

**“WOMAN
DOES
NOT
EXIST”**

Jacques Lacan



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Woman does not exist.
Neither does the conference argument
of the WAP's Great International
Online Conversation.

But there will be many debates, readings,
discussions, that shall be taken on one by one,
in tune with the logic that Lacan called
the "not-all".

Our first appointment is in the following pages
with "Woman does not exist"
by Christiane Alberti,
Chair of the WAP's Great International
Online Conversation.

“Woman Does Not Exist”

by CHRISTIANE ALBERTI

Chair of the WAP's Great International Online Conversation

A wind has risen. Women's voices are emerging everywhere, breaking a silence that has come from afar. They are legitimately proclaiming their desire for equality and freedom, denouncing sexist injustices and violence against women. Psychoanalysis plays its part in this movement.

Freudian Logic (– φ)

Women are at the origin of psychoanalysis. Listening to them, Freud made heard an unheard voice regarding their love lives and sexual lives, at a time when they were seen only as progenitors. But he bears the mark of his time and “the tradition of a long past”. Today we would say that the Freudian conception of femininity is phallogentric. Indeed, Freud settled on the phallus as a symbol of castration in order to consider the feminine. In the unconscious, the feminine being would be irremediably marked by lack, affected by a minus sign. This point of view is rooted in the imprinting power (an infantile memory) of the imaginary comparison of the male and female bodies, which creates a belief in an absence on the female side and in the castration of the mother. From this *having*, it would follow that the man thinks of himself as complete, while the other sex would be marked by an irremediable incompleteness with its share of disappointment, demands, avidity, and eternal rivalry between men and women.

This is what has shocked many feminists: to find in Freud's writing the most insufferable *topos* that makes of woman a deprived being, endowed with a sentiment of inferiority.

This logic, which consists in imagining that Œdipus for the girl begins from its masculine version, leads to a tortuous path towards femininity. Freud himself was aware of the limits of this approach – for women as well as for men – as he came up against the enigma of femininity, which cannot be resolved by the castration complex. Hence Lacan's trenchant words: “To appreciate the true audacity of his step, we have only to consider his reward, which was not long in coming: the stalemate regarding the heteroclitite nature of the castration complex”¹. Wasn't the famous *refusal* of femininity to be read otherwise? This will be Lacan's way.

Occultation of the Feminine Principle “We can't take the father anymore.”

Lacan first formalised the Freudian Œdipus through the linguistic reduction of the myth, with the Name of the Father and the paternal metaphor. Through this operation of symbolisation, the Name of the Father replaces the unknown (x) of the desire of the mother and gives it a meaning. The subject is thus led to a normalised relation with desire by submitting to

1. Lacan J., *The Subversion of the Subject and Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious*, in *Écrits, The First Complete Edition in English*, Transl. with notes B. Fink, New York & London: W.W. Norton & Co., 2006, p. 695.

▶ the symbolic Law. The effect of the metaphor is to engage the subjects to think, enjoy, and reproduce, etc., within the norms of the classically accepted ideals of their sex.

During this time of structuralism, Lévi-Strauss theorised that women are engaged as objects of exchange between fundamentally androcentric lineages. Lacan shifts away from this conception. He had no problem pointing out that there is something “unacceptable” in the position of the woman, which is due to her “position as an object”² even though, on the other hand she is – as well as man – entirely submitted to the symbolic order. He sees in this “the [...] conflictual character [...] without remedy, of her position – the symbolic order literally subdues her, transcends her”³. In this regime of “all men”⁴, of which he has no hesitation in describing as Proudhonian, the attempt to assign her to a place (wife, mother, daughter, etc.) is doomed to failure and never fails to provoke revolt. A part of the feminine does not manage to find its place in the world – it is truly impossible to situate, and this is not new!

Lacan took this part into account very early on, going against a psychoanalysis that guaranteed “peace in the home” that would reduce the woman to the mother and the man to the child. How better to say that the supremacy of the father at the foundation of our culture has an inverse side that Lacan formulated as “the occultation of the feminine principle under the masculine ideal”⁵.

Semblants

This formalisation led him, in a second phase, to reduce *the* father not to a name but to a func-

tion, which makes a plurality of supports possible: *the Names* of the Father. In fact, Lacan had already diagnosed the decline of the all-powerful father in the 1930s. There is no *the* Father, but a swarm of signifiers (master signifiers) capable of naming the modes of jouissance of an era. This pluralisation accounts for contemporary mutations and in particular for the great diversity of sexual life: each one invents his or her own way of enjoying [*de jouir*] and of loving by asserting a name for the scenarios that dethrone Œdipus as the sole solution to desire.

All of this Œdipal symbolic architecture, built on images and signifiers, is nothing more than a fiction in which the character of semblance is revealed, the value and use of which Lacan has advanced. The phallus, an emblem of symbolic power that the father delivers as an ideal, is also merely a semblant with which both men and women dress, according to a virilisation or feminisation of appearance (*paraître, par-être*) to treat the sexual.

Lacan had thus anticipated the era of the gender fluidity that has swept away the man/woman binary. Men, women and genders of all kinds are first of all beings of language. Fatherhood, and very soon now motherhood and marriage, are becoming mere fictions. There is no reason to believe in all these signifying “mummeries”⁶ to the bitter end, says a Voltairian Lacan poking fun at the artificiality of language – all the while demonstrating their usefulness as semblants.

But there is more. The voice of women in analysis will push him to draw out all the full consequences on the structuring and the forms of desire. Lacan ▶

2. Lacan J., *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book II, The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*, Transl. S. Tomaselli with notes by J. Forrester, New York & London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1991, p. 262.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*

5. Lacan J., « Les complexes familiaux dans la formation de l'individu. Essai d'analyse d'une fonction en psychologie », *Autres écrits*, Paris, Seuil, 2001, p. 84. Unpublished in English

6. Miller J.-A., *In Le Parlement de Montpellier*, UFORCA Study-Days of the 21st & 22nd of May 2011. Unpublished.

▶ is led to take into account a dissonance between, on the one hand, the sexuated positions defined in the Other which lend themselves to all sorts of signifying slippages, and, on the other hand, the particular *plus-de-jouir* of each one, which arises from a great inertia. In other words, from the perspective of discourses there is a tension between the collectivising and idealising master-signifier S_1 , and a , the object of jouissance.

Subsequently Lacan will go beyond this tension between S_1 and a , derivatives of the phallus, to engage on the path of a supplementary jouissance that resists sexual meaning.

Sexuation

Lacan introduced the term *sexuation* to indicate the subjective element of choice, dependent on what he called *the formulas of sexuation*. These formulas give reference points as to the possible way of accommodating oneself in sex, beyond the stereotypical designation of man/woman. Thus, in his Seminar *Encore*, he states this choice in terms of the "so-called man portion"⁷ or the "so-called woman portion".

The "so-called man portion" permits *any* subject to lodge themselves under the regime of castration, in the sense of the limit that the function of language instates. The regime of lack, therefore, is in fact situated here on the male side! The experience of the body that corresponds to it is that of a jouissance limited to the phallic organ, localised, felt as outside the body. This part therefore delimits the world of sexuality where one loves and desires the other with the help of the fantasy: one can only mentally enjoy [*jouir*] the body of the Other ($\$ \diamond a$).

The "so-called woman portion" does not respond to any universal but only to a contingent relation to the phallus. It is not all caught up in the phallic dimension, because, at the root of this *not-all* Lacan postulates a properly feminine jouissance: an ineffable jouissance of the body, without form or reason. If we say it is "improperly" feminine, it is in the sense that it is feminine sexuality that gives the best insight into it: in imaginary terms, the Freudian *dark continent* or the *oceanic feeling*; in logical terms, the infinite or the not-all. It is indeed the image of a jouissance "enveloped in its own contiguity"⁸, which, as early as the *Guiding Remarks for a Convention on Female Sexuality*, indicated the relationship to the infinite. Its effects of limitlessness are found in particular in mysticism or in forms of self-abandonment, which escape the framework offered by the fantasy.

This so-called woman part is incommensurate with any ideal, because it is not inscribed in the order of values, but rather in unicity. It is a mode of jouissance that makes of each woman an exception and who, as such, cannot be collectivised. This is why there is no name that could constitute the set of "all women". Lacan writes this lack of a name as $S(\mathbf{A})$. Being outside language, this jouissance does not allow docking to any identification; one does not recognise oneself in it, so much so that Lacan will say that it induces the feeling of being *Other* for oneself. That which responds to this lack in the Other is the exigency for speech of love – it is the only possible way of supplementation.

These signifying structures of the body make it possible to delineate the differentiated forms of love and desire, fetishistic or erotomaniac, ▶

7. Cf. Lacan J., *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XX, Encore*, Transl. B. Fink, New York & London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1998, p. 80.

8. Lacan J., *Guiding Remarks for a Convention on Female Sexuality*, in *Écrits*, op. cit. p. 619.

▶ according to whether they privilege the path of the object or of love as a condition of *jouissance*.

The decisive step taken by Lacan is to have posited that while women are confronted with this supplementary *jouissance* without any actual mediation, they do not have a monopoly on it. It also applies to men. What Lacan called the *feminine principle* can thus be generalised to men and is illuminated as the principle of a *jouissance* that supports itself beyond phallic meaning: it gives *jouissance* its most profound status.

Contemporary Aspiration to Femininity

By declaring “Woman does not exist”⁹, Lacan anticipated a question, if not the major question of the contemporary world: Yes, there are women! And how! They are everywhere. Men have not gotten over it, and neither have women. The strongest resistance, in the colours of delirium and rage from both men and women, consists in wanting to reduce this aspiration to femininity to the androcentric order. Jacques-Alain Miller sees in this aspiration one of the most profound phenomena of our civilisation: “The great fractures between the old order and the new order that we are witnessing can be deciphered, at least in part, as the male order retreating before the feminine protest.”¹⁰ The feminine, the growing importance of which J.-A. Miller highlights, is not of the order of a new Master, because, as we have seen, as such, it escapes all mastery and all knowledge.

In wanting to “put the phallus away”, did Lacan not precede, in a sense, the neo-feminists of today who would like to free themselves from sexual meaning such as it is commonly accepted in the Other? Beyond the various transforma-

tions that neo-feminism has undergone since the 1970s, oscillating from political feminism (known as the Dominance approach) to the feminism of bodies (“pro sex”), the feminine has always insisted. Today, it appears as a fundamental issue that outclasses gender theories. By wanting to “undo gender assignment”, these theories have denied the signifier *woman*.

At the heart of this movement, the recent attempts seeking to reform language have come up against the functioning of speech and language. Is this effort not vain, as it is impossible to speak outside of gender and outside of the body, except to be returned to silence? The path of the letter, outside of meaning, advocated by Lacan, appears to be much more fertile, opening up a new perspective on feminisation.

As it runs out of steam in the hunt for semblants, in any case suspect of being prescribed by the Other, another trend in contemporary neo-feminism is making a lot of noise. In search of a greater ontological consistency of femininity, in an attempt to control *jouissance*, this trend situates the political combat in the very place of the female body. In particular, in order to better free itself from male power it militates in favour of a political lesbianism. Is the false *sorority* of bodies that results from this not a fictitious outcome based ultimately on the imaginary of bodies?

Lacan followed another path from that of discourse. Radically subversive of tradition, it found its source in the speech of analysts and of analysands.

The definition of femininity causes us disquiet. The being that speech gives us is meagre and elusive, which leads us to a passion for the right ▶

9. “La femme n'ex-siste pas » [Woman does not ex-ist]: Lacan J., *Television* [...], New York & London: W.W. Norton & Co., p. 38.

10. Miller J.-A., *Progrès en psychanalyse assez lents* [Progress in psychoanalysis [is] rather slow], *La Cause freudienne*, n° 78, 2011, p. 197. Unpublished in English.

▶ word that would finally enounce authentic feminine being. Isn't it this that can push a woman to seek in analysis a ground that is less elusive? Yet Lacan will say of women: "Everything can be said, even stemming from [the] without reason."¹¹ On this path, analysis leads beyond the fictions to which the Other has assigned us, to the encounter with the contingency of the signifiers that have governed our lives.

Beyond the fantasmatic stopper that compensates for our ontological lack, analysis brings to light the experience of what Lacan calls sex as such, based on the logic of not-all. It is equipped with a network more fundamental than that of the phantasm, more stable than the values of gender, stronger than anything else, where we truly exist and in a unique way. It is the way of the *symptom* which, in this sense, feminises us.

That there are *women* and not *The Woman* does not mean that their existence precedes

their essence, but that it "dispenses with the essence of femininity"¹², according to the formula of J.-A. Miller. What can we learn about this from the experience of analysis? What can we extract from the feminine principle of today's cures, those of women as well as those of men? We would benefit from giving Lacan's mathemes of the masculine or feminine forms of desire, $\phi(a)$ and $A(\phi)$ respectively, their current value. This is what we can expect from The WAP's Great International Online Conversation, which will have to risk everything since... *Woman does not exist!*

C. A.

Translation: Raphael Montague

Reviewed by Pamela King

Watch the conference argument on the WAP's YouTube channel.

11. Lacan J., *L'étourdit*, in *Autres écrits*, op. cit., p. 466.

12. Miller J.-A., *Liminaire*, in *Ornicar?* No. 22-23, Spring 1981, p. 1. Unpublished in English.

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