

A Womb of One's Own: A Wandering Rhetoric

By Lydia McDermott

The womb is an animal which longs to generate children. When it remains barren too long after puberty, it is distressed and sorely disturbed, and straying about in the body and cutting off the passages of the breath, it impedes respiration and brings the sufferer into the extremest anguish and provokes all manner of diseases besides. ...Such is the nature of women and all that is female.

--Plato Timaeus qtd. in Thompson 33-4

But let the embellishment of our style (for I will repeat what I said) be manly, noble, and chaste; let it not affect effeminate delicacy, or a complexion counterfeited by paint, but let it glow with genuine health and vigour.

--Quintilian qtd. in Brody 27

I.

In her 1993 book, *Manly Writing*, Miriam Brody traces the connection of manliness in writing with virtue and truth in rhetoric texts from Quintilian through the twentieth century. Always lurking as the specter in the shadow of a true rhetoric is the figure of the eunuch, adorned in various amounts of deceit/finery depending on the current definition of good writing/rhetoric.¹ Brody writes: "In an intriguing collapse of stylistic and gendered issues, Quintilian claimed that the eunuch deceived, because his body was a

¹ Brody proceeds quite fluidly from advice on oral rhetoric to advice on written rhetoric without noting the differentiation, as Robert Connors has pointed out (*Composition-Rhetoric*). Despite this lapse, the metaphors do persist; their progeny swim forward.

lie. This logic allowed Quintilian to claim that over-ornamented language, like the eunuch, is always the enemy of truth, pretending to be what it is not” (16). The opposite of manly, true rhetoric from Quintilian forward is an effeminate, deceitful rhetoric. Man with phallus/pen intact versus emasculated, de/un-penned man dressed up like a pretty woman. But there is no woman here. The womb has wandered out of rhetoric's reach.

The womb also cannot enter. Robert Con Davis has argued convincingly that Aristotle's conception of form in writing, *logos* in rhetoric, was directly influenced by Ancient Greek figurations of the body. Con Davis's argument is complex, but I will try to summarize the main points here that are related to my developing thesis. In Aristotle's *The Generation of Animals*, Aristotle advances the prevailing argument (as we see in the quote from Plato above) that a woman's body is inferior to a man's. Not only does her womb wander indiscriminately, but also she lacks heat because of a lack of pure blood. More importantly, she has no form, because she lacks sperm. The superior, warm, sperm-producing male body defines form for Aristotle. It is “that which is able to concoct, to cause to take shape or to discharge it” (qtd. in Con Davis 44). Con Davis writes: “The connection here is form (*eidos*) as a natural and intrinsic expression of maleness” (45). A woman could not express form because it is not within the capability of her inferior body. As Con Davis asserts, “The female is alienated from form by her nature as a woman” (49). Additionally, “Aristotle argues quite clearly...that the same form (*eidos*) that is the essence of being male is the form that structures the logical relations of the *hupokeimenon* and scientific inquiry” (49). Good form in science, determined by good *logos* in rhetoric, is unavailable to women because they are women. If we trace the

language Aristotle uses to describe the male's body/form forward, we may find echoes in writing advice through the twentieth century, as Brody points out. What follows are quotes within Brody's argument. I set them here in juxtaposition/parataxis/association. Aristotle values a pattern of "contradiction," binaries with which to assert the superiority of one over the other, naturally (Con Davis 39). Here, I imagine these men in a room nodding heads and talking past one another, agreeing without listening, catching onto the key terms and feeling some solidarity together as men, writing with power/force/sperm.

Adam Smith on Lord Shaftesbury (his eunuch in the shadow): "His weakly state of body ...did not incline him greatly to be of any particular temper ...as he was of no great depth in reasoning, he would be glad to set off by ornament of language what was deficient in matter [read form]. This with the refinement of his temper, directed [him] to make choice of a pompous grand, and ornate style" (qtd. in Brody 50).

Hugh Blair writes: "They who have never studied eloquence...nor have been trained to attend to the genuine and manly beauties of good writing, are always ready to be caught by the mere glare of language" (qtd. in Brody 78).

John Genung's conception of force as “a general vigor and virility of expression wherein every word seems to have its mark and to take deep hold of the author's inner life” (qtd. in Brody 140 my emphasis).

Also Peter Elbow: “Conversely, try to feel that when you write in a mushy, foggy, wordy way, you must be trying to cover something up: message-emasculatation or self-emasculatation. You must be afraid of your strength. Taking away words lets a loud voice stick out. Does it scare you?” (qtd. in Brody 183 my emphasis).

Brody traces Quintilian's conception of “enargeia,” powerful language clearly associated with masculinity, through the centuries under new names: “nativism” for Adam Smith, “vivacity” for George Campbell, “force” for John Genung, and “authentic voice” for Peter Elbow. But enargeia traces back to the sperm in Aristotle's conception of eidos/form, and it is wriggling its way through all the above excerpts in language like “virility,” “strength,” “manliness,” and perhaps even “sticking out” with its phallic potential. The opposite of this ideal form from Quintilian forward, according to Brody, however, is not the female body, but the body of the eunuch: “weakly,” “mushy,” “foggy,” “glaring,” and “ornate.” The eunuch has sacrificed his sperm. He has chosen to imitate the mushy non-form of the woman's body. Is this worse than never having sperm? Or is the female

body/voice/writing/rhetoric just not part of the equation? She is too threatening, with her little animal-womb chomping at the bit.

The womb on the outskirts of this discussion of form/good writing is the silence of the differend of man/eunuch, good manly writing/rhetoric vs. deceitful effeminate writing/rhetoric. Here, I draw on Victor Vitanza's discussion of Lyotard's conception of a *differend*:

As we will eventually see, in a litigation, which is determined by cognitive rules and regimens, often a differend is created, and silence is created; but the creation of this differend and its state, silence, “does not impose the silence of forgetting”; on the contrary, the differend “indicate[s] that something [variously referred to as a 'feeling' and a 'sign'] which should be able to be put into phrases cannot be phrased in the accepted idioms” (1988a, 56). And, therefore, it is necessary to bear witness to this silence and consequent sign/feeling, and to discover idioms for them. (Vitanza 39)

The differend is a stand-off in the presence of a silence on the tip of the tongue. Something begs to be said, but cannot find the words. If writing is figured as solely manly, be it a good man or an ornate effeminate man, a differend is created in the silence of the woman that is not entering the discourse. The wandering womb is floating around the room. I want to bear witness to the womb. I want to discover the idioms to

illuminate/reverberate this silence. I want to embrace a logos and form that wanders like a womb. And I want the womb to have a voice.

II. A Collage: Foremothers: A Womb of One's Own

I must contend with Cixous. Is *écriture féminine* the idiom I am looking for? Perhaps, but I am concerned with the physical, embodied presence of the womb, as well as her metaphorical implications for writing and somehow I find Cixous lacking. After all, Aristotle was concerned with the womb's physical presence, its wandering, and the female body's lack of form/sperm as analogically related to her inability to discourse. Quintilian conceived of the eunuch's body as discourse: a lie embodied. Here the womb inter/dis/e-rupts.

Cixous agrees with Con Davis (in a retrograde motion in time²): “Nearly the entire history of writing is confounded with the history of reason, of which it is at once the effect, the support, and one of the privileged alibis. It has been one with the phallogocentric tradition. It is indeed that same self-admiring, self-stimulating, self-congratulatory phallogocentrism” (“The Laugh of the Medusa” 879). Sperm begets sperm begets more sperm, and then we have form and reason. My prick salutes your prick; I'm prickly all over.

² Perhaps, it makes more sense to say that Con Davis agrees with Cixous, in chronological time. Of course, I'm imagining a conversation between texts that has not taken place until now, so I suppose I can also imagine people agreeing across space, time, and languages. Laughing with each other.

Cixous outlines two levels of realizing a “new insurgent writing” in her essay, “The Laugh of the Medusa.” The first is a writing of and through the body/self: “By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her ...Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time” (880).

I must now contend with Virginia: “she [a young professional writer self of Woolf's] had thought of something, something about the body, about the passions which it was unfitting for her as a woman to say ...She could write no more” (245). Woolf's body silenced her. Did her silence suffocate her? She laments, near the end of her life, that her body always had been silent: “The first--killing the Angel in the House--I think I solved. She died. But the second, telling the truth about my own experiences as a body, I do not think I solved” (245). So Woolf's second objective becomes Cixous's first level of *écriture féminine*. Has woman's writing progressed? Does the Angel still lurk in any dark dusty corners? Woolf describes this angel: “She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life” and when Virginia dared to write a review of a male author, this Angel tried to advise her, “Be sympathetic; be tender; flatter; deceive; use all the arts and wiles of our sex” (243). Use the eunuch's rhetoric to deceive, she whispers. Pretend to be the woman he pretends to be. Let no real women speak.

Woolf says she killed this Angel, but if she could not access her body in writing, then the differend remains. The woman's body, the womb, remains on the tip of her drowned tongue. “A woman with this trouble might miss up to two menstrual periods because her

uterus had lodged between the lungs, and in this condition the text says flatly, 'she cannot survive' because the accumulated menstrual fluid will fill the lungs and drown her" (Con Davis 46).³ Adrienne Rich writes of Woolf three decades later:

I was astonished at the sense of effort, of pains taken, of dogged tentativeness, in the tone of that essay [A Room of One's Own]. And I recognized that tone. I had heard it often enough, in myself and in other women. It is the tone of a woman almost in touch with her anger, who is determined not to appear angry, who is willing herself to be calm, detached, and even charming in a roomful of men...(Rich 271)

The Angel appears to have survived, and continued to charm, not only in Woolf's texts, but also in the tone that Rich recognizes as all too familiar. Not only has the Angel survived, the Eunuch and the manly man are still engaged in fisticuffs and ignoring her. If the Angel still works at the "wiles of her sex" which are really the wiles of the eunuch, then the woman behind the Angel, the body behind the writing, the womb behind the rhetoric, the anger behind the charm is still silent.

Cixous's second level:

An act that will also be marked by woman's seizing the occasion to speak, hence her shattering entry into history, which has always been based on her suppression. To write

³ "Woolf struggled with her own mind all her life. In 1941, when the mental illness she had fought for years returned, she drowned herself in the Ouse River near her cottage in Rondell, England" (Ritchie and Ronald 241).

and thus to forge for herself the antilogos weapon. To become at will the taker and initiator, for her own right, in every symbolic system, in every political process. (880 emphasis in original)

This deserves unpacking, even as I wince at the term and its academic cache. Unraveling? Exploring? Wandering through? I am immediately struck by the rhetoricity of this passage. Finding the occasion to speak is a classical rhetorical impulse, but it has never been available to women.⁴ According to Cixous, history has been “based on her [woman's] suppression.” I would add rhetoric itself and the very logoi that Cixous wishes to destroy. According to Con Davis, this conception of form and logoi could not have existed without women's suppression. So Cixous is in accord. We recognize the difference that has been created by this discourse and its silent observer's name is woman/womb. Cixous calls women to “become at will the taker and initiator [read “grand concocter, sperm-spewer, form-giver”].” We must will ourselves to become; not the willing that Rich recognizes, which stifles emotion and evicts the womb. We will become takers. What will we take? Form? Sperm? We will become initiators? And what will we initiate? Not a sperm economy, for we have forged an “antilogos weapon,” a spermicide. We will take and initiate with our forged weapon, this writing Cixous describes, within all symbols and all politics. The womb will be there, in the room, in every room.

Is *écriture féminine* the idiom I am looking for? Perhaps, but I am concerned with the physical, embodied presence of the womb, as well as her metaphorical implications for writing. In “Sorties” Cixous writes: “First I sense femininity in writing by: a privilege of

⁴ See Robert Connors on how decidedly women were shut out (up?) of rhetoric.

voice: writing and voice are entwined and interwoven and writing's continuity/voice's rhythm take each other's breath away through interchanging, make the text gasp or form it out of suspenses and silences, make it lose its voice or rend it with cries" (285). This I agree with utterly, viscerally, but why? In a footnote to her chapter "Interpreting the Silent 'Aryan Model' of Histories of Classical Rhetoric," Kathleen Welch writes: "The hierarchy that print has enjoyed over sound (one kind of literacy over one kind of orality) has led to the marginalization of, in the United States, African-American aspects of our cultures and Native American aspects of our cultures" (48). And women. I understand and believe Bob Connors when he writes of the denial of oral rhetoric to women and the ensuing rise of "composition-rhetoric" as largely spurred by the introduction of women into the academy. Rhetoric must be confined to writing if we are going to let women learn it. Heaven forbid they use them fightin' words. But her orality, (and yes, African American, and American Indian, Hispanic, etc. ...) her voice was subsumed; was never valued. The womb's voice is on the tip of our collective tongue, and has been repeatedly swallowed. So voice in text is not just a vestige of oral rhetoric's superior position over composition-rhetoric (see Bowden). It can be the voice that never was: "There is not that scission, that division made by the common man between the logic of oral speech and the logic of text, bound as he is by his antiquated relation--servile, calculating--to mastery" ("Laugh" 881). Yes, Hélène.

But the womb, itself, I have not heard here. For Cixous the avenue of body-writing is erotic, mirrors the female experience of sex: "Because she arrives, vibrant, over and again" ("Laugh" 882). As she comes back again in sex, so she comes back again in

writing. The form/logos is recursive like a female orgasm. The metaphorical possibilities here are lovely, but I am troubled because I think the womb is still wandering in the ether and not on the page. Cixous writes: "When I say 'woman,' I'm speaking of woman in her inevitable struggle against conventional man; and of a universal woman subject who must bring women to their senses and to their meaning in history" ("Laugh" 875-6). But this, I cannot swallow.

Alice Walker invokes Virginia Woolf in her essay "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens," but she adds some physical specificity, a material specificity I find lacking in Cixous. Walker quotes Woolf [and inserts her own parentheticals in square brackets] {and I insert some of my own in curly brackets}:

[A]ny woman born with a great gift {a womb} in the sixteenth century [insert "eighteenth century," insert "black woman," insert "born or made a slave"] would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage {in the river down the road from the cottage?} outside the village, half witch, half wizard [insert "Saint"], feared and mocked at {ignored for her charm}. For it needs little skill and psychology to be sure that a highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift for poetry {rhetoric} would have been so thwarted and hindered by contrary instincts {the eunuch and the penis in a boxing match} [add "chains, guns, the lash, the ownership of one's own body by someone else,

submission to an alien religion”], that she must have lost her health and sanity {womb wandered into the brain?} to a certainty. (qtd. in Walker 317)

Not all wombs are created equal. Woman is not universal, even under patriarchy. We are women, various and wandering, and all our constraints and histories/hysterics are not the same. Yet we can listen to each other. Alice Walker speaks to Phyllis Wheatley: “It is not so much what you sang, as that you kept alive, in so many of our ancestors, the notion of song” (318). Yes, this notion of song is important. Yes, this voice, this song. But no, Alice, the what is also important, as you point out so well in your rewriting of Woolf.

I want a womb to wander in, a room to wonder in. I want to hear/write the womb-stories we are missing. Speak, Fido, Speak!

III. Collage Two: Grandmothers / Wondering Wombs:

My grandmother on my mother’s side, Mimi, was diagnosed with “infantile uterus”⁵and was unable to conceive. My mother was adopted. My other grandmother, Big Red, called herself the ugly one in relation to her sister, Dot, who was mentally retarded and diagnosed as schizophrenic. She was the pretty one. I wonder at the power of the naming here.

⁵ This must have been in the 1930s, so she would have been diagnosed through a pelvic exam. Apparently such a diagnosis has fallen by the wayside for its lack of accurate descriptive possibility. Additionally, what was normally diagnosed as “infantile” usually could conceive, so my grandmother probably had a mullerian abnormality that prevented conception (see <http://mulleriananomalies.blogspot.com/2007/12/what-are-different-types-of-mullerian.html>>)

...how our language has trapped as well as liberated us, how the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative, and how we can begin to see and name--and therefore live—afresh. (Rich 270)

What did it mean to Amelia to have a doctor call her uterus “infantile”? Not just small, but baby-like? Whiny and immature. Mimi had a dependent personality, an infantile womb. My grandfather had to take care of her, drive for her, baby her. When my mother came along, she was jealous that another baby got the attention.

I have had three children now. Each a cesarean section. At my first son's birth, the OB, Cricket/Dr. Cricket, who was called in after 23 hours of labor with a midwife, told me my cervix was funny-shaped. No babies coming out that way.

The Catholic Church played a significant role in Mimi's conception of the utility of her womb/of her existence. My grandfather had gone to seminary. He dropped out when he fell in love with Amelia while ministering the sacrament to her in a TB hospital. The Catholic Church played a significant role in Big Red's womb as well. When Big Red got drunk she lamented “that coat hanger” Robert had used. Oh that coat hanger.

My mother tells me this story now in close juxtaposition to her talk of working in a Catholic crisis pregnancy center, and offering me “natural” family planning advice, since another c-section could be risky for my health. *Mimi told my mother when she was a little girl that she was a punishment from God. Amelia could not bear children; how dare she relish her sexuality, with her little baby-like womb? My mother was her punishment, she said. What did that do to my mother's conception of her own sexuality/body/womb?*

I got an IUD for the first time recently, after my third child. The doctor wanted to insert it while having an ultrasound to make sure she did not wound my battered womb. The experience felt a bit like a sci-fi film. The speculum glowed a light blue light in the dim room. My uterus was projected on a big screen TV in front of me so I could watch the little metal T find its place in me. Truly cyborgian. The doctor actually said, "Ready to deploy" before she inserted the IUD. Looking at the T in the little room of my womb, I felt empty. The only times I've had ultrasounds, there were babies to see in there. I'd never looked at my womb in its non-pregnant form before. The ultrasound was disappointing. I was displaced. What was I looking at? Not a fetus, but the space inside me projected outside me by a miracle of man-made sound and technology; a space of conception that had not conceived; a space that would reject sperm/form; a space of formless potential. This womb is a part of me that represents neither the erotic sexuality of Cixous, nor the maternity expected by Aristotle. This was the hysterical body that Woolf could not write. This is an opening.

IV. "Because she arrives, vibrant, over and again"

What am I looking for? What am I arguing for? A womb-rhetoric/womb-writing. I want to discover the idioms to illuminate/reverberate this silence. I want to embrace a logos and form that wanders like a womb. And I want the womb to have a voice. I want to bear witness to the womb. Aristotle values a pattern of "contradiction," binaries with which to assert the superiority of one over the other, naturally (Con Davis 39). I am looking for parataxis/juxtaposition, an associative, recursive logos: "To write and thus to forge for herself the antilogos weapon" (Cixous "Laugh" 880). Not anti-logos, exactly, but

spermicide, yes. I want to write and forge a different logos, a womb-infused logos. The form/logos is recursive like a female orgasm. The metaphorical possibilities here are lovely, but I am troubled because I think the womb is still wandering in the ether and not on the page.

The womb cannot enter. It is by nature deceitful and unhealthy. We must will ourselves to become: "Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time" (Cixous "Laugh" 880). The Angel whispers in our ears, "Use the eunuch's rhetoric to deceive. Pretend to be the woman he pretends to be. Let no real women speak." Danger, dear writer, danger, dear reader! If the Angel still works at the "wiles of her sex" which are really the wiles of the eunuch, then the woman behind the Angel, the body behind the writing, the womb behind the rhetoric, the anger behind the charm is still silent.

And I want the womb to have a voice: "It is the tone of a woman almost in touch with her anger, who is determined not to appear angry, who is willing herself to be calm, detached, and even charming in a roomful of men" (Rich 271). Not this tone--an unleashing of the animal, of the womb-anger. Our wombs are angry. They have been dissected, appropriated, blamed, and thrown away. We must will ourselves to become. If writing is figured as solely manly, be it a good man or an ornate effeminate man, a differend is created in the silence of the woman that is not entering the discourse. The wandering womb is floating around the room. I want to bear witness to the womb.

Have I begun to will my womb to become here on paper? I am not looking for a universal Woman's discourse/rhetoric. I'm searching for writing/rhetoric that enacts the body as it speaks the body. Even more specifically, I want to bear witness to the womb. I want to find the idioms to express her. She is chomping, chomping at the bit---still.

Calling all wombs! I want to pursue this writing/rhetoric and research, and I want others to do so too. This is an opening. I want the womb to have a voice. I want to bear witness to the womb. I want to encounter other witnesses, wombs.

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