The Feminist Difference

Literature, Psychoanalysis, Race, and Gender

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which is different from male self-difference be sure that it is not already framed within male self-difference? The answer is far from clear, but at least it might be possible to conclude that to be differently empowered does not have to mean: to be empowered *as* different.

Muteness Envy

A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing . . .
William Wordsworth

In one of the best known poems in the English language, John Keats proclaims the superiority of silence over poetry by addressing a Grecian urn in the following terms:

> Thou still unravished bride of quietness,
> Thou foster child of silence and slow time,
> Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
> A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme . . .
> Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
> Are sweeter . . .

The ego ideal of the poetic voice would seem, then, to reside in the muteness of things.

Why does Keats choose to write about an urn? Why not, for example, a Grecian frieze? Is an urn somehow overdetermined as an example of a thing? When Martin Heidegger had to choose something as an example of a thing in his essay "The Thing," he chose a jug. And when Wallace Stevens placed an exemplary object in Tennessee, it was a jar. What is it that might make an urn impose it-

self? Why does Cleanth Brooks entitle his New Critical treatise on poetry *The Well-Wrought Urn?*

Urns are containers. They can contain the ashes of the dead. They can also contain water, wine, nourishment. As containers or vehicles, they lend themselves as metaphors for form itself, or language itself, as in Francis Ponge's poem about a jug, which ends, "Couldn't everything I have just said about the jug be said equally well of *words?*" Urns can be metaphors for the relation between form and content, but also between body and soul, expression and intention. Like the most general description of a human being, they have an inside and an outside. Whether we speak of eating or of thinking, we see the human being as a thing with interiority, an outside with something happening inside. Thus, urns are not so much anthropomorphic as humans are urnomorphic. The thing, the human, the poem, and indeed language itself all become metaphors for each other through the urn.

But Keats's urn wears its contents on its *outside.* Does this have anything to do with its idealization of muteness?

Of course, Keats is not the only poet to have made muteness into a poetic ideal. Mallarmé oriented his theory of poetic language toward "le poème tu, aux blancs." And in what is perhaps the most explicit expression of the idealization of muteness as a prerogative of things, Archibald MacLeish proclaims in his "Ars Poetica":

> A poem should be palpable and mute
> As a globed fruit,

> Dumb
> As old medallions to the thumb,
>
> Silent as the sleeve-worn stone
> Of casement ledges where the moss has grown—
>
> A poem should be wordless
> As the flight of birds.

Yet these poems do not seem to be able to maintain the privilege of muteness to the end. No sooner does Keats convince us of the superiority of the Grecian urn's aphonia, than it speaks. "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," it says; "That is all ye know on earth and all ye need to know." MacLeish's poem, too, is unable to leave well enough alone. It concludes, "A poem should not mean/But be," a sentence which disobeys its own prescription, since, in saying what a poem *should* do, it is "meaning" rather than "being." "Ars Poetica" can be read as a more explicit version of the Grecian urn's final violation of its own apparent rules. Is muteness not really a value, then, or is it simply that language cannot, by definition, say so? Or is it that the utterance "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" *is* a form of silence? What is behind the poem's incomplete commitment to its own muteness envy?

In choosing the expression "muteness envy" to name a recurrent poetic condition, I am consciously echoing Freud's expression "penis envy," which for him marked the nature of sexual difference

from the woman's point of view. Since muteness envy seems to be a feature of canonical poetry written by men, could it somehow play into the question of sexual difference? Does the muteness that men envy tend to be feminine? Certainly Keats's urn is feminized, a "still unravished bride of quietness." Doubly feminized, indeed, if the container-like shape of the urn is denied as anthropomorphic and affirmed instead as gynomorphic. In an essay published in 1954, Charles Patterson offers a "comprehensive and virile interpretation" of the ode, comparing the urn's shape to "the outlines of the feminine body": "the urn is a receptacle, just as is the body of woman—the receptacle from which life springs."[1]

For Mallarmé too, the blanks and the "white page" that are the material inscription of silence are also the analogues of the female body. And numerous are the Parnassian poems addressed to silent female statues, marble Venuses and granite Sphinxes whose unresponsiveness stands as the mark of their aesthetic value, and whose whiteness underscores the normative whiteness of canonical representations of women. Baudelaire parodies this conceit by making Beauty *speak* her own unresponsiveness and gloat over the muteness of the poets' love for her, while Stevens parodies it by refusing either to feminize or to idealize his jar as it takes deadpan control over the slovenly wilderness. The parodic edge to these poems seems only to confirm the normative image of a beautiful, silent woman addressed by the idealizing rhetoric of a male poet for whom she "seems a thing." There is, of course, nothing new in saying that, in Western poetry, women are often idealized, objectified, and silent. Feminist criticism has been pointing this out for at least

thirty years. But why is female muteness a repository of aesthetic value? And what does that muteness signify?

Interestingly enough, the silence of women seems to be a *sine qua non* of sexual difference for Jacques Lacan, too, in his translation of Freud's story of anatomical destiny into a story of discursive destiny:

> There is woman only as excluded by the nature of things which is the nature of words, and it has to be said that if there is one thing they themselves are complaining about enough at the moment, it is well and truly that—only they don't know what they are saying, which is all the difference between them and me.
>
> It none the less remains that if she is excluded by the nature of things, it is precisely that in being not all, she has, in relation to what the phallic function designates of *jouissance*, a supplementary *jouissance*.
>
> Note that I said *supplementary*. Had I said *complementary*, where would we be! We'd fall right back into the all.[2]

In contrast to Freud, whose geometry of castration implies a complementarity between presence (penis) and absence (vagina), Lacan theorizes feminine *jouissance* as something other than what would fit into that schema of complementarity. In sexual complementarity, everything is a function of only one of the terms: the phallus. In sexual supplementarity, woman is that which exceeds or escapes. Which does not mean that she speaks.

> There is a *jouissance* which is proper to her, to this "her" which does not exist and which signifies nothing. There is a *jouissance* proper to her and of which she herself may know nothing, except that she experiences it—that much she does know. She knows it of course when it happens. It does not happen to all of them . . . What gives some likelihood to what I am arguing, that is, that the woman knows nothing of this *jouissance*, is that ever since we've been begging them . . . —begging them on our knees to tell us about it, well, not a word! (145–146)

In his efforts to collect reliable testimony from women about their pleasure, Lacan finally turns, astonishingly, to a statue, thus writing his own Parnassian poem: "You have only to go and look at Bernini's statue [of Saint Theresa] in Rome to understand immediately that she's coming, there is no doubt about it" (147). As Stephen Heath, Luce Irigaray, and Barbara Freeman have remarked,[3] this is a very odd way to listen to women. But it fits in perfectly with the idealization of female muteness already in place in the aesthetic tradition.

Returning now to Keats's urn, we find that the question of feminine *jouissance* (or lack of it) is very much at issue. By calling the urn a "still unravished bride," Keats implies that the urn's destiny is to become a *ravished* bride. The word "ravished" can mean either "raped" or "sent into ecstasy." Both possibilities are readable in the scenes depicted on the urn:

> What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
> What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
> What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

The privileged aesthetic moment is a freeze frame just prior to ravishment.[4] But how does pressing the pause button here make us sublate the scene of male sexual violence into a scene of general ecstasy? How does the maidens' struggle to escape congeal into an aesthetic triumph?

If we turn now to one of the primal scenes of Western literature, Apollo's pursuit of the nymph Daphne and her transformation into a laurel tree, we will find that the same questions apply. Whether because of Cupid's mischief or out of her own resistance, Daphne struggles to escape the god's embrace, becoming a tree—a thing—in a last desperate attempt to avoid rape. But Apollo not only does not lose; he enters a whole new dimension of symbolization, plucking off a laurel branch and using it as a sign of artistic achievement. "Instead of becoming the object of a sexual conquest," writes Peter Sacks in his book on *The English Elegy*,

> Daphne is thus eventually transformed into something very much like a consolation prize—a prize that becomes *the* prize and sign of poethood. What Apollo or the poet pursues turns into a sign not only of his lost love but also of his very pursuit—a consoling sign that carries in itself the reminder of the loss on which it has been founded . . . If there is a necessary distance between the wreath and what it signifies, that distance is the measure of Apollo's loss. Daphne's 'turning' into a tree matches Apollo's 'turning' from the object of his love to a sign of her. It is this substitutive turn or act of troping that any mourner must perform.[5]

Thus, "any mourner" must identify with Apollo, not Daphne, and the fact that Apollo does not carry out the intended rape is coded as "loss"—a loss that becomes a model for the aesthetic as such. The rapist is bought off with the aesthetic. And the aesthetic is inextricably tied to a silence in the place of rape.

As Christine Froula and Patricia Joplin have argued, that silence has been so inextricably tied to the aesthetics of the literary canon that even the most subtle and insightful of readers have, as we have just seen, tended to perpetuate it. Joplin analyzes the "elision of gender" and the "mystification of violence" in Geoffrey Hartman's celebration of the phrase "the voice of the shuttle" as a beautifully condensed trope for Philomela's tapestry (which testifies to her rape and mutilation after her tongue has been cut out).

> When Geoffrey Hartman asks of Sophocles' metaphor "the voice of the shuttle": "what gives these words the power to speak to us even without the play?", he celebrates Language and not the violated woman's emergence from silence . . . When Hartman ends his essay by noting that "There is always *something* that violates us, deprives our voice, and compels art toward an aesthetics of silence," the specific nature of the woman's double violation disappears behind the apparently genderless (but actually male) language of "us," the "I" and the "you" who agree to attest to that which violates, deprives, silences only as a mysterious, unnamed "something."[6]

Once again, an "aesthetics of silence" turns out to involve a male appropriation of female muteness as aesthetic trophy accompanied by an elision of sexual violence.

There seem, then, to be two things women are silent about: their pleasure and their violation. The work performed by the idealization of this silence is that *it helps culture not to be able to tell the difference between the two.*

What happens when women attempt to break that silence? Sometimes their speech is simply discounted, as when Lacan claims that feminists get it right about silence but don't know what they are saying, "which is all the difference between them and me." Even in the case of the Grecian urn, penalties apply. Summarizing a history of reservations critics have expressed about the wisdom of allowing the urn to speak at the end of Keats's poem (T. S. Eliot called the final lines "a serious blemish on a beautiful poem"), Cleanth Brooks notes that "Some critics have felt that the unravished bride of quietness protests too much."[7] His reference to Hamlet's mother's reading of women's guilty speech implies that, to many readers, the urn would have been better off keeping still. Overdetermined by the aesthetic tradition of women's silence, any speech at all appears as guilty speech. It is as though women were constantly subject to the Miranda warning: "You have the right to remain silent. If you waive that right anything you say can and will be used against you." No wonder Shakespeare's Miranda can only exclaim as she notes the completion of the patriarchal set, "Oh brave new world, that has such people in it!"

Two recent feminist approaches to the speech of girls corroborates these functions of silence. Carol Gilligan's study of adolescent girls' development suggests that when culture teaches girls that their sexual feelings are unseemly or irrelevant or secondary to the needs and initiatives of men, they learn to say "I don't know" about their

desire.[8] (Interestingly, this is Maria Torok's interpretation of the nature of penis envy: girls who have learned to repress knowledge of their own sexuality project their sexual feelings as the unobtainable experience of the other sex.)[9] And recent work on child abuse and father-daughter incest, reinforced by Jeffrey Masson's *The Assault on Truth,* his account of Freud's abandonment of the "seduction" theory of hysteria,[10] suggests that girls learn silence not only about sexual pleasure but also about sexual abuse.

Christine Froula, in an essay entitled "The Daughter's Seduction: Sexual Violence and Literary History," makes an analogy between Homer's silencing of Helen and Freud's discrediting of his hysterical patients. "As the *Iliad* tells the story of a woman's abduction as a male war story, so Freud turned the hysterics' stories of sexual abuse into a tale to soothe a father's ear . . . Freud undertook not to believe the hysterics not because the weight of scientific evidence was on the father's side but because so much was at stake in maintaining the father's credit: the 'innocence' not only of particular fathers—Freud's, Freud himself, the hysterics'—but also of the cultural structure that credits male authority at the expense of female authority."[11] In switching from an alliance with the daughters to an alliance with the fathers, Freud had to translate the "truth" of abuse into the "beauty" of psychoanalysis. At this point we might conclude after Molière, "Et voilà pourquoi votre fille est muette."

But perhaps she is mute because she knows that neither of these accounts is quite right. While it is true that Freud's paradigmatic model of incest seems to switch from the father's desire for the daughter to the son's desire for the mother (thus letting the father

off the hook and granting the son the privilege of perversity), it is also true that by crediting the inside/outside, guilt/innocence opposition, critics of psychoanalysis have lost sight of Freud's understanding of the daughter's desire. Why does the father's guilt have to be tied to the daughter's innocence? Can't the daughter's capacity for perverse desire coexist with the fact of abuse?

Now I would like to explore all these issues as they play themselves out in a recent film and in a series of responses to it. The film, written and directed by Jane Campion, is called *The Piano.* The heroine, Ada McGrath, played by Holly Hunter, is mute. Her "voice" is a piano. It could be said that the piano in the film plays, with respect to Ada, the role traditionally assigned to the Muse with respect to the poet: it is her significant other, herself, and her missing piece. Ada has a daughter, Flora, played by Anna Paquin. Ada has been sent by her father from Scotland to New Zealand to be married to a man she has never met. When she is deposited by sailors on a deserted beach with her daughter, her piano, and a large number of other boxes, she is met by two European men—her husband-to-be, Alisdair Stewart, played by Sam Neill, and another man named George Baines, played by Harvey Keitel—and fourteen Maori men and women. Stewart decides that there are too few people to carry all the boxes plus the piano, and the piano is left on the beach while the party, with Baines translating Stewart's orders to the Maoris, makes its way through the dense, muddy New Zealand bush. Ada communicates by writing on a pad hanging around her neck and by signing to her daughter, who translates. She is enraged at the abandonment of her piano.

Shortly after a marriage which seems to take place as a photographic sitting, Stewart leaves to buy some Maori land, and Ada and Flora attempt to persuade a reluctant Baines to retrieve the piano. The three of them visit the piano on the beach, where Baines is fascinated by the emotional abandon of Ada's playing, so different from her normal resistant demeanor. Soon Baines has brought the piano to his own hut and has traded some of his land to Stewart for ownership of the piano, claiming a desire to learn to play. When Stewart tells Ada of the deal, and indicates that she is to give Baines lessons, she is outraged, writing, "NO, NO, THE PIANO IS MINE!" on her note pad. Stewart disregards her, saying everyone in the family must make sacrifices. Baines then persuades Ada that she can win back her piano, key by key, in exchange for sexual contact, which begins while she plays, but eventually, for a larger number of keys, takes place in his bedroom. His approach is gradual; her response is resistant, then hesitant. Flora is generally left resentfully outside Baines's hut during these sessions. Then Baines abruptly abandons the bargain, saying, "I am giving the piano back to you. I've had enough. The arrangement is making you a whore and me wretched. I want you to care for me, but you can't." Once the piano is installed in Stewart's hut, Ada is confused about her relation to it, and runs back into Baines's arms. Stewart follows her and peers at their lovemaking through the cracks in the hut walls. That night Stewart seems to make no response to what he has seen, but the following day he intercepts Ada as she tries to return to Baines. Stewart wrestles her to the ground and tries to kiss and touch her. Then he locks her into his hut. She plays the piano furiously, then,

at night, enters Stewart's room and begins to stroke his body, not allowing him to touch hers. This is the first sexual contact of the marriage. When later Ada learns that Baines is leaving the area, she removes a key from the piano, writes on it "Dear George, you have my heart, Ada McGrath," and asks Flora to take it to him. Instead, Flora takes it to Stewart, who is working with his axe on his boundary fence. In a paroxysm of rage, Stewart returns to Ada and chops off one of her fingers, telling Flora to take it to Baines. That night Stewart hovers over Ada's feverish sleep, apologizing and then on the point of taking sexual advantage of the seemingly unconscious woman when he notices her full attention on him and stops. He then goes to Baines and tells Baines he has heard Ada's voice saying, "Let Baines take me away." Soon Ada, Flora, Baines, and the piano are loaded by Maori oarsmen onto a canoe. As the canoe leaves the shore, Ada asks that the piano be tossed overboard. When the others obey, she puts her foot in a loop of the piano rope and is pulled into the sea after the piano. Yet she does not drown but kicks herself free and returns to the canoe, to Baines, and ultimately to life in Nelson, New Zealand, as a wife and piano teacher. While Ada escapes us into banal colonial wifehood, the film ends by seeming to want to display its allegiance to the English poetic tradition of aestheticizing silence: the last lines uttered are a quotation from a sonnet by Thomas Hood called "Silence."

How are we to read Ada's muteness in the movie? First of all, like the urn's, Ada's muteness is not absolute. Not only does she both sign and write, but at the beginning and end of the film there is a voice-over that purports to be the voice of Ada's mind. Similarly,

Keats's apostrophe to the urn ensures that it never exists outside the realm of the anthropomorphic, and even then, it has to talk back in the end. Like the urn, Ada reassures the spectator that she is not really other, never absolutely beyond the reach of communication. But also like the urn, she does not directly answer the questions the spectator might ask. The speaker in Keats's poem asks the urn for names, narratives, legends; the urn answers with chiasmus, tautology, abstraction. The speaker asks for history; the urn resists with theory. Inversely, the men in the film attempt to establish an I–Thou relation with Ada, but her voice-over only links the events of the movie to the past and to the future, and does not offer interpretive guidance through the period—the time actually dramatized in the film—between the initial landing and the final departure from the deserted beach.

The voice opens the movie by saying: "I have not spoken since I was six years old. No one knows why, not even me. My father says it is a dark talent and the day I take it into my head to stop breathing will be my last." First interpretation, then: Ada's muteness is a talent, a talent as strong as life itself.

Stewart, the husband-to-be, is said not to mind the muteness before he sees her, considering that it makes her like a dumb animal, but when he meets her, he begins to wonder whether it is a sign of mental deficiency. This is not because he wants to listen to her—he disregards every explicit expression of her wishes concerning the piano—but because he worries that the merchandise he has bought might be defective. Yet it is he who ends up recognizing Ada's muteness as voice, as will, as resistance. As he reports it to Baines,

Ada has in the end said to him, "I have to go, let me go, let Baines take me away, let him try and save me. I am frightened of my will, of what it might do, it is so strange and strong." Of course, Stewart, having just chopped off his wife's finger, may well be frightened of what his *own* will might do. But at least he recognizes Ada as a center of will and desire.

That Ada's muteness is a manifestation of will is confirmed when the voice-over returns at the moment Ada frees herself from the piano rope that is dragging her under the sea: "What a death! What a chance! What a surprise! My will has chosen life!?"

But the final voice-over of the movie suggests that Ada, now married to Baines and fitted with a prosthetic finger, is beginning to pronounce syllables aloud. While the voice-over, like the urn's voice, may be read as a projection, a narrative fiction, perhaps even a prosopopoeia, Ada, at the end of the movie, is beginning to fade into the sound of common voice.

Thus, although Ada is passed from father to husband as a piece of merchandise, her muteness is not a form of passivity or objecthood. It is a form of resistance and subjecthood. But does the resistance and subjecthood of Ada's *character* outweigh the objecthood thrust upon her by the male bargains and decisions that structure the *framework* of her life? What is the movie *saying* about the muteness that articulates and confuses women's oppression and women's desire?

Reactions to this movie have been remarkably varied. "Jane Campion Stirs Romance with Mystery," wrote Vincent Canby when the film won the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival.

"Wuthering Heights, Move Over," wrote Jay Carr in one of two long pieces he published in *The Boston Globe*. Yet some viewers of my acquaintance found its pace intolerably slow and its characters and setting repulsive. Some found it fascinatingly romantic and emotionally gripping. Some consider it pretentious; others marvel at its subtlety. Before I saw it, I was told by one friend that it was a hauntingly beautiful love story, and by another that she experienced it as a narrative of rape. How can we determine whether it is about sexual awakening or sexual violence?

Here I am going to quote two representative readings of the film, both written by women. The first is a quotation from the filmmaker, Jane Campion:

> I have enjoyed writing characters who don't have a twentieth-century sensibility about sex. They have nothing to prepare themselves for its strength and power . . . The husband Stewart had probably never had sex at all. So for him to experience sex or feelings of sexual jealousy would have been personality-transforming . . . Ada actually uses her husband Stewart as a sexual object—this is the outrageous morality of the film—which seems very innocent but in fact has its power to be very surprising. I think many women have had the experience of feeling like a sexual object, and that's exactly what happens to Stewart.[12]

For Campion, then, the film is about sex and power and sexual power reversals. It is also, quite explicitly in the published stage directions, about the appeal of fetishistic displacement as sexual surprise: Baines is surprised into excitement while watching Ada play the piano; Ada is surprised into excitement while watching Baines fondle her clothing; Stewart is surprised into sexual jealousy while watching Ada make love to Baines. In these scenarios, there are only displacements and substitutions—*all* sexuality, not just female sexuality, is supplementarity and excess rather than complementarity. It is interesting, however, that Campion describes the film's depiction of sexual awakening in terms of Stewart rather than Ada. It is he, not Ada, who is the virgin in the story.

Now I would like to quote from another reading of the film, this one a long essay by Margaret Morganroth Gullette published in *The Boston Globe*. Gullette writes:

> I felt sullied by "The Piano," muted, mutilated, threatened by rape, pulled underwater and shrouded. Yes, I identified with the heroine . . . I knew I was supposed to identify as a woman with her Victorian fragility and silencing and her redirected expressiveness . . . Holly Hunter, one of the tiniest stars in American movies, is used for her anorexic vulnerability . . . She has the female body type that can be brutalized by men . . . Serious movies can still get away with torturing women in the audience by portraying them as vulnerable heroines and forcing them through a soft porn experience . . . What is staggering is how we're asked to relinquish instantly the resentment and obstinacy we've felt on [Ada's] behalf. She may fall in love right on time, by [Baines's] emotional time table, but why should we? At this point my vicarious anger turned into disbelief.[13]

Gullette's review continues in a more autobiographical vein, narrating the feeling she had that the movie, which she saw with her husband of twenty-five years, had gendered and sundered its male and female spectators, that while she was seeing women's entrapment in men's bargains and men's timetables, her husband was seeing the revelation of men's vulnerability and awakening.

The response to Gullette's review from the *Boston Globe*'s readers was astonishing. The *Globe* printed two long rebuttals and seven letters to the editor. One rebuttal protested the projection of twentieth-century feminist ideals upon a nineteenth-century woman (even though it is, of course, a twentieth-century film). Written by someone who calls herself "a feminist and a diminutive woman," the first rebuttal also protested Gullette's use of the phrase "anorexic vulnerability." The writer argues that Ada is strong, bold, vital, and in control every moment. The rebuttal ends: "*The Piano*'s subject is the empowerment of women despite difficult circumstances, and, as an extension of that, the voices women developed when silenced by a history of submission. I am curious about the time and space [the *Globe*] devoted to condemning a film like *The Piano* . . . Gullette's article would rather make Ada a victim, and it took a lot of words and, at times, twentieth-century cliches, to do an inadequate job."[14]

The second rebuttal, also written by a woman, also takes the *Globe* to task for giving so much space to Gullette's review. The writer rejects Gullette's reading of the body-for-piano-key bargain as rape, writing, "Rape is out-of-control violence: Here, in contrast, is a lover's painstaking delight in the sight, touch, texture of

the beloved."[15] And the writer concludes with a portrait of Baines as sensitive and empathic, able to communicate well not only with Ada but also with the Maoris. The seven letters published in the *Globe* expressed, in less nuanced terms, their contempt for Gullette's feminism, their sympathy for her husband, and their outrage that the *Globe* had given so much space to her review.

I think these reactions are highly significant. The genius of the movie lies in the fact that it can provoke such diametrically opposed readings. Like the aesthetic tradition on which it implicitly comments, *The Piano* would seem to be about telling, or not telling, the difference between women's violation and women's pleasure. Yet the readings are not *simply* symmetrical. Those who view it as a love story and as a reversal of sexual power roles concentrate on the *characters:* Ada is strong, willful, and in control; Baines is sensitive, restrained, and in love; Stewart is surprised by emotion and made physically vulnerable. But Gullette's reading was not based on the individual characters but on their allegorical resonance, the framework within which they operated, and on the way the *movie,* not the characters, spoke. What message does it convey? she asked. It says that women can find the way of their desire within a structure in which they are traded between men like land, ebony, and ivory. It also says that "no" means "yes." Women may be angry, but as soon as men show any restraint, sensitivity, or need, women will abandon their anger, fall in love, and adapt happily to society as it is. Nothing, therefore, needs to be changed in the social *structure.* But in that *structure,* Ada does *not* have power. Stewart and Baines may both be responding to a *sexual* power that Ada does have over them

(and there is nothing new in seeing women's power as sexual), but Baines, not Ada, can decide to go away, and Stewart has the power to either mutilate her body or give her to another man. By focussing on the contrast between Stewart and Baines, rather than on the relation of domination between both men and Ada, or, for that matter, between the Europeans and the Maori, the film encourages us to value the better of the two men rather than to question the whole structure. As bell hooks has noted,[16] the film reveals an analogy among sexual violence, patriarchal power, colonialism, capitalism, and violence against the earth. By romanticizing the borderline between coercion and pleasure in the sexual domain, the film implicitly romanticizes the rest of the chain as well.

While readers of the *Boston Globe* are eager to idealize Ada's muteness—to prove that Ada is *not* a victim, that her muteness is *not* silence—they are intent on producing a silenced woman elsewhere: Margaret Gullette. Calling her "hysterical" and "strident," they castigate the *Globe* for allowing her so much space. It is as though the taboo on women's speech has simply moved to a new place. Now it is possible for Ada to say both her anger and her pleasure, but not for another woman to object to the message Ada's story might convey. The *Boston Globe* has become the new, respectable father who ought to have known how to keep his daughter mute. This recourse to *institutional* power to keep a woman from speaking is precisely what Margaret Gullette was protesting against.

Interestingly, after a period of otherwise almost unanimous critical enchantment with the film, a different kind of disgruntlement began to surface after its nine Oscar nominations. *Newsweek* quoted

one "well-known producer" as saying about the pre-Oscar hype, "I think it's pretentious . . . 'Aren't we artsy? We're the fancy movie.' "[17] In the same week, *New York* magazine published "Seven Reasons Not to Like *The Piano*" ("Little Girl Vomits On Beach, Too Much Mud, Too Much Ironic Symbolism, Too Much Harvey, Cruelty to Pianos, Revoke that Poetic License! and Impending Appendage Trend ('Hunter receives a très chic replacement for her severed finger. If *The Piano* wins Best Picture, won't Tiffany's want to sell authorized movie-tie-in versions? And won't they be too expensive for the people who really need them?')"[18] Somehow, Steven Spielberg's multiple nominations can translate into greatness, but Jane Campion's make her look like just another spoiled woman with expensive and artsy tastes.

Women with expensive and artsy tastes *can,* of course, be idealized, but probably only if they project an image of graceful muteness. One has only to think of the outpouring of feeling around the death of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis to realize the genius of her adoption of the role of silent image from the moment of the assassination onward. Prior to that time, the woman with a taste for French cooking, redecoration, and Oscar Wilde was a far less idealized figure in the American press. And the contrast between Jackie O's muteness and Hillary Clinton's outspokenness only served to give cultural reinforcement to the notion that grace, dignity, and class could only be embodied by a woman who remained silent.

But the claiming of silence around the film *The Piano* turns out not to be confined to women. The *International Herald Tribune,* reporting on what it called "the backlash" against the film, speculated:

> One theory holds that the initial critical blast that launched the film into the stratosphere simply stunned any doubters into silence.
>
> Slowly, timidly, the naysayers are gathering courage to speak. Most of them appear to be men. "I defy you to tell me what that film is about," said one hyper-male Hollywood producer . . . Kurt Anderson, the editor of *New York* magazine, said, "I have discovered, to my happiness, that there are significant numbers of people like me who think it has been highly overpraised." The reluctance to carp, he speculated, may have been political: "It arrives with this feminist baggage, or presumed feminist message, that probably shuts people up."[19]

So the whole thing becomes a political game of "muteness, muteness, who's got the muteness," and feminism, having been accused of privileging silence and victimhood, now becomes so powerful that it is a cause of silencing in others.

One of the political successes of feminism, indeed, seems to reside in its understanding of the power of reclaimed silence, a power that is not unrelated to the idealization of muteness found in the aesthetic tradition. It is no accident that every actress who has been nominated for playing the part of a mute woman—Jane Wyman, Patty Duke, Marlee Matlin, and Holly Hunter—has won an Oscar. Indeed, it might be said that the recent hysteria about protecting free speech against political correctness, in implicitly claiming that white heterosexual men were being silenced, was enacting its own form of muteness envy.

Feminism seems to have become reduced, in the public mind, to complaints about sexual victimization. Recent publications exemplifying this trend, many of them written by women, include Katie Roiphe's *The Morning After: Sex, Fear, and Feminism on Campus*. I would like to look for a moment at the ways in which this book intersects with what I have been saying about culture's investment in not being able to tell the difference between female victimization and female pleasure. By calling her book "the morning after," Roiphe implicitly ties that undecidability not to a silence that does cultural work but to the question of retrospective individual interpretation ("one person's rape is another person's bad night"). Much of her irritation is directed at the rituals that have grown up around "Take Back the Night" marches on college campuses, in which women who have been raped or abused testify to their experience. What particularly disturbs her is the way in which the speeches on those occasions have tended to constitute a literary genre:

> As I listen to the refrains, "I have been silent," "I was silenced," "I am finally breaking the silence," the speakers begin to blur together in my mind . . . As the vocabulary shared across campuses reveals, there is an archetype, a model, for the victim's tale. "Take Back the Night" speak-outs follow conventions as strict as any sonnet sequence or villanelle. As intimate details are squeezed into formulaic standards, they seem to be wrought with an emotion more generic than heartfelt.[20]

Perhaps inevitably, the complaint about genre leads to a complaint about false rape accusations. The power of the literary form to engender fictions becomes the danger of feminism out of control.

Yet, as we have seen, control over the undecidability between female pleasure and female violation has always already been at the heart of the literary canon. Is the "Ode on a Grecian Urn," then, a meditation on date rape? Roiphe claims that contemporary campus feminism resurrects from the Victorian era an image of women as passive sexual victims, an image that her mother's generation of feminists worked so hard to overturn. "Proclaiming victimhood," she writes, "doesn't help project strength."[21] But doesn't it? Why are so many white men so eager to claim a share in the victimhood sweepstakes? Why did Petrarch, the father of the love sonnet, insist that it was he, not Laura, who was wounded, burned, enslaved, and penetrated by love? Even if this is "just rhetoric," why has it achieved such authority? Is it just the sexual equivalent of Christianity?

To speak about female victimization is to imply that there is such a thing as a model of male power and authority that is other than victimization. But what *The Piano* so convincingly demonstrates is that that is only partly true. Yes, for every sensitive man there is a man who chops off women's fingers. But *both* men are actually depicted in the movie as in some sense powerless. Jane Campion and actor Sam Neill both describe the husband Stewart as "vulnerable."[22] And the movie pivots on George Baines's wretchedness. "I am unhappy because I want you," he tells Ada in true Petrarchan style. "My mind has seized on you and thinks of nothing else. This

is how I suffer. I am sick with longing. I don't eat, I don't sleep. If you do not want me, if you have come with no feeling for me, then go!" It is in this male two-step—the axe wielder plus the manipulative sufferer, *both* of whom see themselves as powerless—that patriarchal power lies.

Far from being the opposite of authority, victimhood would seem to be the most effective *model* for authority, particularly literary and cultural authority. It is not that the victim always gets to speak—far from it—but that the most highly valued speaker gets to claim victimhood. This is what leads readers of Apollo and Daphne to see Apollo's failed rape as "loss," or readers of "the voice of the shuttle" to say that there is always *something* that violates "us." If feminism is so hotly resisted, it is perhaps less because it substitutes women's speech for women's silence than because, in doing so, it interferes with the official structures of self-pity that keep patriarchal power in place, and, in the process, tells the truth behind the beauty of muteness envy.