1 Conceiving a Girl

INTRODUCTION TO A FEMALE
POETIC SUBJECTIVITY

STORY OF A WOMAN WHO

Indeed, if woman had no existence save in the fiction written by men, one would imagine her a person of the utmost importance; very various; heroic and mean; splendid and sordid; infinitely beautiful and hideous in the extreme; as great as a man, some think even greater. But this is woman in fiction. . . .

A very queer, composite being thus emerges. Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history.

—Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

. . . images and symbols for *the woman cannot be isolated from images and symbols* of *the woman.*

—Jacques Lacan, "Guiding Remarks for a Congress on Feminine Sexuality"

⇒⟩⟩

The failure to possess the woman of the West's poetic legends is often the occasion for a poem's coming into existence. Displaying herself in some way, on a walk or with her flock, the woman invites notice (in essence, asks for it). The resulting demand on the part of the male, as Lacan tells us in another context, leads to language: for the poetic subject, the displacement of unfulfilled demand (desire) produces the poem; for the subject-in-process, entrance into

the social contract.[1] This displacement is as true of origin tales of poetry as it is of psychoanalytic scenarios of gender identity and subjectivity.

But poetry practices poetic license, taking an imaginary detour off the symbolic path. The violent appropriation of the feminine figure by the masculine that so often comprises in poetic convention the originary enunciatory moment—rape sublimated as poetic ravishing—illuminates the ideological specificity of sexual difference and its relation historically to poetry and aesthetic representation. The ideology of gender is inscribed in poetry through such hierachized images as dominating male/dominated female figures. A solitary woman is represented as violable; that is, she is intolerable when she remains independent of the man.[2] He must make his presence *felt.* Her protests of violation are brutally silenced by/in beautiful language. This pattern of the woman's loss of autonomy from the male term, *voice* as synecdoche for *self,* reveals that for the masculine subject woman "is unnecessary in and of herself, but essential as the non-subjective subjectum," as Luce Irigaray observes.[3] The poem must replace her, because the poet must prove the durability, the potency, of his word: gender violation slips handily into a trope for the creation of poetry itself.[4]

Ovid's *The Metamorphoses* plays upon and tells its stories through this slippage, suggesting not only that "the politics of violence [is] already encoded in rhetorical figures," as Barbara Johnson suggests,[5] but that it is encoded in the structural patterns of a text as well. Nancy J. Vickers contends, for example, that *The Metamorphoses* both illustrates the gender violence in Western cultural constructions and helped to institute it as a canonical poetic feature.[6] The tale of Syrinx epitomizes the heritage of occulting gender politics within the rubric of a universal poetics. Famous for her charms, her elusiveness, and her "bird-like voice" (and thus closely associated with Philomela),[7] Syrinx twittered and sang, "slipped through the clutches of the most nimble satyrs," and because of this inappropriability was by some mistaken for the virgin goddess, Diana.[8] But one day, Pan sees and chases her. This time, Syrinx cannot evade her pursuer, but she does frustrate his worst intentions. Her prayer to be rescued is answered: Pan seizes not a nymph but a "sheaf of

reeds." Her metamorphosis is the lesser of two evils: Syrinx is "saved" by losing herself.

Pan, too, would seem to come out a loser in this turn of events, and yet he is satisfied, for "Pipes are my pleasure; they are mine to keep."[9] If he cannot have Syrinx, she is nevertheless his kept woman, her altered body his instrument, the very medium for his song. Because Pan's (proliferating) pipes function in the genre as a trope for poetry itself, the tale quite literally replaces Syrinx's voice with Pan's lyrics. Unlike Diana, Syrinx is not inviolable, cannot punish her ravisher, and disappears in the process of her own rescue. The unstable status that her metamorphosis represents indicates that what gets restabilized in Ovid's text is the symbolic threat to masculine identity posed by an autonomous feminine voice (and all that it represents synecdochically). When she is overtaken, her body as well as voice are taken over: the reeds are "broken," her lips (and, we presume, other orifices) sealed with wax. She becomes the vessel that conveys "divine" inspiration that is, as it will come down to us through the Romantics, poetry. As inscribed in this tale, woman's disembodiment spells man's gain of poetic inspiration. The reason underlying this repeatedly represented failure to possess the woman physically, that the poem *requires* the absence it seems to lament, is the point of Lacan's observation of that "staggering thing," the "fraud" central to Western poetic tradition, that "courtly love is the only way of coming off elegantly from the absence of sexual relation."[10]

Vickers's feminist analysis of the specularization and fragmentation of the female beloved that characterizes Renaissance love poetry exposes the violence central to the tradition as well, which the term *courtly love* elides. The Ovidian context that Petrarch brings to his poetic portraits of silenced and partial feminine beauty, she asserts, suggests that the relation between masculine seeing and feminine bodily dispersion, Laura-in-pieces (a poetic *corps morcelé*) scattered throughout, is castration anxiety projected onto the figure of woman. Vickers contends that such portraits became a conventional gesture in Western lyric tradition because the resolution, the substitution of poem for woman, displaces the threat.[11]

According to Margaret Homans, the Biblical tradition transmitted through Milton culminates in the "Romantic reading of gender," which most often identifies the feminine with nature and silence, an otherness a masculine self can absorb and dominate.[12] Extending Homans's insights about British Romanticism to the later American Emersonian version, Joanne Feit Diehl argues that in order to be the poet of the common man, Emerson claims the "common" (feminine) domestic sphere for poetic activities at the same time as he denies woman access to the soul's affective life. He thereby doubly disempowers women.[13] Mary Nyquist speculates that the figure of woman in poetry, especially as muse, has to some degree always been represented as "the other who makes possible the creative articulateness of the male voice," hence the obsessive representation of mute, dead, or silenced feminine figures.[14] The image of the male poet as seer and prophet—"Walt Whitman, a kosmos," to name but one example—has produced a fetishized version in the lyric of discourse that occults the ideology of gender, as Teresa de Lauretis asserts of aesthetic structures in general, as well as suppresses the material conditions of gendered experience. That image of the lone male poet as visionary purports to represent universal experience.

Joel Fineman's analysis of Shakespeare's sonnets elaborates the implications of the trajectory I am reviewing. Noting the emphasis in the lyric on visual imagery as well as on subjectivity, he examines Aristotelian metaphor, "to see the same," and characterizes this reflexive generic feature as "the orthodox homogeneity and homosexuality of the poetics of praise."[15] His thesis supports feminist critiques of structuralism—most famously, of Claude Lévi-Strauss's contention that women function like words and things, not subjects, in the symbolic exchange systems that establish bonds, networks, and alliances among men—and helps to confirm that aesthetic as well as social structures are, to invoke Irigaray, *hom(m)ological* in nature.[16] Similarly observing the paradox that characterizes Lévi-Strauss's thinking on this point, de Lauretis states that "One can only conclude that . . . this human subject is male."[17] Speaking of deep sociocultural structures and symbolic patterns, Irigaray has argued that woman is "never anything but the locus of a more or less competitive exchange between two men."[18]

Shelley's "Hymn of Pan," which portrays Pan as insisting on the potency of his songs after he has lost a musical competition to Apollo (a loss Pan suppresses), epitomizes such an exchange. The poem represents within its framework of direct address not only the symbolic structure that pertains to this discussion, but the violent process by which it is reified. Shelley's depiction of Pan suggests that desire posits poetic subjectivity, an implication that apostrophe exposes better than it conceals. Throughout the poem, Pan portrays Apollo as listening, "silent with love" and "envy" of Pan's "sweet pipings."[19] But by the end, it is clear that Apollo is "frozen," not with love or envy, but with indifference, a listener only because the device of apostrophe constitutes him as one. Culler examines how a poet employs apostrophe to posit an inanimate or unresponsive object as another subject, in order to assert "the condition of vision-ary poet who can engage in dialogue with the universe." The device figures the poetic subject's claim that he does not merely write verse, but embodies "poetic tradition and the spirit of poesy."[20] Although he has lost the contest, Pan can still win if his songs move Apollo to tears.

In the poem's resolution, Pan's recollection of his frustrated attempt to possess a "maiden" (he suppresses not only Syrinx's name but the reason for her metamorphosis) changes both Pan's line of thought, his *tune*, and the poem's theme:

> And then I changed my pipings,–
> Singing how down the vale of Maenalus
>   I pursued a maiden and clasped a reed.
> Gods and men, we are all deluded thus!
>
> (lines 29–32)

The elusive maiden replaced by the reed becomes sign for the epis-temological crisis that Pan, as representative of the male poetic sub-ject, finally confronts. But in order to close with a universalized claim in the tradition of philosophical idealism, that appearances are deceptive, the text must suppress the literal violence, a discur-sive trace of which it restores at the end. The allusion, like the the-matic interruption, creates a break in the formal surface of the poem through which the *other* frozen body surfaces: Syrinx's living

body has been permanently "frozen" into the image of the dead reed that she quickly became in Pan's hands. Her fate is the inverse of Pan's attempted animation of Apollo: originally animate, Syrinx has been rendered inanimate.

Pan's suppression underscores the masculine creative invest-ment in its representations of the feminine, the tendency to jettison woman in order to consolidate a unitary masculine subject (a point I will take up more closely in chapter 2 in relation to Dickinson and the sublime), as well as the revelation that it is Apollo, not Syrinx, that Pan wishes to engage in (poetic) intercourse. But in represent-ing the real nature of Apollo's indifference to Pan, the homological, specular desire that occasions the Romantic male subject's entry into language, Shelley's poem endorses the masculine social bonds that Irigaray criticizes for being exclusionary.

Although surely ironic, his portrait of the artist rehearses the appropriation of the feminine in the service of poetry. Pan's desire for Apollo's rather than Syrinx's attentions is based on the generic tradition of a richly self-reflexive construct. Male poets in Western tradition have been free to ponder metaphysical and aesthetic "truths" (for example, the valorization of Apollonion constraint over Dionysian excess), without concern for whether such "univer-sal truths" could in fact be true for all. Even those poets whose works are most associated with a radical revision and subversion of the lyric "I" illustrate the rhetorical blind spot of Western poetic tra-dition that figures woman but grammatically elides women.

Consider Whitman, whose poetry has significantly influenced twentieth-century fictions and inflections of Western poetic subjec-tivity. The Romantic speaker in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rock-ing" locates his origins as poet, as well as the source of the poem itself, in the disappearance of a female bird. The speaker construes a performative transformation of identity at the expense, in effect, of the feminine.[21] Through a series of curious reversals after the bird's departure, the "curious child" is able to pronounce himself "the outsetting bard."

The speaker's description of watching the nesting birds antici-pates the poetic authority he will come to assume. Although he keeps his distance spatially, the speaker imaginatively violates the birds. Privy to their language, he is also privy to its meaning, "never

too close, never disturbing them, / Cautiously peering, absorbing, translating" (lines 30–31).[22] The boy already stands in the privileged position of visionary poet able to comprehend the incomprehensible, which the transformation into bardic identity thus merely formalizes.

We should by now not be surprised at the dynamic that structures such self-recognition. The constitution of this self-creating "bard" rests on the boy replacing the lost mate. Listening to the male bird's lament unleashes "love in the [boy's] heart" (line 137) and arouses "the fire, the sweet hell within, / The unknown want, the destiny of me" (lines 156–57), awakening the boy's own "songs." Desire comes into being, not only as a function of his voyeuristic gaze, but as a relationship established between two male figures catalyzed by the departure of the feminine figure. The distance between the speaker and the birds collapses in an imaginatively reversed apostrophe that disguises its performative *léger-de-voix* (so to speak): the boy asks whether it is "toward your mate you sing? Or is it really to me?" (line 145). But if the boy seems now to stand rhetorically in the place of the beloved, his "translations" (the poetic text) have subtly replaced not only the vanished female bird, but the male bird's lament itself.[23]

The boy/bard's songs find their source not in the discovery of sexuality, as the text claims, but in the recognition that desire translates into poetic identity. The rites of passage into sexuality symbolize the boy's more significant passage into textuality,[24] as the speaker's earlier use of "translation" suggests. His coming into an authorizing relationship to words is consummated by the revelation that he can translate "The word of the sweetest song and all songs" that the "old crone" sea whispers to him: "death" (lines 180–82). The last line ("The sea whisper'd me") is ambiguous, suggesting both that the sea whispers to the boy and that "she" speaks, metaphorically *bears*, the bard into being. But either reading makes the poet present to himself. The speaker's capacity to pronounce the "final" word is the sign of his birth not only into poetic identity but into linguistic authority. The bard's newly attained poetic power to inspire, to put words in the mouth of, the omnipotent crone/sea, who can then be represented as speaking him into being, is the very sign of that authority (and, incidentally, the final ironic reversal of the poem). The text's

proliferating voices—the speaker's "thousand . . . songs," his "translations" of the bird's lament, the sea's whisperings—arguably cannot be "contained" within a unified "one." But tellingly, the repressed of Whitman's poem, like that of Shelley's, is the sexual politics that structure it.

The claims for poetry, from its being divine inspiration to its being the unselfconscious expression of an individual voice overheard, have rendered it an especially idealized (or, to put it another way, defensive) discourse. While the work of such theorists as Culler and Paul de Man has helped to expose the idealizing tendencies of the genre, male-authored poststructuralist writing has itself perpetuated the dynamic of "the putting into discourse of 'woman'" to valorize a masculine activity in writing, as Alice Jardine aptly characterized the pattern she termed *gynesis* some time ago. Jardine's question, What do these discourses have to do with women?[25] is not simply rhetorical, since it poses the distinction between woman, as symbolic sign, and real women, as speaking subjects, on which de Lauretis has insisted as well.

A wry poem invoked by de Lauretis that raises this question as a grammatical issue is Muriel Rukeyser's "Myth," which I quote in full:

> Long afterward, Oedipus, old and blinded, walked the
> roads.   He smelled a familiar smell.   It was
> the Sphinx.   Oedipus said, "I want to ask one question.
> Why didn't I recognize my mother?"   "You gave the
> wrong answer," said the Sphinx.   "But that was what
> made everything possible," said Oedipus.   "No," she said,
> "When I asked, What walks on four legs in the morning,
> two at noon, and three in the evening, you answered,
> Man.   You didn't say anything about woman."
> "When you say Man," said Oedipus, "you include women
> too. Everyone knows that."   She said, "That's what
> you think."[26]

While the poem pokes lighthearted fun at masculinist fantasies of linguistic inclusion (as well as of odorless femininity!), it also draws very pointed connections between grammatical exclusion, rhetori-

cal misreading, and the subsequent tragic (and implicitly *prevent-able*) consequences of inclusionary fictions. In so doing, it illustrates Craig Owens's assertion that women artists are concerned to address "what representation *does* to women (for example, the way it invariably positions them as objects of the male gaze)."[27]

The difference between two modern versions of Helen, one by W. B. Yeats and the other by H.D., further exemplifies Owens's point. Yeats's "No Second Troy" images Maude Gonne as Helen, it would first seem, to elevate her beauty to a mythic level: it is "not natural in an age like this" (line 9).[28] But the analogy excoriates Maude, who in teaching "most violent ways" has, we are encouraged to conclude, not only filled the speaker's days "[w]ith misery" but made a spectacle of herself. In suppressing the context of Maude's political commitment to Irish independence in order to lay a personal blame at her door (in addition, the final question, "Was there another Troy for her to burn?" [line 12], demonstrates a curious confusion of agency), Yeats's poem suggests how, in order to be rendered solely in relation to the male term, the woman behind the figure of woman must be decontextualized. H.D.'s poem "Helen" reproduces the process of such iconicization of woman, but is concerned to demonstrate that it has literally lethal consequences for women. Lingering over the parts of Helen's body (that is, miming the Petrarchan gesture), the text portrays her slow death beneath the castigating as well as fetishizing gaze of "All Greece," metonym for the force of the whole patriarchal history of blaming the woman (*CP*, 154–55). The pallor of this woman both damned and deified for her beauty is, as Susan Stanford Friedman has remarked, a deathly one.[29] By the final stanza, her perfect "white face" has turned to "white ash amid funereal cypresses," literally and figuratively dematerialized by the objectifying eye of scopic and cultural judgment.

Following Catharine A. MacKinnon, de Lauretis contends that because art has historically upheld women's socialization as sexual objects, reiterating as well as regulating the power differential between men and women that characterizes the institution of heterosexuality, aesthetics is a *political* subject.[30] Like Woolf in the epigraph that opened this chapter, de Lauretis emphasizes that the figure of woman is paradoxical, "a being that is at once captive and

absent in discourse, . . . displayed as spectacle and still unrepresented or unrepresentable,"[31] and asserts the need to maintain the distinction between woman and women. The Rukeyser and H.D. poems discussed above confront the problem in grammar and representation that de Lauretis calls a real and irreconcilable contradiction: that "women continue to become woman."[32] Woman is present in rhetoric, trope, figure; but women are absent in grammar, logic, scheme. Ironizing the (il)logic of women's place in relation to men, Rukeyser as well as H.D. find there is none—*nowhere* in the conventional scheme of things other than for scheming woman, who *is* present grammatically as well as figuratively, as the always-marked term. What is a woman to say?

An example that will serve to illustrate an alternative is posed by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the poet who represented for Emily Dickinson both poetic foremother and the proto-feminist claim to female poetic subjectivity. Invoking Irigaray, de Lauretis asserts that if women's perspectival difference, their "view from 'elsewhere,'" still seems invisible, it is not because women artists (or feminist theorists) have not succeeded in producing it. Rather, it is

> that what we have produced is not recognizable, precisely, as a representation. For that "elsewhere" is not some mythic distant past or some utopian future history: it is the elsewhere of discourse here and now, the blind spots, or the space-off, of its representations.[33]

Barrett Browning's retelling of the Pan/Syrinx myth, "A Musical Instrument," shares similarities with the male-authored heritage, most notably the outline of its plot. But its differences prefigure de Lauretis's insight that the "elsewhere" of women's perspectives is already encoded in the "space-offs" of hegemonic discourse. The repetition of the same story does not, that is, produce the Same story.[34]

Like the Shelley and Whitman poems, Barrett Browning's raises questions about poetic power, identity, and subjectivity. But in dwelling on Pan's mutilation of the living reed to make his pipes, "A Musical Instrument" dissects, rather than glosses over or romanticizes, the violence of the originary moment. Pan "hacked and

hewed" until "there was not a sign of the leaf" (lines 15, 17).[35] He "cut" the once "tall" reed "short," "then drew the pith, like the heart of a man," and "notched the poor dry empty thing / In holes" (lines 23–24). As in the canonical tale, the reed is killed to bear art forth. It is imaged as masculine, not feminine, however first implicitly in the fourth stanza in the likening of the reed's pith to a man's heart, and then explicitly in the last stanza when Pan is described as "Making a poet out of a man" (line 39). In Barrett Browning's version, considerably more than Syrinx's body has been transformed. The chilling scene of "creation" that displaces the attempted rape in Ovid's tale characterizes the relation between poetry and poetic power as permanently disfiguring.

Paradoxically, the poet gains (rather than loses, like Syrinx) his identity through this process. The poem's explicit theme is whether the disfiguration that gain entails is worth the "pain" it cost the poet. As the reed's leaves are hacked off, its height cropped, its insides emptied, the poem visually associates it with the male "instrument" itself. It irreverently reproduces the homological poetic structure reviewed above, as well as the accompanying tendency in the lyric to homogenize voices. Because of the connections the text draws between poetic power, masculinity, and violence, Barrett Browning's insight in this poem thus seems a radical one.

Anticipating Vickers's compelling point, the poem suggests that the sadomasochistic fantasy of divine ravishment that defines the romantic poet is transfigured castration anxiety.[36] It inscribes the simultaneous reassurance of and threat to masculinity that, Barrett Browning's text indicates, writing poetry seems to entail for male poets (hence so many of the defenses of poetry are couched in the rhetoric of a revised "manliness").[37] The act that most establishes the reed as male, the hacking off of the leaves to reveal the reed's phallic attributes, also depicts the process that transforms man into poet as emasculating, producing an ambiguity of gender. No longer feminine, the reed is nevertheless not wholly masculine either: after cutting it down to size, Pan reintroduces the "holes" that Barrett Browning's version has previously erased. This effeminization of the reed suggests the fine line between the reed's masculinization and the poet's emasculation.

In the space between them, Barrett Browning implies that the engendering of violence is a defensive posture against castration anxiety (a point to which we will return in chapter 4), the masculine subject projecting fears of gender ambiguity onto the feminine. She thereby renders the invisible elsewhere a visible here-and-now, intervening upon the conventional image of woman as passive vessel through which lyric song is born. Pan's notching activity *re*inscribes the identifying feminine lack ("holes") as already within the masculine.[38] The "feminine" is symbolically altered, no longer a sign now for the male poet's empowerment but more accurately a screen image for a masculine hysteria, the male subject in crisis. Barrett Browning subtly re-presents poetic identity as emasculated, uncannily effeminized, indeterminately bisexualized (in a word, problematically *feminine*),[39] encoding the cultural heritage of gender asymmetry as an "empty" misrecognition.

Substantively rewriting the earlier versions of Syrinx's loss of voice, Barrett Browning exposes the sexual politics on which traditional lyric conventions are based. She transforms the textual implication that women were absent from the "divine scene" of poetic production, as she calls it elsewhere, into a critique of the scene itself. Her transsexualization of the reed shifts the perspective on the conventional codes. Although the poem astutely intuits masculine posturing as defensive, however, revealing its stature to be an illusion (though a grand one), Barrett Browning's "solution" to women's defilement by the signifier (to paraphrase Lacan) is, as it were, a dissolution. As John Fletcher observes, the poem leaves unanswered how one might make "a poet out of a woman."[40] It reproduces the historical silencing of women poets Barrett Browning otherwise decried, a protest with which the next section will open.

A WOMAN OF DEEP ACQUIREMENTS

England has had many learned women, not merely readers but writers of the learned languages, in Elizabeth's time and afterwards—women of deeper acquirements than are common now in the greater diffusion of letters; and yet where were the poetesses? The divine breath . . . why did it never pass, even in the lyrical form, over the lips of a woman? How strange! And

can we deny that it was so? I look everywhere for grandmothers and see none. It is not in the filial spirit I am deficient, I do assure you—witness my reverent love of the grandfathers!
                                                    —Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Letters*

⇛

Full of questions and exclamations, this famous passage from Barrett Browning's letters is a text at odds with itself.[41] The statement about the erudition of women in the past is part of a coordinated structure: a question follows the first clause that attenuates the assurance of women's historical accomplishments ("and yet . . . "). To be sure, the passage insists on the inexplicability of women's absence from the "divine" scene of poetic production, but we look everywhere for *authorial* assurance and see none except the insistence on "filial spirit."

But because we see nothing, is there nothing to see? Barrett Browning protests too much. The grandmothers may be absent, but she commands visibility ("witness my reverent love"). The grandmothers may have been deficient, but she is sufficient, for reasons having less to do with of her reverence for the grandfathers than with her striking rhetorical strategy. Her insistent questioning of why poetry alone of all literary genres was not written by women, and her choice of the exclamatory "strange" to characterize that (uncanny) absence, are cast within the framework of the idealization of poetic discourse. That miming of the Romantic defense of poetry calls attention to itself, at the same time as it deflects focus from the implications of her meaning.

Barrett Browning poses the issue of the grandmothers' absence as a rhetorical question ("can we deny that it was so?"). De Man has usefully analyzed the specific ambiguity of the rhetorical question, in reference to the last line of Yeats's "Among School Children" ("How can we know the dancer from the dance?"). The grammatical model of the question is itself devoid of ambiguity, he asserts, but signifies through its rhetorical mode two mutually exclusive meanings—one at the literal, the other at the figurative, level. When grammar and logic support each other, de Man observes, linguistic as well thematic coherences are maintained. But when two entirely contradictory meanings prevail, it being impossible to decide

between them, rhetoric "radically suspends logic," opening up "vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration."[42] By means of her rhetorical question, in other words, Barrett Browning manages vertiginously to say not only that we can, but at the same time that we *cannot*, deny that the "divine breath" has passed women's lips. The question opens a space in which to interrogate women's absence.

It is no coincidence, of course, that sexual difference plays a part in both instances of this "rhetorization of grammar," de Man's term for the semantic effect, as that which is present but un(re)marked by de Man himself. Nor is it accidental that issues of thematic consistency, schematic and figural symmetry, and rhetorical balance arise in the context of an analysis of an intersexual dialogue about "difference" that he canonizes: Archie and Edith Bunker's (his first example of the rhetorization of grammar). One must not "yield," de Lauretis dryly remarks, to such "referential aberrations." De Man, for instance, goes on to erase the eruption of gendered differences by discussing Yeats and Proust, analyzing the grammatization (mechanization) of rhetoric and demonstrating finally that poetic writing is not irresolvably indeterminate (as perhaps is gender difference), though it be "forever the most rigorous and . . . the most unreliable language in terms of which man names and modifies himself."[43] There is "something accurate about [the] repeated dramatization of woman as simulacrum, erasure, or silence," Barbara Johnson remarks: "For it would not be easy to assert that the existence and knowledge of the female subject could simply be produced, without difficulty or epistemological damage, within the existing patterns of culture and language."[44] The rhetorical contortions of Barrett Browning's brief passage, like those in "A Musical Instrument," attest to her awareness of the threat to epistemological systems (and her male reader's comfort) were women to have drawn breath in that rarified masculine air of poetry. But the passage also dramatizes how Barrett Browning strategizes her position as speaking subject equivocally, within "existing patterns" of grammar and rhetoric, by logically suspending logic. She constitutes herself as the referential aberration contradicting women's absorption into symbolic figuration.

It is in such a radical suspension of coherence between logic, grammatical pattern, and rhetorical mode that I locate the pun in this study's title, *scheming* women. In classical rhetoric, which de Man redefines as poetic writing, tropes are semantic deviations, while schemes are syntactic deviations, deviations of normative grammatical patterns. But schemes as well as tropes have been classified as figures, because such mechanical deviations also can influence a text's meaning. It is fairly self-evident that the basic distinction between schemes, nonsignifying deviations of word order (chiasmus, for example), and tropes, signifying semantic deviations (metaphor, for example), can blur, as a passage from Mary Jacobus's brilliant reading of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" readily illustrates. Noting a moment in the story's climax structured by a chiasmus, Jacobus asserts:

> The figure here is the grammatical figure of chiasmus, or crossing (*OED*: "The order of words in one of two parallel clauses is inverted in the other"). "I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled" prepares us for the exchange of roles at the end, where the woman reading (and writing) the text becomes the figure of madness within it. Gilman's story hysterically embodies the formal or grammatical figure. . . .
> . . . Since chiasmus is at once a specular figure and a figure of symmetrical inversion, it could be regarded as the structure of phallogocentrism itself, where word and woman mirror only the presence of the (masculine) body, reinforcing the hierarchy man/woman, presence/absence.[45]

How can the syntactic inversion of the "order of words" (scheme) become a "grammatical figure" (a "mechanized" trope)? Throughout the passage, the borders between structural and figural features, scheme and trope, are chiastically crossed and confused. In order to theorize a female-authored text that represents chiasmus as a figure for the prison house that symbolic structures have been for women, Jacobus must perform the very rhetorization of grammar whose significance she is, in fact, analyzing. In order to read a woman's lines as lines written by a woman, in other words, Jacobus must read between them.

Julia Kristeva's theory of poetic language does not purport to conceptualize female subjectivity, but she does provide us with a linguistic pattern, a schematization of linguistic registers, that theorizes the feminine's (or more precisely, the maternal's) place in subjectivity as well as text. A scheme is a syntactic pattern, but a deviant one. Kristeva arguably does not allow for female subjectivity. In de Lauretis's view, as well as that of others, Kristeva's human subject—indeed, Kristeva herself—is thus "male."[46] Kristeva theorizes a *pattern*, perhaps a normative (shall we say "masculine"?) pattern, but one from which a woman can deviate. As the phrase *scheming women* implies and Johnson reminds us, however, it isn't easy to produce a female subject without epistemological damage to existing patterns of culture and language. Recognizing the specificity of women's differences is far more difficult or threatening than is the mimetic revelation of woman as sign (the substance of the first section's discussion).

As we have seen, rhetoric and grammar do not always support each other. Nor do Kristeva's analogous linguistic modalities of semiotic (nonsignifying) and symbolic (signifying) in her theory of subjectivity. Rather, rhetoric and grammar oscillate between support and subversion, and, in that schematic deviation from the normative order of things, form not only affects but resemanticizes content. De Man's anxiety about, as well as interest in, the resulting indetermination of this suspension of fixed meaning (an anxiety both Johnson and de Lauretis note as well) might suggest why, in the age of second wave feminism, he so fully erased the possibility of female subjectivity. (It is, for example, the last sentence of "Semiology and Rhetoric" that defines literature as the language in which "man names and modifies himself.") To recall the passage that opened this section, Barrett Browning's letter indicates that standard, or "masculine," techniques are of course employed by women as well as men, but when they are, both Owens and Jardine assert, they are "modified." Words, images, structures are resemanticized.

Women have functioned in the symbolic order not only as objects of exchange analogous with words and things, but in the social order as surfaces reflecting and augmenting masculinity, behind which they disappear. If representation conditions feminine

sexuality and subjectivity, as Lacan implies in the quotation serving as an epigraph to this chapter; and if, as Jardine and de Lauretis have noted, women become conflated with the androcentric representation of femininity; and if the implication of that insight is that woman is represented but women are not; then how, one might ask, "can a girl be conceived?"[47] To respond to that question in terms of women's poetry, we must think what the Oedipus of Rukeyser's "Myth" and Johnson's "de Man" could not: we must reconsider the specificity of female subjects, and relate that particularity to the grammatical and rhetorical schematization sketched out above.

TO MAKE A POET OUT OF A WOMAN

The psychoanalytic staging of subject formation within the heterogeneity of language paves the way for grammatology, Kristeva claims.[48] Like many materialist feminists, as well as other "French feminists," Irigaray and Hélène Cixous among them, Kristeva assumes that representations are historically situated and ideologically produced. To change the socioeconomic scene, it is therefore necessary to alter radically the representational system. For the Kristeva of *Revolution in Poetic Language*, an alteration of master signifiers in the culture can potentially transform the social order and thus change the subject, which is constituted in symbolic discourse and lives through its representations. Because of the transference entailed in the act of reading (the reader identifies with the subject of the text), the *reading*, as well as writing, subject is altered by this revolutionary subjectivity.[49] Beginning in the nineteenth century, Kristeva asserts, avant-garde poetry articulates such a subject. My approach to the work of the poets on which this study focuses is to a great degree framed by this definition of poetry and subject.

Framed indeed. Kristeva forecloses on the possibility of women writing revolutionary poetic language. For her (at least in one incarnation, "Stabat Mater"), women's identification with their mothers causes them to lose themselves when they enter the symbolic order. Men, of course, must separate from their mothers in order to establish their identity. They gain from the abjection that establishes them in the symbolic order; women lose. Women poets are

Kristeva's blind spot, which can be usefully exposed if one reads her against as well as with the grain (a methodology her theory invites). She writes in a note to the translator, for example, that because the subject of *Revolution in Poetic Language* is "universal," she employs *he* to signify both sexes. She adds, however, that in "reality, feminine 'subjectivity' is a different question."[50] If the subject is universal, why is feminine subjectivity a "different question"? Although it is now a truism that "feminine subjectivity" is not a linguistic position that necessarily denotes female subjects, Kristeva's employment of the third-person masculine pronoun throughout *Revolution in Poetic Language* is remarkably consistent with her discussion of male poets. I am interested in examining the substance of this aside, this "different question," which is also, obviously, a question of difference in relation to poetic subject and text. To do so, I would like first to consider briefly her notion of universal subjectivity and revolutionary poetry.

Revolution in Poetic Language concurs in broad terms with Lacan on the subject's constitution. The child must separate from the mother, through the mirror stage and the discovery of castration, in order to introduce "the signifier/signified break" productive of both subjectivity and social communication. Identity is first experienced as both specular (the child's image unified in the mirror) and separate/divided (the image is not the child). In Kristeva's mirror stage, unlike Lacan's, the child mistakes neither its image nor the mother wholly for itself. It differentiates itself from, as well as identifies itself with, both. It is already instituted in processes of separation and identification that will be transferred to language, eventually enabling the subject (the signified) to acknowledge that it is not present in that which constitutes it (the signifier).[51] According to Kristeva, there is no seamless imaginary plenitude of maternal/specular identification for the child. Although, as in Lacan's scenario, the father's intervention in the mother-child dyad inaugurates the child's entry into the social contract, Kristeva does not give his role the weight of initiation that Lacan does; she redistributes it to the mother. The Kristevan father merely fills a position in a structure already in place in the subject-to-be.[52]

Kristeva terms the subject's necessary but provisional assumption of a positionality (identification) the "thetic." The thetic is the

"precondition for signification" because it recognizes the place of the Other (separation) in the processes of identification. The thetic marks the threshold of heterogeneous contradiction between the semiotic (nonsignifying elements) and the symbolic (signifying processes). The *Symbolic,* "an appropriate term for this always split unification," is comprised, then, of both *semiotic* and *symbolic* modalities.[53] This important distinction explains how Kristeva can locate the mirror stage in the Symbolic order, before the subject takes its place in language.

Her theory restores the repressed, the significance of the mother's role in the development of the subject. She casts this development as an early function of intrasubjective differentiation, which the mother regulates but into which the child does not assimilate her, that precedes the mirror stage and entrance into the symbolic. The confrontation between these actions prepares the subject-to-be for the transfer to the linguistic level of the negativity ("drive rejection") already present at the physiological level (for example, in bodily functions). This transfer institutes the symbolic rejection that undermines identity even as it is posited.[54] Kristeva brings the speaking body back into structuralism, Kelly Oliver explains, by reinscribing not only the body within language (biological drives), but language within the body: "For Kristeva, just as the pattern and logic of language are already found within the body, the pattern and logic of alterity are already found within the subject."[55]

Kristeva builds on Lacan's notions of fantasy, separation, castration, and division as integral to positing the subject in language. Rather than rejecting the symbolic order (because such a rejection would "open the way to psychosis," as Jacqueline Rose explains),[56] she concurs that it is the social realm and that our condition as split subjects is "the common destiny of the two sexes, men and women."[57] She agrees that men and women share a *linguistic* destiny. But in theorizing the place of the maternal function, her work diverges from orthodox psychoanalytic theory in a number of ways useful in thinking about gender, subjectivity, and poetry.

In postulating the semiotic *chora,* she attempts to theorize the importance of the mother all but absent in Lacan's and Freud's thinking. The *chora* is tied in with the preoedipal drives that "con-

nect and orient" the child's body to the mother, which are trans-
ferred to subjectivity. There is something "nourishing and mater-
nal" as well as disruptive about the semiotic.[58] Although it
"logically and chronologically precedes the establishment of the
symbolic and its subject,"[59] it can only be "designated" by dis-
course, which "regulates" it. It precedes as well as underlies figura-
tion and thus identification ("specularization") in and by language.
The *chora* marks the symbolic with the negativity that produces it
(the moment within linguistic unity that shatters it).[60] The *chora* and
the symbolic are, in sum, mutually constructive and destructive of
the subject.

Revolutionary poetic writing demonstrates this structuration.
Poetic language is a heterogeneous, signifying "process . . . a struc-
turing and de-structuring *practice*."[61] The text puts the interaction of
symbolic and semiotic modalities into a form that makes possible
the articulation of psychic processes and an engagement of the lim-
its of meaning without becoming nonsense. Kristeva contends that
poetic prosody is not the representation of the unconscious (or, for
that matter, of the "real" in any of its senses), but "its expenditure,"
its discharge. Prosody "recalls," spatially and musically, the dialec-
tical moment of signification, the subject-in-process, the double
articulation of signifier and signified.[62] In poetry it is obvious,
Oliver observes, that the meaningful but nonsignifying aspects of
prosody—rhythm, tone, music—are just as important as the signify-
ing elements of language. (And to a poet, of course, it is obvious that
the distinction between signifying and nonsignifying meaning is
very difficult to maintain.) In the poetic text the heterogeneity in
the signifying function is at its most apparent: "Poetic language is
language that is also not language, language that is other to itself."[63]

Kristeva's poetic theory is reminiscent of de Man's grammar/
rhetoric split (or the reverse, as she claims). Poetic language "dem-
onstrates that it is possible for a signifying process to be different
from the process of unifying conceptual thought."[64] Poetry is asso-
ciated with social practices that unsettle bourgeois hegemony—eso-
tericism, shamanism, carnival—because, like them, poetry demysti-
fies the unifying operations of language and the symbolic bond
itself.[65] It is revolutionary in the sense that it articulates a crisis of
meaning to which it submits language that supports sociocultural