mr. David Hume with his green turban asking her to be daring and to send to the devil that mountain of inherited superstition” (262)] she takes flight in nomadism, seeking knowledge through her body.

Marianna’s aimless wanderings through northern Italy are scandalous for a woman of her age and rank: “E disdicevole per una signora girare da una locanda all’altra, da una città all’altra senza pace, senza rimedio,” direbbe il signor figlio Mariano e avrebbe forse ragione,” Marianna thinks (265) [“It is disgraceful for a well-born woman to drift restlessly, aimlessly from one inn to another, from one city to another, her son Mariano would say, and perhaps he would be right” (319)]. Yet her abrupt departure from Bagheria is in part motivated by her desire to distance herself from Saro, whom she has set up in an arranged marriage with a peasant girl. While she looks back nostalgically on the time she spent with Sarò, she also feels compelled to suppress her memories, telling herself that “ci deve pur essere qualco’ altro che appartiene al mondo dalla saggezza e della contemplazione. Qualcosa che distolge la mente dalle sciocche pretese dei sensi” (265) [“there must also be something else, something that belongs to the world of wisdom and contemplation, something that deflects the mind from its foolish preoccupation with the senses” (319)]. Through these reflections Maraini unwittingly positions Marianna against Emma Bovary, while positioning her on the threshold between reason and passion, tradition and modernity.

In The Woman in the Red Dress: Gender, Space, and Reading (2002), feminist scholar Minrose C. Gwin has written that “reading is a way to make one’s life and one’s
self more and less than one’s own through a meaningful act of dislocation from known geographies” (23). This model of reading applies to Maraini’s duchess, who uproots herself from known geographies, exteriorizing a journey that literature has inspired. Like Isadora Wing, Marianna contemplates and rejects suicide in a foreign land: her will to resume her quest, or self-questioning, is stronger than her desire to capitulate to “the ultimate seduction.” Unlike Isadora, however, she pursues her journey of *ragionamento* alone, in the absence of men who try to teach her how to live. Hence Maraini goes further than Jong in liberating her heroine from bovarysm’s constraints. Marianna is Emma Bovary’s foil, a woman who rejects an aristocratic worldview, shows compassion for servants and peasants, and sets an example of courageous mothering for her daughters. Marianna’s reading of philosophical treatises constitutes a betrayal far worse than Emma’s adulterous adventures: it enables her to travel outside of her country and century, to embody a subversive spirit of change. We are brought full circle to Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* (1928), the subject of Chapter 1: Marianna Ucrìa’s discovery of Hume, like the nobleman/woman Orlando’s discovery of Sir Thomas Browne, initiates a transformation whose effects exceed the scope of the novel.

**Beyond Bovarysme**

In *The Odd Woman* (1974), a coming-of-age feminist novel written by Gail Godwin, Jane Clifford, an English professor, identifies “the Emma Bovary syndrome” as “the theme of literally dozens of nineteenth-century novels.” She writes in her journal:

> Literature’s graveyard is positively choked with women who choose—rather, let themselves be chosen by—this syndrome, also with their ‘cousins,’ who ‘get in trouble’ [commit adultery, have sex without marriage; think of committing adultery,
or having sex without marriage] and then, according to the literary conventions of the time, must die. (297)

The four feminist authors discussed in this chapter write beyond this syndrome. Each of their heroines begins as an Emma Bovary—an unhappily married, melancholic women who indulge in book-inspired romantic fantasies— and becomes a quixotic quester of her authorial agency. She refuses to end her sexual/textual quest in death, to submit to the plot written by men for the rebellious heroine of the nineteenth-century novel of adultery: “And I survived,” are the final words of Erica Jong’s Isadora Wing trilogy.

_Ella Price’s Journal, Fear of Flying, and La lunga vita di Marianna Ucria_ repeat yet move beyond a Flaubertian model of bovarysme. Reading initially serves as a substitute for living, a way for the thwarted female artist to vicariously gratify her desires; it then becomes a means of self-inquiry and a catalyst of the heroine’s rebirth. Unlike Flaubert, Bryant and Jong position their heroines in a dialectical relationship with books: they not only read their lives through literature, they also read literature through their lives, and are aware of the limitations of searching for models of selfhood through male-authored novels. In what seems like a significantly different pattern, Maraini’s duchess loses interest in fiction and turns to Enlightenment philosophy for answers to the riddle of her identity. In foregrounding an emancipatory model of reading and the survival of their rebellious literary women, Bryant, Jong, and Maraini create alternatives to the feminine imaginary constructed by Flaubert and his followers. Ella Price, Isadora Wing, and Marianna Ucria evolve from subjects of textual seduction into desiring agents, picaras who derive their knowledge of the world from their bodies.
Written in the aftermath of World War II, *Dalla parte di lei* is the most pessimistic of the four novels. Bovarysme is portrayed as a symptom of women’s “apologia” but it is never transformed into an “elevating power.” Alessandra Corteggiani remains a victim of her romantic delusions like her mother Eleonora, who models herself after male-authored heroines who die for love. Like Elsa Morante, her contemporary, de Céspedes uses the motif of bovarysme to highlight a daughter’s quest for her mother’s love: what Marianne Hirsch has called “the feminist family romance.” Bovarysm also figures as a fatal maternal inheritance that the daughter must destroy in order to establish her authorial identity: Elisa de Salvi burns her mother’s love letters and Alessandra Corteggiani commits matricide in a dream that precedes the murder of her husband. Yet Alessandra remains faithful to the romantic image she has constructed of her mother and her husband even as she writes from prison. At the end of *Dalla parte di lei* de Céspedes’s protagonist is seated by a window, a liminal space that links her with Flaubert’s heroine. Her final statement suggests that she will never emerge from the limbo of the *neutrouniversale*: “[...] chi conosce queste pagine sa che restarmene in silenzio presso una finestra e, fin dai più remoti giorni dell’infanzia, una delle mie condizioni di felicità,” she reflects (405) [“All those who have read these pages know that, ever since childhood, to sit quietly by a window has afforded me contentment” (343)]

Departing from their nineteenth-century predecessors, twentieth-century Italian women writers have created a counterdiscourse to the novelistic tradition of Bovarysme. Their resistance to Flaubert’s model of femininity is allegorized in a mother-daughter

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21 I have in mind Marchesa Colombi and Matilde Serao, whose early novels borrow heavily from *Madame Bovary*. See Introduction.
plot. The mother, who is identified with Emma Bovary, dies or is dead; her disappearance grounds the daughter’s authority as a narrating subject. Although the daughter has inherited her mother’s bovaresque tendencies, she is determined not to repeat her destiny; this repudiation of the Emma Bovary syndrome links her with the “real” author, the one outside the text. Alessandra Corteggiani, Ella Price, Isadora Wing, and Marianna Ucria entertain thoughts of suicide but take up their pens instead. Maraini’s duchess departs on a journey that is both physical and spiritual, interior and exterior. While its outcome is ambiguous, the novel’s title (La lunga vita) assures us that she will not share the fate of Flaubert’s hapless heroine.

The pattern that I have traced in this chapter, the metamorphosis of the bovaresque woman into a self-aware (although by no means self-assured) author, lends credence to my hypothesis that twentieth-century Italian and American women’s metafiction emerged, at least in part, as a revisionary response to the male tradition of Bovarysme. Replacing ironic distance with confessional intimacy, de Céspedes, Bryant, Jong, and Maraini have written the book-inspired erotic quest from a feminist perspective, holding a two-way mirror to the female reader. Unlike James Joyce and Manuel Puig, these authors have recreated Emma Bovary in their own image, rendering her more sympathetic for a female audience without stripping her of moral and psychological complexity. Future studies of Madame Bovary’s influence need to examine the relationship of other feminist novels to Flaubert’s classic.
CONCLUSION: REIMAGINING THE FEMALE IMAGINARY

Se tutto fosse possibile, quale sarebbe il senso, la bella della vita?
If everything were possible, what would be the meaning, the point of life?
--Jhumpa Lahiri, *In Altre Parole (In Other Words)*

Throughout this study, I have demonstrated how twentieth-century women writers have revised the narrative models they inherited from Cervantes and Flaubert, using the motifs of quixotism and bovarysme to represent their own search for self-representation. I would now like to explore the theoretical implications of my analysis, taking the following questions as my points of departure: How have the authors of this study reimagined the female imagination? What new models of reading, identification, and desire do their fictions offer?

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar were the first critics to theorize literary influence from a female perspective. Framing their work as a response to Harold Bloom’s, they argued that his anxiety of influence model could not account for the plight of the nineteenth-century woman writer “for the simple reason that she must confront precursors who are almost exclusively male” and who “attempt to enclose her in definitions of her person and her potential which, by reducing her to extreme stereotypes (angel, monster) drastically conflict with her own sense of self” (48). Rather than struggle against the influence of their literary fathers, nineteenth-century women writers suffered from an “anxiety of authorship,” a culturally ingrained inferiority complex that stemmed from Victorian constructions of authorship as a masculine prerogative. “If the pen is a metaphorical penis,” Gilbert and Gubar mused, “from what organs can females generate texts?” (7) The nineteenth-century woman writer’s sense of being culturally contained and “contaminated” manifested itself in metaphors of enclosure and illness, from the
from the poetry of Emily Dickinson to the novels of the Brontë sisters (the title alludes to Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*).

Gilbert and Gubar’s model is useful in understanding the legacy of fear and shame with which twentieth-century women writers have had to contend, as my analysis of *Fear of Flying* has shown. Well into the second decade of the twenty-first century, female authors still experience intense public scrutiny that biases our perception of their work (which is why acclaimed Italian novelist Elena Ferrante has chosen to remain anonymous); they also receive significantly less recognition for their fiction than their male peers, judging from *The New York Times Book Review*. Yet if the anxiety of authorship model seems dated today, it is because twentieth-century women writers have used their fiction to work through it, directly addressing what it means to read and write as a woman in a male literary tradition. Reflecting on the discrepancy between women’s lives and their representation in canonical male texts, these writers heeded (or, more often, anticipated) Adrienne Rich’s invocation to “know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold on us” (19). Their idealism constituted a significant departure from the paralysis that had afflicted their predecessors, a shift that is reflected in literary terms, as the female invalids and ghosts of nineteenth-century women’s novels gave way to the quixotic questers of twentieth-century women’s fiction.

If the “madwoman in the attic” functioned as an index of the twentieth-century woman writer’s self-image under patriarchy, by the twentieth century the quixote had become an apt metaphor for the female author, who sought to “redefine the terms of her socialization” through her fiction. All of the authors represented in this study, even those
who were more influenced by Flaubert than by Cervantes, have used the motif of quixotism to explore a literary woman’s struggle for self-creation. Being born into and part of a male world,” Acker’s female Don Quixote “had no speech of her own;” she could only “read male texts which weren’t hers” and rewrite them, in the hope of accessing a corporeal dimension. In *Menzogna e sortilegio* and *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrida*, the Flaubertian motif of bovaryaeme gives way to Cervantean idealism. Both Elissa de Salvi and Marianna Ucrida—whose first names reveal their status as avatars of their authors: Elisa/Elsa, Maraini/Marianna—reject the fantastic genres of which they were enamored in their youth and turn to memory and imagination as sources of inspiration (and, in Marianna’s case, to the philosophical writings of Hume). Desire exceeds the mimetic trajectory invoked by René Girard in his discussion of *Don Quixote*. While the Don’s distance from his mediator assures that he will never live up to his model, will never be Amadis de Gaul, the twentieth-century woman writer’s desire is quixotic because it persists in the absence of models, of a literary tradition to call her own. Rather than imitate the inimitable, she seeks the not-yet written; rather than live her life according to literary standards, she makes her body a vehicle of transcendence.

Like Quixote and Bovary, twentieth-century women’s heroines inhabit a space between life and literature, a space referred to in psychoanalytic discourse as the

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22 Ellen G. Friedman has contrasted the future-oriented dimension of twentieth-century women’s narratives with the nostalgia of male modernist texts. In “Where Are the Missing Contents? (Post) Modernism, Gender, and the Canon,” Friedman argued that while “the yearning for fathers, for past authority and sure knowledge that can no longer be supported, permeates male texts of modernity,” “women’s works of modernity” “show little nostalgia for the old paternal order and little regret for the no longer presentable” (240, 242). Interestingly, she illustrates her thesis by comparing two quixote narratives, Borges’s “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote” with Acker’s *Don Quixote*, observing that, while both texts foreground gaps in our knowledge of the past, only Acker’s is concerned with “the not-yet presented.”

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imaginary. Since Jacques Lacan published “Le stade du miroir comme formateur de la fonction de Je” [“The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I”], his notion of the imaginary has exerted an enormous influence on literary studies. For Lacan, misrecognition inaugurates identity-formation, a process that is comparable to what a child perceives when he looks into an actual mirror and mistakes the image for his body. Emma Wilson adopts a Lacanian model of the imaginary in *Sexuality and the Reading Encounter: Identity and Desire in Proust, Duras, Tournier, and Cixous* (1996), arguing that reading “privileges identification as scopic activity dependent on the recognition of an (alien) image or series of images which will become constitutive of the self” (5). Her reliance on a Lacanian imaginary leads her not only to conflate the reader with the spectator, but also to conclude that the former is “considerably less free than the death of the author might lead us to suppose,” constrained, in most cases, by “a regulatory matrix of heterosexuality” (56). On the other hand, novels and films that unmask the illusion of stable subject positions attest to “the trauma and pain inherent in the performance of a culturally illegible identity,” an aspect of queer subjectivity which Judith Butler overlooks in her celebratory account of gender instability (47).

Although Wilson does not mention *Don Quixote* and *Madame Bovary*, an absence that is conspicuous given her topic, both novels lend themselves to a Lacanian framework. Alonso Quesada assimilates the image of Amadis de Gaul to his ego, becoming the Knight of the Sad Countenance; he also assimilates the Amadis de Gaul series to his life, turning prostitutes into princesses, windmills into giants, and barber’s basins into helmets. While Bovary’s desire is not strictly mimetic like Quixote’s, images from sentimental eighteenth-century novels constitute her identity at a formative time in
her education, when she is a young woman in a convent. However, the fictions I have analyzed in this study resist Wilson’s post-Lacanian analysis by underscoring the agency of the female subject in her encounter with male texts. Reading serves as more than a means of escape, a compensation for ennui, or a substitute for living; it engenders in women an awareness of possibilities denied to them in literature and in life, opening a window onto a utopian horizon. Perhaps Orlando is absent from Wilson’s consideration of queer novels because it stands as an important exception to her emphasis on the traumatic effects of witnessing gender instability, highlighting the liberating potential of female fantasy. Woolf has fun with the male literary establishment at Vita Sackville-West’s expense, creating a fluid and mobile imaginary. Orlando’s love of reading enables him/her to inhabit multiple subject positions—man/woman, poet/aristocrat, English ambassador/Turkish nomad—and ultimately, to exceed the binary of identity/difference.

Both Italian women’s attempt to create a maternal genealogy and American women’s desire to write from their bodies are at odds with some of the core tenets of Lacanian theory: that entry into the symbolic order requires our separation from our mothers, and that language alienates us from our bodies. Their fictions anticipate the works of late twentieth-century British scholar Jan Campbell, who in “Mediations of the Female Imaginary and Symbolic” (1997) and in Arguing with the Phallus (2000) has drawn from the work of Luce Irigaray to hypothesize the existence of a female imaginary that unites the “real” of the mother’s body with the symbolic realm of language. In “Seeing Gender” (1995) and in “Riflessioni sui corpi logici e illogici delle mie compagne di sesso” (1987), respectively, Kathy Acker and Dacia Maraini have acknowledged the impossibility of locating female subjectivity outside Oedipal paradigms. However, this
impossibility figures as a starting point rather than an unsurpassable limit in their fictions, engendering a sustained quest for an embodied female imaginary.

Gilbert and Gubar have written that the woman writer’s struggle against male authors’ images of her “frequently” requires that she seek “a female precursor who, far from representing a threatening force to be denied or killed, proves by example that a revolt against patriarchal literary authority is possible” (49). Yet, as I have demonstrated in Chapters 3 and 4, Italian women writers have created a novelistic tradition of their own by portraying a woman writer’s attempt to create a maternal genealogy as an impossible quest. Finding a female precursor may also have been more problematic for American feminist authors than they would have liked to admit. While Erica Jong and Dorothy Bryant have acknowledged their debt to Doris Lessing, their fiction tells a different story. Rejecting Lessing’s heroine Anna Wulf because she “cannot come unless she is in love,” Isadora Wing aspires to be a “female Chaucer.” Likewise, Bryant’s Ella Price finds little to admire about the female characters in *The Golden Notebook*: although they are “free, independent women who earn their own living, raise their own children, sleep with whoever they want, make their own rules,” their lives “don’t seem to be much different” from Ella’s since “they’re not really in a position to use influence or power” (88). Likening Lessing’s women to a generation of newly freed slaves, Ella takes as her model Bernard Shaw’s Lavinia (from *Androcles and the Lion*), whom she reads as a proto-feminist heroine. Although Jong and Acker have very different aesthetic visions (Acker satirized Jong’s style of confessional realism in “Hello, my name is Erica Jong”), both have appropriated male discourse to write about female sexuality.
The quixotic ambition motivating the authors of this study was to write fearlessly, as no woman had written before. By “tampering with” the tradition of Cervantes and Flaubert, they realized this ambition. Writing beyond a plot that links voracious reading with disillusionment and death, they leave their endings open, their heroines on the brink of a much-needed transformation: Acker’s female knight awakens, drunk, to the world that lay before her; Ella Price waits for the abortion that will save her life; Isadora Wing soaps herself “ceremoniously” in a bath, turns to face the husband she betrayed. Refusing to surrender their idealism, they find the courage to translate their lives into literature.
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