

# INCEST AND AGENCY IN ELIZABETH'S ENGLAND

Maureen Quilligan



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Elizabeth's England*

Maureen Quilligan

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*to*

*Nancy J. Vickers*

*In honor of the friendship that first began rewriting*

*the Renaissance almost thirty year ago*

*In anticipation of recreations to come*

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## Halting the Traffic in Women: Theoretical Foundations

WE HAVE BEEN TAUGHT BY feminist scholarship that women are constrained by family structures; we have taken this as a foundational principle of arguments for the liberation of women, at least in part because we have so poorly understood the activities women have actually undertaken within kinship structures in traditional societies. If, however, we understand that traditional family and kinship structures may be radically different from our own, we may see how family rank could work to empower highly placed women rather than to limit them. In the sixteenth century the family dynasty became far more pivotal in political arrangements in absolutist Europe than it had been throughout the cloistered Middle Ages, a development that would make the Renaissance aristocratic family a potential site of real agency for women.

Before scrutinizing at a theoretical level exactly how and why traditional kinship structure might endow elite females with agency by means of an endogamous halt in what we have come to call “the traffic in women,” it will be helpful to look at a specific example of the incest taboo in a text which is central to the culture of the Renaissance. No text can be more canonical than *King Lear*; more important, the play clearly lays out for us the tragedy which occurs when proper intergenerational relations are not observed. *King Lear* outlines the profound dangers to the culture when men and women fail to abide by the law against incest.

### The Cultural Paradigm: Cordelia’s Silence

In the opening scene of *King Lear*, Cordelia’s refusal to speak demonstrates by *negative* example how authoritative female speech in the Renaissance is linked with, indeed may be enabled by, the discourse of incest. Unlike her

voluble sisters Goneril and Regan, who claim to love their father inordinately, Cordelia refuses to trespass beyond the natural bond of a daughter to a parent. When Lear orders her to prove that she loves him more than her sisters do (and they have just said they love him more than they love their husbands), her unwillingness to answer affirms her appropriate and natural position as a woman, daughter, and potential wife. Asked if she has nothing to add to her terse reply, her first response is the single word “Nothing.” If this looks to the modern eye like a radical defiance of patriarchal authority, the modern eye is fooled by its own assumptions. Indeed, after her sisters have professed an all-transcending love for their father (if they really meant what they said, their feelings would be incestuous), Cordelia speaks to (and for) the Renaissance audience: “What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent” (I.i.64). Cordelia here enunciates the silence which is the most appropriate kind of speech for a dutiful woman.

Prodding her to greater eloquence about an entirely inappropriate love for him, King Lear tells her to “Speak again.” In her answer, she makes a noteworthy parallel between her taciturnity and the proper distinctions of love relationships.

Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave  
My heart into my mouth. I love your Majesty  
According to my bond, no more nor less. (I.i.93–94)

Cordelia here stresses her “bond,” which naturally limits her love for her father. When Lear further pleads that she “mend” her speech “a little,” she answers only to point out the transgression against matrimonial norms that her sisters have hypocritically committed for their own venal purposes.

Why have my sisters husbands, if they say  
They love you all? (I.i.101–2)

Incest haunts this play’s subplot: Gloucester’s eyes are gouged out on stage, and his Oedipus-like punishment betrays the presence of familial transgression within the play. But while in its opening scene, Cordelia does not accuse her sisters (or her father) of anything but a hypocritical language of incest, she *is* implying that Goneril and Regan are transgressing (or would be if they weren’t lying) their own proper and natural “bonds” by saying they love their father more than their husbands. Cordelia’s complaint against her sisters, moreover, succinctly outlines what the incest taboo is culturally meant to accomplish, that is (according to Claude Lévi-Strauss) to extend patriarchal alliances across social groups by making

a bond between men, here the daughter's father and her husband. Cordelia sums up the proper traffic:

Happily, when I shall wed,  
That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry  
Half my love with him, half my care and duty.  
Sure I shall never marry like my sisters,  
To love my father all. (I.i.106–10)

The rights and affections between the two men (father and husband) meet, as they should, in the woman: she becomes the bond between them. Cordelia thus identifies her sisters' unnatural infractions as a monstrous transgression against the necessary traffic in women.<sup>1</sup>

It is possible to trace Lear's tragedy to his disastrous interruption of the normal patterns of inheritance by daughters (who traditionally get equal portions), and to his incestuous preference for his youngest daughter (on whose "kind nursery" he intends to rely, thus making her into a caregiving mother). We must, however, postpone until a later chapter a fuller discussion of this play.<sup>2</sup> The important point here is that Cordelia's predicament offers us with admirable clarity the cultural paradigm in Renaissance society within which any attempt to claim female agency had to work. Cordelia's stance in the opening scene as *silent* daughter formulaically explicates what the ideal woman was perceived to be. Her silence *is* her cultural obedience and equals her refusal to claim agency for herself. Anthropological theory, as we shall see, has struggled to articulate how the necessary passivity of female desire translates into lack of access to speech. Lévi-Strauss famously leaves the female ability to manipulate language as the foundation of a great mystery. Cordelia's insistence on her own "silence" categorically underscores the connection between speechlessness and an acceptance of the female's nature to be traded out. The ideal woman in the patriarchal society of the English Renaissance is chaste, obedient, and most of all *silent*.

We must be careful not to be misled into thinking Cordelia's defiance of her father means that she is claiming agency for herself. She may seem to be doing just that, especially to post-nineteenth-century audiences, and thus to be the most independent and "modern" of the sisters. However, we must pay the closest possible attention to what she actually says: she mouths a thoroughly conservative statement of what women should do in her society. They should have no independent desires; they should provide the bond between men. They should remain chaste, silent, and obedient.

The bond must be appropriate, neither too endogamous (by marrying her husband's brother, Gertrude—like Catherine of Aragon—turns Hamlet's Denmark into "a couch for luxury and damnéd incest"), nor too exogamous (Brabantio cannot believe his mild, quiet, "still" daughter Desdemona would "fall in love with what she feared to look on!"—the Moor Othello—"in spite of nature, of years, of country, credit, everything").

Although they seem defiant to us, Desdemona and Cordelia closely follow the models of proper conduct for Renaissance womanhood. Compare Desdemona's and Cordelia's defenses of their seeming disobedience. Desdemona explains to Brabantio:

My noble father, I do perceive I have a divided duty.  
To you I am bound for life and education.  
My life and education both do learn me  
How to respect you. You are the lord of duty,  
I am hitherto your daughter. But here's my husband,  
And so much duty as my mother showed  
To you, preferring you to her father,  
So much I challenge that I may profess  
Due to the Moor my lord. (*Othello*, I.3.180–88)

Cordelia sounds the same:

Good my lord,  
You have begot me, bred me, loved me,  
I return those duties back as are right fit—  
Obey you, love you, and most honour you.  
Why have my sisters husbands if they say  
They love you all? (*Lear*, I.i.97–102)

Asked by Emilia to "Speak again . . . O sweet mistress, speak!" to accuse her murderer ("Who has done this deed?"), Desdemona softly answers, "Nobody." Asked by Lear, "What is't thou sayest?—Her voice was ever soft, / Gentle, and low, an excellent thing in women," Cordelia's lips are still. She begins *Lear* by choosing silence. After she accuses her sisters, contrasting their unnatural and hypocritical hyperbole with her own sense of the boundaries to the duty she owes her father, she is banished from the stage. She marries and leaves the country. (Significantly, she is the only daughter with marriage proposals from *outside* the kingdom—France and Burgundy—as if these foreign marriage partners were there to underscore the exogamy she prefers.) Thereafter, she speaks very little. Cordelia's taciturnity thus marks at the opening of the play an association of appropriate

female silence with a woman's perfect and passive willingness to be exchanged. In the contrast between Cordelia's onstage taciturnity (followed by her off-stage silence) and the garrulous horror with which her sisters' swell into perverted authority, *King Lear*—and the culture of which it is a part—imagines female agency as a monstrous growth predicated on incestuous female desire. Cordelia's return at the head of a foreign army in act IV insists further on the problematic association of female agency with incest, for she invades the kingdom less as her husband's wife than as her father's daughter. Indeed, as Richard McCabe has usefully pointed out, "Once she appears to love [Lear] 'all,' his vision of future bliss excludes all thought of [her husband] France." Lear dreams of a paradise for two even in prison, "we two alone," singing like birds in a cage.<sup>3</sup> His boast, "Have I caught you now?" reminds us of his desire for his daughter's nursery at the play's opening.

Shakespeare's two quietest heroines articulate by their silence the symmetrical boundaries stabilized by the incest taboo. Judith Butler has recently pointed out the parallel nature of the interdiction against excessive endogamy and exogamy in the incest taboo: "there must be exogamy. But there must also be a limit to exogamy; that is, marriage must be outside the clan but not outside a certain racial self-understanding. . . . Cornered . . . between a compulsory heterosexuality and a prohibited miscegenation, something called culture, saturated with the anxiety and identity of dominant European whiteness, reproduces itself in and as universality itself."<sup>4</sup> Between them, Cordelia and Desdemona articulate the parallel nature of their predicaments. Cordelia is finally punished for acceding to her father's incestuous desires; Desdemona is punished for going beyond the cultural boundary of color-based racial difference, which is (I would argue) historically instantiated in the play itself, when Othello is taught how to speak its discourse. Strangely we misread both heroines' crises because we do not listen to what they are actually saying: each announces the most conservative obedience to the traffic in women.

In a later text of the high Renaissance canon, the first female to speak embodies a trinity of incest, femaleness, and evil in a single figure. She is Sin in *Paradise Lost*. From this female monster, we learn that it was at the moment at which Satan first thought of rebelling against the patriarchal God that he gave birth to Sin. She would become first his incestuous daughter, and then herself an incestuous mother, raped by her son Death. She with her son comes to earth after the fall to remake God's entire creation. That very fall was caused by Adam's incestuous preference for the

creature born from his body over his obedience to God. Like that of Sin, Eve's sexual partner is the male from whose body she has been born. Milton too makes an important connection between the incestuous daughter and the manipulation of verbal signs; in a pun on her very name, Milton has Sin explain that the host of heaven "Called me Sin and for a Sign portentous held me." Thus, like Shakespeare, Milton associates the daughter's responsiveness to incestuous desire with her position within a system of signs.

Even an author so putatively supportive of female agency as Edmund Spenser felt compelled to twin his female warrior hero Britomart with Argante, her double, a dark shadow of the virtuous female who chases after her, and whose darkness must be challenged—if only in a brief episode in the epic—by the chaste Palladine. Spenser introduces the giantess Argante as one who had committed incest *in the womb* with her twin brother, Ollyphant.<sup>5</sup> While Spenser's text may have directly influenced Milton's Sin, what is more significant here is the shared emphasis among these and so many other canonical works of the period; the emphasis insists upon the remarkable cultural resonance throughout Renaissance culture (including Jacobean tragedies like *The Duchess of Malfi*) of associations between female agency and incestuous desire.

As the instance of Cordelia's striking wordlessness in *King Lear*'s opening scene makes evident, the fundamental source of authority denied the obedient woman is language that leads to action. Indeed, Goneril and Regan's protestations of what would be (were it real) an incestuous love for their father are couched in terms that call direct attention to the relationship of eloquence to deed. By insisting on how incapable speech is of delivering meaning, Goneril's hyperbole paradoxically makes a grand rhetorical display of rhetoric's failure adequately to represent reality. Ordered by her father to "speak first," she swears that her feelings are too large for words to compass:

Sir I love you more than word can wield the matter;  
 Dearer than eyesight, space and liberty.  
 Beyond what can be valued, rich or rare;  
 No less than life, with grace, health, beauty, honor,  
 As much as child e'er loved, or father found;  
 A love that makes breath poor and speech unable:  
 Beyond all manner of so much I love you. (I.i.56–62)

The "eyesight" that Goneril claims means less to her than her love for her father becomes, of course, a spectacularly literalized coordinate of loyal

relations between father and child in the more explicitly Oedipal subplot of Gloucester's blinding. Here, it signals the incestuous bent of Goneril's speechifying. Regan goes on to outdo her sister in professional doublespeak

I find she names my very deed of love;  
Only she comes too short, that I profess  
Myself an enemy to all other joys  
Which the most precious square of sense professes,  
And find I am alone felicitate in your dear Highness' love. (I.i.74–78)

That silence should be the mark, as *King Lear* seems to indicate, of the willingly exchanged woman, while transgressive polysyllabic garrulousness marks the endogamously invested daughter, says a great deal about the perceived (and for some, dangerous) potential for female eloquence and authority at this cultural moment. Suzanne Hull has tabulated the large number of books aimed specifically at a female readership during the period whose purpose was to teach women to be (as Hull titles her study) *chaste, silent, and obedient*. Hull's point is that each of these three injunctions enjoins the other two, silence being the signal hallmark of both chastity and obedience.<sup>6</sup> Patricia Parker has further argued for the crucial conjuncture of society's association of verbal excess with female excess during the period. Her study of rhetorical handbooks reveals how extremes of rhetorical display were seen to threaten with the same transgressive immoderation as female sexuality: both had to be controlled with analogical means of restraint.<sup>7</sup>

My purpose in the following chapters is certainly not to question the centrality of the incest taboo throughout human societies. Rather, my aim is to understand the remarkable presence in the Renaissance of what we may call incest schemes in the books of a small number of women who did manage to claim an active female authority by writing in high canonical genres—what we would call “literature”—and who, even more transgressively at the time, often sought publication in print. By looking at these historical texts in all their specificity, I hope to be able to contribute something new to the conversation about female agency, which has taken place, at least at the theoretical level, with a set of assumptions based upon distinctly modern social arrangements. While modern anthropological theory about woman's agency has deeply informed my understanding of why some Renaissance women writers wrote as they did, I argue that the historical texts themselves have some corrections to offer modern theorizing.

Indeed, my attempt to understand the scandalous anomaly of an



instantiating act of incest in the work of a writer who has been called France's first professional woman of letters, is what originally compelled me to notice how certain other key premodern women writers re-create scenes of endogamy, subsequently using these narratives for their own empowerment. As far as we know, the first history of women by a European woman is Christine de Pizan's *Livre de la cité des dames* (1405). This early fifteenth-century allegory builds its city of ladies with a foundation stone of legendary mother-son incest. Is it an accident that the first printed work by Queen Elizabeth I's hand was a translation she had done at age eleven of Marguerite de Navarre's *Miroir de l'âme pécheresse* (first published in 1531), a poem which uses the notion of "holy" incest as its prevailing trope? Is there no connection between the fact that Mary Wroth, the author of the first sonnet cycle and prose romance printed in English by a woman, carried on an endogamous (if not legally incestuous) illegitimate relationship with her first cousin and the fact that she described that relationship—under the guise of her two lovers, Pamphilia and Amphilanthus—in both the sonnets and the prose volume? Is it an accident that Sir Philip Sidney and his sister Mary Herbert, the Countess of Pembroke, translated the Psalms together and that the sister finished the brother's work by revising it for publication? Does the importance of the brother-sister tie have anything to tell us about the reason Elizabeth Cary may have chosen to write about a woman who defies her husband's sexual demands because he had murdered her brother? May not Isabella Whitney have cast one of her most important long poems as a fictive legacy to her brother because such a relationship resonated with the power of endogamous female agency? As such women sought positions of authority within the highest canons of literature, they would appear to be speaking directly to the thematics of endogamy they found there, manipulating this discourse to their own purposes of self-authorization as female storytellers.

In the chapters that follow, I have attempted to keep these female-authored texts in dialogue with better-known texts by men, rather than cordoning them off into what Myra Jehlen long ago called the "no-man's land" of a problematically univocal female tradition. The dialogue allows us to interrogate the long border that not so much lies between the two traditions as forms their common ground.<sup>8</sup> As we shall see, this approach not only has the salutary effect of keeping the texts inside the cultural conversation of which they were an integral part, but also offers altered perspectives on canonical texts by Sidney, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton.

The result may prove a useful estrangement of texts that we have told ourselves we already know very well, a not insignificant benefit of any critical practice that insists on reading in concert writing by both men and women.

I begin the discussion with the special instance of Elizabeth I—whose continued unmarried state was the foundation for an “unnatural” female agency enabled by her endogamous halt of the proper traffic in women. From that perspective I then consider Sir Philip Sidney’s peculiarly familiar challenge to Elizabeth’s power to make her own decision about marriage. Through their complex relationship with the queen, the Sidney family gained a social status out of all proportion to their actual wealth, and that relationship continues, as the next chapter explores, in Sidney’s sister’s writing, evident in the ways in which she connects her authority to her brother in her literary work, particularly in her address to the queen.

I turn then to Edmund Spenser, who once served as secretary to Sidney’s uncle, the Earl of Leicester; Spenser disguises his criticism of the queen’s endogamous, unmarried virginity in the character of Britomart, the cross-dressed female knight at the heroic center of nearly three books of *The Faerie Queene*. A rereading of the discourse of incest in Spenser’s allegory leads me to a way of understanding the remarkable revision of both Sidney’s and Spenser’s romances in Mary Wroth’s *Urania*. That Wroth is Sir Philip Sidney’s niece and was sexually involved with her first cousin, the Countess of Pembroke’s son, is the test case for my argument. The study concludes with a fuller discussion of the relation of Cordelia and incest in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, followed by a brief analysis of Milton’s meditations on female agency and the problem of incest in *Paradise Lost*.

### The Incest Taboo in Anthropological Theory

While the utility of any theory rests with its local applications, the association of transgressive women with transgressive uses of language runs deeper than practices particular to the Renaissance. The interdiction against incest is a constant in all human societies, pivotal at all periods and in all places, however mutually exclusive the specific tabooed permutations and sexual combinations may have been from one culture to the next. Anthropological theory has been well organized to ask at this most generalized level what is achieved by the social process of interdicting certain sexual liaisons and authorizing others.<sup>9</sup> The theory has been less

interested in articulating the power of female speech to interrupt the social controls placed upon female desire—and Lévi-Strauss's account is a good place to begin to see this difficulty, as well as its dismissal.

As he concludes his seminal work, *Elementary Structures of Kinship*, Lévi-Strauss points out the endemically problematic position of women tabooed by the incest prohibition. This discussion is, in fact, the only time that he takes into account how the tabooed women might themselves experience their functional status as passive objects to be traded in the system of exchanges just analyzed.

The total relationship of exchange which constitutes marriage is not established between a man and a woman where each owes and receives something, but between two groups of men, and the woman figures only as one of the objects in the exchange, not as one of the partners between whom the exchange takes place. This remains true even when the girl's feelings are taken into consideration, as, moreover, is usually the case. In acquiescing to the proposed union, she precipitates or allows the exchange to take place; she cannot alter its nature. This view must be kept in all strictness, even with regard to our own society, where marriage appears to be a contract between persons. Set going by the marriage of a man and a woman, with its aspects set out in the marriage service, this cycle of reciprocity is only a secondary mode of a wider cycle of reciprocity, which pledges the union of a man and a woman who is either someone's daughter or sister, by the union of the daughter or sister of that man or another man with the first man in question.<sup>10</sup>

Although Lévi-Strauss observes here that a girl might have some feelings about the particulars of the exchange, he emphatically insists that she cannot change its nature, which is to be, in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's useful shorthand, a "homosocial connection," a bond not between a man and a woman but "between men."<sup>11</sup> As he ends his book, however, Lévi-Strauss has glimpsed the problem that the potential agency of women poses for the system under analysis. It is significant that he presents this problem in terms of a woman's relationship to *language*. True to his structuralist position at the time, Lévi-Strauss is arguing that the system of exchange of women, enforced by the incest taboo, works like a language. He understands as similar the semiotic function of language and the "elementary structures of kinship," because, as he argues, both are means of social communication bound by discoverable rules. Having pointed out that the incest taboo often operates, along with other taboos, against the misuse of language, he proposes that, in the system of exchange which creates culture, "women themselves are treated as signs, which are misused when not put to the use reserved to signs, which is to be communicated."

He is quick to grant, however, that in reality women are more than signs because they make and use signs themselves:

even in a man's world [a woman] is still a person, and since in so far as she is defined as a sign she must be recognized as a generator of signs. In the matrimonial dialogue of men, woman is never purely what is spoken about; for if women in general represent a certain category of signs, destined to certain kinds of communication, each woman preserves a particular value arising from her talent . . . for taking her part in a duet. In contrast to words, which have wholly become signs, woman has remained at once a sign and a value. This explains why the relations between the sexes have preserved that affective richness, ardor and mystery which doubtless originally permeated the universe of human communications. (496)

While Lévi-Strauss never explores the implications of the fact that a woman's value-endowed ability to speak, that is, to manipulate signs herself, may come into conflict with her function as a sign in the system of the traffic in women, it is clear that female semiotic agency is potentially *very* problematic to this system. The implications have been the focus of much feminist anthropology of recent decades.

Gayle Rubin's greatest quarrel was with Lévi-Strauss's failure to follow the implications of the end of his own text: "Why is he not, at this point, denouncing what kinship systems do to women instead of presenting one of the greatest rip-offs of all time as the root of romance?"<sup>12</sup> Rubin's move against Lévi-Strauss—rhetorically highlighted by the drop in diction—was programmatic: she did not query his peculiar emphasis on female speech and the concomitant issue of silence, but stressed how his interests in understanding the traffic in women as an exchange of rights and privileges only among men worked to deny women any agency. Her insight into his critical practice illuminated its blindness to the way the system itself institutes different statuses for males and females. Thus Rubin was following Lévi-Strauss in her understanding of the "traffic," the process by which men reciprocally trade women among themselves in the founding act of civilization. But she goes on to ask questions Lévi-Strauss does not: how profoundly asymmetrical does this traffic make the different rights men and women have in themselves? Rubin moved the discussion from the fact that men trade women among themselves, to the fact that it is men who trade and women who are traded: a male has the right in himself to trade and a female has no right in herself. According to Rubin, systems underwritten by the incest taboo and that traffic in women

do not merely exchange women. They exchange sexual access, genealogical status, lineage names and ancestors, rights and people—men, women, and children—in concrete social relationships. These relationships always include certain rights for men, others for women. “Exchange of women” is a shorthand for expressing that the social relations of a kinship system specify that men have certain rights to their female kin and that women do not have the same rights either to themselves or to their male kin. In this sense, the exchange of women is a profound perception of a system in which women do not have full rights to themselves. (177)

Another way of putting this insight—and indeed the way that Lévi-Strauss glanced at the problem of female agency at the end of his book—is to say that men may use women as signs in the semiotic system of kinship, but women cannot speak for themselves in the kinship system. In that system, women are only signs—a function with which their own ability to use language may well come into conflict, as Cordelia’s silence exemplifies. Or as Milton’s incestuous daughter Sin announces when the angels recognize her as a “sign.”

Rubin’s critique of Lévi-Strauss was empowered by her inexplicit recognition that the issue of female *agency*, including a female’s use of language—is what is at stake in the suppression of female *desire*. Thus she mounted her argument against Lévi-Strauss’s anthropological understanding of the workings of the incest taboo by appealing to the status of that taboo in psychoanalysis and outlining the familiar process by which the Oedipal complex creates differently gendered—and heterosexually desiring—others. Following Lacan’s rereading of Freud, Rubin laid out a similar set of exchanges, in which the male, in possession of the phallus (which names a specifically male privilege but also is the privileged signifier of subjectivity), is able to pass the phallus on to another male through a female. (The phallus is passed to the son through the mother, but also passed through women in exchanges between men.) In this exchange, the female is only a passive conduit for that power, able to pass it along to another male but unable to possess it herself.

This position as agencyless conduit is, as it were, what Cordelia asserts as her place: the limit of her bond to her father is that she will form the bond between her father and her husband. For her sisters to insist that they love their father all is for them to ignore their already-married status, to ignore the fact that the phallus has already passed through them, connecting Lear and their husbands. The play, of course, acknowledges this connection when Lear disowns Cordelia by appealing not to Goneril and Regan but to their husbands: “Cornwall and Albany, / With my two

daughters' dowers digest the third" (I.i.129–30). When Goneril and Regan speak of their all-engulfing love for their father, it is as if they've forgotten that they have already been exchanged; they speak as if it were possible to double back, so to speak, as if by their rhetoric they could win for themselves the greatest portion of Lear's wealth, as if they could have the phallus—that is, their father's power—descend to them without passing it on to their husbands. The proof of their evil is that they desire to usurp that interdicted phallic power from both father and husbands. Their adulterous lust for the bastard Edmund underscores the illegitimacy of their desires, which become incestuous when Edmund dallies with both of them as sisters.

Rubin's concluding argument was that what is ultimately interdicted by the incest taboo is active female desire itself, rather than any particular categories of unallowable sexual couplings. Freud argued that

the turning away from her mother is an extremely important step in the course of the little girl's development. It is more than a mere change of object . . . hand in hand with it there is to be observed a marked lowering of the active sexual impulses and a rise of the passive ones. . . . The transition to the father object is accomplished with the help of the passive trends in so far as they have escaped catastrophe. The path to the development of femininity now lies open to the girl.<sup>13</sup>

Rubin stresses that this presumed passivity is a renunciation of the girl's active desire: "What is important in Freud's schema however is not the geography of desire but its self-confidence" (195). Deprived of the agency which derives from faith in one's self, the girl "has become a little woman—feminine, passive, heterosexual" (196).

Theoretically, there are three ways to halt the traffic in women. One is incest, where women make an erotic choice within their own close kin. Two is celibacy, either personal spinsterhood or institutional vocation, the latter when a woman enters a religious order (here, however, the halt is at least named with the terms borrowed from intimate family positions; nuns are traditionally called "sisters"). And, as adumbrated by Rubin, there is a third way out of the traffic—a choice that would in theory root out all kinship system—and that is a lesbian desire that does not comply with the compulsory heterosexuality required by the exchange of women. Rubin's emphasis on the potentially active status of the woman who evades the rules and is capable of making her own choices, ought to suggest the power of the first means for agency. If the declaration of agency allows an evasion of the traffic in women, a different way of achieving this

cessation is to refuse to be traded out and, instead, actively to choose an endogamous male as partner. Rubin did not take up the question of the function of the incest taboo at the level of language—which is, of course, the place where Lacan found Lévi-Strauss most interesting. But because what is important about this agency is its transgression of the tabooed woman's *passivity*, it is important to glance, however briefly, at the question of the construction of female identity within language.

What Lacanian theory seems in part to have accomplished is to provide an answer to Lévi-Strauss's ultimate conundrum about women's semiotic abilities; it does so by uncovering what Lacan calls the "impossibility" of women in the very nature of language itself.

That the woman should be inscribed in an order of exchange of which she is the object, is what makes for the fundamentally conflictual, and, I would say, insoluble character of her position: the symbolic order literally submits her, it transcends her. . . . There is for her something insurmountable, something unacceptable, in the fact of being placed as an object in a symbolic order to which, at the same time, she is subjected just as much as the man.<sup>14</sup>

Jacqueline Rose points out that Lacan eventually moved away from the Lévi-Straussian notion of exchange articulated above and developed a more complicated model for the subject's simultaneous acquisition of language and sexual identity. As Rose puts it, Lacan shifted from seeing the problem as one of a "process of exchange (women as objects) to the construction of woman as a category within language" (47).<sup>15</sup> This move, of course, binds even more intimately the limits placed on female agency to the question of language, and makes even more problematic a woman's access to language as a means of representing her own activity (as distinct from male agency). Specifically, Rose takes issue with Rubin's appeal to Lacan as a way of reappropriating the Oedipal conflict to an anthropological function: she points out that Rubin's use of Lacan loses sight of such fundamental psychoanalytic concepts as the unconscious and slights the long and nuanced process of the formation of sexual identity, "reducing relations . . . to quite literal . . . acts of exchange."<sup>16</sup> But Rose ultimately agrees with Rubin that Lacan's formulations—like Lévi-Strauss's—are complicit with the male-biased system he is describing.

Rose is equally critical of the kinds of emphases given Lacan's thought by French feminists such as Luce Irigaray, who attempt to blaze a pathway out of the impasse into which the Lacanian logic of language places the female. In this argument, the female is seen as outside any

language predicated on the male body, that is, on the presence or absence of a penis/phallus. Instead the woman has access to an alternate version of verbal activity—an *écriture féminine*—a feminine writing which works differently as a means of representation from male language because it relies on a pre-Oedipal (and preverbal) relationship to the maternal body. Thus Irigaray writes: “Woman is never far from the ‘mother.’ I do not mean the role but the ‘mother’ as no-name and as a source of goods. There is always at least a little good mother milk left in her. She writes with white ink.” Irigaray further pinpoints the problem as one of “woman’s ‘improper’ access to representation, her entry into a specular and speculative economy that affords her instincts no signs, no symbols or emblems, or methods of writing that could figure her instincts.”<sup>17</sup> In essence, this is to say no more than what Cordelia’s silence indicated: the proper passivity of the obedient good woman requires no access to the system of representation which is language.

In *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Irigaray meditates on the different language women might speak together by using phrases like “The Mechanics of Fluids,” puns like “When Our Lips Speak Together,” a labile communication which is never univocal: “Woman never speaks the same way. What she emits is flowing, fluctuating. Blurring. And she is not listened to, unless proper meaning (meaning of the proper) is lost. Whence the resistances to that voice that overflows the “subject.”<sup>18</sup>

In a similar manner, Julia Kristeva suggests that there is a compensatory countering to this denial of access. While the gendering of different subjects is not her main concern, Kristeva grants women a unique and particular language among themselves:

Women doubtless reproduce among themselves the strange gamut of forgotten body relationships with their mothers. Complicity in the unspoken connivance of the inexpressible, of a wink, a tone of voice, a gesture, a tinge, a scent. . . . No communication between individuals but connection between atoms, molecules, wisps of words, droplets of sentences. The community of women is a community of dolphins.<sup>19</sup>

Kaja Silverman has usefully criticized the theoretical positing of a separate language for women by pointing out how such female speech, predicated on the plenitude of the mother/infant couple, puts the fully functioning adult mother inside the enclosure experienced by the child, and thereby denies to the mother her adult verbal sophistication, substituting instead a magic language reminiscent of the babble of the infant. Silverman asks:



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