English Studies in Canada

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Volume 47, Number 2-3, June 2021, September 2021

Lacan Now

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1111878ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/esc.2021.a919368

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Publisher(s)

Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English (ACCUTE)

ISSN

0317-0802 (print)
1913-4835 (digital)

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Cite this article

Pero, A. (2021). Whose Sex Is It Anyway? Lacan, Sexual Difference, and the Sinthome. *English Studies in Canada*, *47*(2-3), 79–99. https://doi.org/10.1353/esc.2021.a919368

Whose Sex Is It Anyway?: Lacan, Sexual Difference, and the *Sinthome*

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The title of my essay is indebted to the play and later film *Whose Life Is It Anyway?,* starring Richard Dreyfuss. The 1981 film problematically explored some of the ethical and legal questions surrounding the right to die. Here, I will offer some thoughts on the right to sex and, more specifically, the right to gender. The right to gender is, in traditional terms, one of determination—one determined by the laws of the state and those of biology. However, as the work of theorists like Judith Butler have shown us, the discourses of power informing such determinations produce gender trouble; indeed, some would say nothing but gender trouble. As we know, her primary insight is that gender is socially determined, and we are, to a little or large extent, cast in gender roles and are constantly given directorial or discursive "notes" about the relative success of our performances; for her, gender is marked linguistically and theatrically (xxv). Gender is, in this sense, as we have repeated to each other ad nauseum, socially constructed. Gender troubled souls buck against the discursive constraints of genders imposed from without; however, the emergence of trans theory and the greater attention paid to trans people has in turn troubled the particular fantasy of gender as social construction. Or, a more nuanced way of saying it is that we create or produce in cultural terms what we, through repetition, ideologically call essences of gender.

ESC 47.2–3 (June/September 2021): 79–99

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What I am suggesting is that Butler has perhaps helped us get at a particular set of social problems informing gender and its performance, but social constructivism itself has a blind spot, or scotoma, if you prefer: the aesthetics and ontology of gender as they are experienced by people in gender transition. I say aesthetics and ontology because I believe that both of these factors are crucial to our beginning to theorize in more nuanced terms what must be reconsidered—the possibility that we rather hastily dismissed the role of essence in the staging and living of gender fantasy. Of course, I must be careful here. How can one think about ontology, of being *qua* being, without falling into essentialism? God forbid we return to pseudo-notions like "Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus." Instead, we must consider how gendered beings are coextensively marked by something outside of being—the signifier, which cannot be utterly colonized or reduced to the Symbolic; the signifier as such is of the Real, "related to the points of structural impossibility/contradiction of symbolic reality itself" (Zupančič 41). Trans people reveal another dimension of this structural impossibility—the Real is always with us, as an impasse that disrupts our tidy attempts to anchor gender and sexuality to classified bodies (we know this because these disruptions keep happening). This impasse disrupts and confronts us with other forms of being for which meaning cannot account. The failure, then, is that of the Imaginary and the Symbolic, of the gap in meaning, not of a particular person's failure at sex or gender.

So, how to begin? With a small difference. In *Seminar XIX: … Or Worse*, what is the small difference to which Lacan repeatedly refers? He is of course speaking of the difference implied by the phrase "Vive la différence!" That is, the difference that marks little boys and little girls, but, as he goes on to argue, there is an empty place that informs this small difference. Hence the use of ellipsis in the title *… Or Worse.* The ellipsis marks this absence; recall that the etymology of ellipsis is "fall short, or leave out." There is something left out, disjointed around which the small difference circulates. His point is that we mask what falls short in discourse, indeed, around the bit of the Real that necessitates discourse in the first place: the idea that there is no sexual relationship. In other words, it is in the nature of language to fall short. Language perforce cannot say everything, cannot speak everything, much less the fullness of truth. But it does not mean that we do not (sometimes) try our best. We cover what truth we cannot articulate with discourse. But why can we not speak the whole truth? As Lacan says, the reason is that "There is no such thing as metalanguage" (*Seminar XIX* 4). We can only fix meaning in language by recourse to language; we cannot step outside it and use another means to do so. But

is there an outside to language? Yes. For Lacan, this would be the Real; it, as we know, resists symbolization. It would be worse to refuse or deny the impossibility of a sexual relation because it would constitute a disavowal of the role the Real plays in its impossibility.

But if we turn to the term "worse," what would something worse be? It would be to suggest that there is a sexual relationship, or *rapport sexuel*. Allow me to back up a bit and turn briefly to a crucial moment in Lacanian thought: the conclusion to *Seminar VII*. Where does *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* leave us? At an impasse, one that Lacan is at pains to overcome. Catharsis, he reminds us, is a purification of desire. Antigone, he claims, is the embodiment of pure desire, having crossed the limits of fear and pity. She does not attempt to escape this zone, set forth by Creon's obscene law; she accepts that its only escape is Death, which is what she desires. That is, there is *nothing else*—it is what Lacan will much later call the zero of the Real. She does not yield her desire but is steadfast in her commitment to it, in what Lacan will later call "speaking well" of one's desire, of taking responsibility for it, of letting one's jouissance speak. It is, in other words, the Thing worth dying for. But recall, the Thing—Polynices, her dead brother, whom she is determined to bury, even at the cost of her life—is already a no-thing. She enjoys the no-thing, the lack in the Thing, which the death drive makes appear. The death drive is, perforce, subtractive. It separates the undead Thing (Polynices, who is physically dead, but symbolically alive, thus undead) from its symbolic consistency or articulation. The paradox of Antigone's act—that, out of love, she buries her brother—can only be accomplished symbolically on the other side of the Law—that is, the Real. She is presented, and this is the pledge and seal of the obscenity of Creon's decree, with what? The Real of her desire.

But what is the impasse? I claim that Lacan has reached a stumbling block: How can we tell the difference between the jouissance of transgression and pure desire? His argument is that, as an image, Antigone's act is to resist the superegoic moral law set forth by Creon—the lure of indulging the evil that he desires (and that the neighbour, the Chorus, implores her to desire). However, we are left nevertheless with Antigone's body hanging in the cave. This is the impasse; yes, Antigone, in her act, has avoided the obscene jouissance that Creon claims to symbolize in the name of the Law, but the problem is that we are left with the symbolic remainder: Antigone's corpse. Yes, she absorbs the force of the Real. This is the beauty of her act, which shapes how we might perceive the discovery of her body, but the remainder, her lifeless body, means that she has not left the Symbolic behind. My view is that Lacan does not resolve this impasse.

This is why these two readings remain possible: one resolves it "negatively," that is, transposing it back onto the Kanto-Sadean problems of excess or transgression, while the other interpretation resolves it "positively," pushing past Lacan's impasse into a case for an ethics of the Real that the text of *Seminar VII* does not conclusively make. This impasse prompts him to move slowly toward the questions of sexuation and the *sinthome*.

Does this mean we need repair to reactionary notions of sexuality and gender? Is Lacan's thought thus not "unconsciously" heteronormative or policing gender performance? By way of beginning to answer these questions, we should recall that what is less well-known about Lacan was that he was the first psychoanalyst to train gay and lesbian subjects as analysts (Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan* 254). Homosexuality was then viewed by the International Psychoanalytic Association (IPA) as a pathology, perforce disqualifying queer subjects from becoming analysts. Lacan's view was that perversion was a structure of love itself rather than a question of sexual behaviour. Not only did he train gay and lesbian subjects as analysts, but, as Patricia Gherovici tells us, he was also one of the first analysts in France to work with an analysand in gender transition, not as a pathological case but as a set of ontological problems around the analysand's desire (87). In *Séminaire XVIII*, we are treated to the first introduction to Lacan's notorious "formulas of sexuation" (Gherovici 146). It remains one of the most misunderstood dimensions of his thought. It has been variously dismissed as prescribing or, at best, reinscribing particular forms of gender binarism and heteronormativity. In other words, he was accused of being an enemy of the multiple; as we know, masculine and feminine are retained as Symbolic positions. But these positions are not in a binary relation. However, they do retain the logic of sexual difference.

But the sexual difference of what? Of a relationship to the phallic function or how a subject's desire responds to the phallic function, which, as Lacan repeatedly reminds us, explains the following: a masculinized identification with the phallic function means that he is not without having it (the phallus), whilst a feminized relation to the phallic function is that she is the phallus without having it. The feminized position in sexuation is the freedom of not having to worry about not having the phallus, whereas the masculinized position in sexuation is one in which he is condemned to worry about whether he has it, has lost it, mislaid it, or failed it. This dilemma, or lack thereof, has nothing to do with gender; one can identify with the phallic function (or not) and be a man, a woman, a trans man, or a trans woman, and one—whatever one's gender—can be the phallus as signifier without having the phallus precisely because *no one* has the phal-

lus. Again, as a reminder, even the phallus is not "One." And the reason is that as Lacan told us—sorry deconstructionists, your talk of phallogocentrism was all for naught—the phallus does not exist and has no centre. It has no being outside of being a cultural signifier without signified. In sum, that is why Lacan also insists that "there is no sexual relationship." It is not that people do not have sex with their bodies, of course. Instead, the impossibility of the sexual relation means that there will always be a way in which sexuality, even with gender's help, will never produce the total jouissance one might hope for. Jouissance is perforce split by the phallic function, which is just another phrase for the impasse that marks the Real. One can have phallic jouissance (that is, genital jouissance) or feminine jouissance (that is, Other jouissance), but one cannot have it all. If we could, there would be no desire, since it could be absolutely, rather than provisionally, fulfilled. In this way, sexual difference is thus not of the Symbolic; it is of the Real. Why? Because by the 1970s, Lacan sees the signifier itself as incomplete, of contending with a minus or lack; there is an absence in the signifier itself, or gap that is inscribed in the symbolic order itself—it is, in other words, a positive minus. It is an absence that is positively there. As Alenka Zupančič explains, "This negativity is the Real of the junction between the (missing) signifier and enjoyment; and the conceptual name for this configuration in psychoanalysis is sexuality (or the sexual)" (42). In other words, this "minus" is the site where jouissance as surplus appears, a surplus with which discourse and signification grapple, all the while seeking satisfaction.

If there are "ideals" of masculine and feminine, and culturally and provisionally there are, then no matter how much they change over time, no one can live up to them precisely because there is no such thing as the phallus, except as a positive minus: it marks us, but it has no being. In this regard, gender cannot help but be a series of infelicitous admixtures. In terms of desire, some admixtures are more infelicitous than others. That is why we are repelled or disturbed by some forms of gender performance and intrigued and fascinated by others, by how gender's being manifests itself, just as we are potentially and sometimes repelled by our own gender being and thus need to alter it. Of course, the poles of sexual difference tell us there is no one gender; the fracturing of gender into many manifestations (and here we must acknowledge the difference between gender expression and ontology) is a reaction to the nonexistence of one gender. When Simone de Beauvoir called Woman "the Second Sex," she was reminding us that the fantasy of Man as the First Sex is simply one who has simply, inevitably failed to be the Only Sex—which is what makes

misogyny simultaneously dangerous and profoundly stupid—and makes Woman the symptom of Man.

For now, let us return to *Seminar XIX*. Lacan calls the assertion "There is no such thing as a sexual relation" a truth (3–5). Because the Lacanian subject is split, because its unconscious relation to the Other is extimate, there is a fundamental disconnection or disjunction in any encounter with the other. Love, for Lacan, is a means of compensating for this fundamental disjunction. One way of looking at this is, of course, "there is no sexual relation" or "*un rapport sexuel*." The word rapport in French is not simply "communication" or "connection"; it also implies a kind of carrying, a "portare," but this carrying is problematic because what is to be carried—the symptom, the *objet petit a*—is itself something which is a manifestation of the very split in the subject. It announces a gap or lack, even as it is meant to "fill" it. What you carry with you, then, is the object that points to the lack in yourself. That is, it is not that we are subjects with lack; rather, we are subjectivized lack. Another way of coming at this problem is to say that the subject's relation to the other points to the disjunction between the subject and consciousness. Thus, if this disjunction inheres in the subject, what purchase can it attain over the other's desire? That is, if the subject is not self-identical, how can it have a direct relation with the other? In Lacanian terms, although consciousness is called upon often to suture or bridge this gap within the subject, it is actually a lure, the lure of the ego, to claim suzerainty over truth. In other words, sex does not define the relation between speaking beings (or what Lacan cunningly, or punningly, calls *parlêtres*). Sexual organs, Lacan says, are used as the means of suggesting that this is the foundation for a sexual relation, but that logic will show us the limits of this particular fantasy: he turns to the prosdiorism.

What is a prosdiorism? It is a quantifier, like the word "all." What Lacan is drawing our attention to is that prosdiorisms like "all" do not signify a universal "thing" but, instead, signify a particular logical function: to universalize the assertion that follows it. As Gherovici phrases it, a misuse of quantifier, in terms of gender, leads to a category mistake, "that of taking the presence or absence of a natural organ for an organon, a system of principles, an organizer that allows someone to assume a body" (89). But there has to be an "empty place" between the quantifier and the assertion in order for it to be an argument. This kind of misreading or projection attempts to elide the necessarily empty space between the prosdiorism and the assertion that follows it.

Of course, we know that logic can be used ideologically as a means of universalizing or naturalizing that which are neither universal nor natural

at all. This is an example of the foolish knavery to which Lacan refers in *Seminar VII* (and to which he will refer repeatedly) (182–84). In the case of the small difference, he readily admits that it is a product of nature but has nothing to do with logic. That is, everything else surrounding the "aura" of the small difference is generated as discourse, that is, "with the types of man and woman such as they will be constituted from something quite different, namely from the consequence of the value that the small difference will have acquired in what comes next" (*Seminar XIX* 8). For Lacan, children are conditioned "solely in accordance with criteria that have been shaped under language dependence" (8). Further, any perceived lack or gap in gender performance is simultaneously narrated as error, even as terms like "*garçon manqué*" (that is, a tomboy) point to the empty place that cannot be properly accounted for or symbolized. Error is not found in the girl's failure to be feminine; rather, the error is inherent in language's failure to describe or symbolize utterly the Real, the Real of sex.

In *Seminar XVIII*, Lacan contends that human reproductive copulation cannot be regarded as the foundation of a sexual relationship because it is merely a dimension of sexual behaviour, one that "*consiste dans un certain maintien de ce semblant animal*" (32), or that, in reproduction, it consists of a certain maintenance of an animal semblance. But we are not only animals. We are also speaking beings, who rely upon semblances. Yet Lacan reminds us that when he uses the term semblance, he is not opposing it to truth. Truth is, for him, a dimension of the semblance that supports it (*Séminaire XVIII* 26). But this is part of the problem of gender in general; penis and vagina, which we imagine generally encompass the small difference, means that one cannot find the natural "origin" of sex. (Of course, this search for an origin is troubled further by the existence of intersex people.) This difference is translated and sustained by semblances in discourse. That is, we only know this difference discursively. As speaking beings, we cannot know whether what we "know" of sex is a result of the symptomatic dimension of language itself or if the reason is that the origin of sex is not "speakable" or articulable in language (*Séminaire XVIII* 167–68). This is why Symbolic castration, which nominates one organ as the metaphoric instrument of its marking, by necessity has the "other sex" tip "over to the real through the intermediary of the organ" (*Seminar XIX* 8). The sex organ, then, has to become a signifier (the phallus as signified to jouissance) in order to begin to organize sex at all. By virtue of our participation in the Symbolic Order, we acknowledge the phallus as a signifier that must occupy the empty place in the assertion that "For all x, the phallic function is valid." But as we will see, it is more complex than that.

When Lacan suggests that transsexuals "want to get rid" of the phallus, which is the means by which jouissance is possible, he means something very specific. He is not saying that trans people are perforce mentally ill, nor is he pathologizing them generally. In one sense, he is arguing that some people confuse a penis with the phallus, or the Real with the signifier. In another, more clinical sense, he is attempting to distinguish between a person who is experiencing gender dysphoria (for example, someone who is delusional, thinking that he is "becoming a woman," as if his sexual organs were transforming unilaterally) and someone who wishes to transition. Instead, it is that the "error" precedes any notion of sexual reassignment surgery, or what have you. The problem is not with transsexuality; the problem is with gender *tout court*. What Lacan is leading us to is that gender itself is a compensatory stratagem for dealing with the Real of sex. The split into two genders is, in other words, the Symbolic order's attempt to contend with the empty place in the symbolization of sex: that is, the Real. Another way of putting it, or perhaps finessing it, is to say that all speaking beings are condemned to struggle with gender. When Lacan expresses his suspicion of gender reassignment surgery, he does not mean that it is wrong because it is "unnatural." Instead, it is that if you think it, and it alone, will solve your problem with gender, you are mistaken. Because gender is the problem in the first place.

For example, I will turn to the moment in Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*, in which the narrator is concerned about her partner T's decision to have reassignment surgery:

> I sputtered a few half-baked Buddhist precepts about the potential unwisdom of making external changes rather than focusing on internal transformation. What if, once you made these big external changes, you still felt just as ill at ease in your body, in the world? *As if I did not know that, in the field of gender, there is no charting where the external and the internal begin and end—*
>
> Exasperated, you finally said, *You think I'm not worried too? Of course I'm worried. What I don't need is your worry on top of mine. I need your support.* I get it, give it. (55–56)

In Lacanian terms, this exchange has captured the problem neatly. The issue is not that the person wishing to transition has absolute access to unconscious truth to be able to claim the desire for transition. Rather, T's confession of anxiety about the decision demonstrates a jouissance that has nothing to do with gender's ability to "solve" all of their psychic or

somatic problems. Gender is not an ideal to be reached but a mode of being that makes living possible.

But what of the relation of sex to gender? In terms of sexuality, as opposed to sexuation, Lacan argues that gender is remedially marked by the terms masculine and feminine. As the Nelson quotation suggests, these poles are ideals that do not exist, much less could they be performed as such. Otherwise, there would be an effective model of sexual difference and perhaps the inevitability of a sexual relationship. It is precisely because they fail as ideals (indeed, if there were an ideal form of sexuation, then there would be only one sex), that gender performance can vary greatly depending upon ethnicity, class, disability, sexuality, or historical moment. That is why we have sexual difference. These are Symbolic positions; given the current discourses informing gender politics, one can understand why progressive people might have problems with this argument. However, what we have to keep in mind is that, in Lacanian psychoanalysis, the terms masculine and feminine have nothing to do with the little difference, however marked, with which you are born. Moreover, it has nothing to do with the preferred choice or choices of sexual partner. Masculine and feminine are Symbolic positions articulated around the Real of sex. In terms of gender, its various performances, disavowals, spectra are operating in the Imaginary, as means of contending with the Symbolic problems that masculine and feminine positions produce. This does not mean that they are merely delusions or mere frippery; to call them so would, I think, be to disavow the problem. Rather, all forms of gender display are contending with the same problem in the Symbolic but, in doing so, also produce forms of meaning in relation to sexuality.

These poles are ideals that do not exist, much less could they be performed as such.

If we repair to the model of the Borromean knot, we can begin to offer some clarification of the relations between and among gender, sexuality, and sex. Gender is marked by the Imaginary, by self-image, by fantasy; sexuality is marked by the Symbolic, in language, in discourse, in desire, in the law; finally, sex itself is of the Real. Meaning about sexuality and gender emerge in the encounter between gender as fantasy (as performance) and sexuality as desire. When I refer to gender as a dimension of the Imaginary, of fantasy, I do so because it is the means by which the ego can begin to address the question of an other's desire: "Is this gender performance what you want? Is this what you want *from me*?" The problem for gender-troubled trans subjects is that they are required to ask these questions from a position that fails to address the corporeal fantasy of their *own* desire. How can a person who is not allowed to choose their gender performance be able to articulate these questions without first addressing

the question of their own desire? Is their desire utterly conscious to them? No, nor is it to anyone. This is one of the great jokes played on us by the unconscious. However, to the extent that it is conscious, how can one play the role discursively and juridically assigned to them when, in an essential sense, it does not reflect their desire, their lack? How does one ask what the other desires when one does not know or have the means of expressing that desire to oneself? And this is the moment when aesthetics, ontology, and phenomenology come into the discussion: we call upon sensation, feeling, and perception, all of which are aesthetically freighted, to address the gap between knowledge and being. It means that we must think about how the Real disrupts, or renders impossible, the smooth discursive flow between gender as fantasy (as a means of *expressing* identification) and sexuality as (unconscious) desire.

This gap was a question that Lacan first began addressing substantively in the 1950s, in his theorization of obsessional neurosis and hysteria; if the obsessive's question is "To be or not to be?" or its variant, "Am I alive or already dead?," the hysteric's question swirled around gender: "*Am I a man or am I a woman?*" (*Seminar III* 180, 172). What is interesting is that by the early 1960s and beyond Lacan moved away from the pathologizing of hysteria by transforming it into a general discourse, as a form of protest, however purblind, however exceptional, against the master (*Seminar XVII* 43–44). One of the reasons for this move away from pathologizing the hysteric's question was that it was part and parcel of his move away from the pathologizing of homosexuality. Indeed, even his early work subscribed to Freud's insistence that there was nothing "natural" about sexuality, that it was culturally determined. This is why there have always been cultural sets and subsets of sexual behaviour, each with its varying codes, standards, and expectations. In short, if gender is a fantasy, one that attempts not only to address the other's desire but also the essential gap between knowing and being, then sexuality is the site of the signifier, of the laws informing different kinds of sexual behaviour and the behaviour of bodies. Gender and sexuality, like the Imaginary Worlds of Fantasy and the Symbolic Worlds of the Other, together produce forms of meaning. There is no sexuality without language, just as there is no gender without fantasy.

However, a gap or lack in the representations of gender and sexuality persists. So, what then, is sex? In Lacanian terms, I would again argue that sex is of the Real. It is precisely because of the Real of sex that we have all this trouble and joy around gender and sexuality. In terms of gender, what trans people do is reveal something that has been hidden in plain view, as it were. They produce a parallax view of how the Imaginary and the

Symbolic are busily, through semblance, endlessly articulating themselves around, and shape themselves around, the elusive Real. But this parallax view also offers a window into the need to theorize further the connection between sex as Real and gender as Imaginary.

When theorists like Joan Copjec express concern about the dislocation of gender from sex, she is drawing our attention to the fact that, as a rhetorical stratagem, the separation of gender from sexual difference avoids the problem of sex as something of the Real. It effectively removes the drives from the discussion of the role of cause in sex and gender. As Copjec puts it, "*sex has no domain*. What is essential is not the substitution of a plurality of causes for a single one but the fact that sex as cause cannot be located in any positive phenomenon, word or object, but is manifest in negative phenomena exclusively: lapses, interruptions that index a discontinuity or jamming of the causal chain" (32). One of the implications of her critique is that the argument in favour of the splitting of sex from gender is that it does so in the name of the multiple: multiple sexes, genders, sexualities. In other words, the splitting of sex from gender emerged understandably from a desire to embrace different forms of gender expression. On the surface, this impulse is an admirable one in terms of expressing solidarity with various forms of gender difference. The problem is that it reduces the ontological and aesthetic questions that continue to besiege us about sex and gender into simply multiplying forms of self-expression. The lapses and discontinuities Copjec describes will persist regardless. More explicitly, this criticism obviously does not mean that there should be reactionary limits or laws placed upon multiple forms of gender expression; they are an effect of sex as cause. Rather, as Lacan and others contend, we need to think more carefully about how the concept of the One as universal redounds upon multiplicity.

A close reading of Lacan's late seminars reveal that he was describing, if not anticipating, the current problematics surrounding the emergence of transgender discourse. His theory of sexual difference is in fact organized around failure. Specifically, that the concepts masculine and feminine are, in their non-complementarity, both asymmetrical, failed attempts to answer the ontological questions which inform sexuation. In this case, the failure is both freeing and revelatory. This is one of the reasons why, as he notoriously insists, "there is no sexual relation." In this respect, Lacan's theory of sexuation thus troubles received notions of the bind between biological sex and gender, even as it radically reimagines elements of desire like fantasy, *objet a*, and jouissance around the gap between knowledge and being.

The absence of the sexual relation means, Lacan suggests, that we could better refer to them as liaisons and that its absence "provides them with their conditions" (*Seminar XIX* 11). So let us turn to the problem of the One—the One who prompts us to long to be but who cannot but end in being not quite Two. The non-existence of the One (that is, the phallus) creates the not quite Two, as it were. If there is no sexual relationship, one of the reasons is that sexuality remains virtually as much a puzzle all our lives. Our vocabulary and experiences might become more sophisticated, but they are also sophistical in that the vocabulary and experience themselves do virtually nothing to alleviate or "cure" sexual symptoms, largely because sex is not primarily a problem of the Symbolic but of the Real. As a result, it is also a problem of the unconscious (which is the hole or lack in being that is repressed in language; for example, the written is marked by the bar of repression and, as such, is an effect of the unconscious, a site of impossible knowledge that "doesn't stop not being written") (*Seminar XX* 59). That is to say, sex is an index of the ontological status of the unconscious but, as such, is a site of uncertainty. It is a kind of negative space around which discourses of sexuality and sexual practices form. This uncertainty drives the circumstances of the sexual non-relation and, as such, conditions what kind of discourse (or social link) might appear. In this respect, love is one compensation, as a discourse, for the fact that there is no sexual relationship. But let me iterate. Lacan does not mean there is no sexual relationship in the "Men are from Mars, Women from Venus" sense, in part because the formulas of sexuation themselves have nothing to do with particular sexual acts by/with/to other particular bodies.

This view is of course consistent with Lacan's repeated contention that perversion is not a pathology but is simply a particular structure in the Symbolic. It is this lack of relation that makes any kind of relationship (successful, happy, hellish, miserable, passionate, banal) possible. It does not "prevent" the relation; rather, it shapes its conditions. The subject's relation to *objet petit a*, for example, is not a sexual relation; it is perhaps asexual. But to speak of the ontological status of sex, and of sexual difference, would seem to smack of the most retrograde kinds of essentialist thinking around gender, with thinking like the masculine is *this* and the feminine is *that*. But it is precisely because the ontological status of sex is itself marked by inconsistency, an inconsistency that, as part of the Real, cannot be resolved or made consistent, that any attempt to essentialize the feminine and masculine in terms of bodies or sexual practices is itself impossible. This problem is redoubled in what Lorenzo Chiesa argues is the only partial success of the phallic function in which "woman remains

not-all caught in the semblance of the One" (xi). In short, this inconsistency is part and parcel of why there is no sexual relationship. Draining sex from sex (which, as Copjec writes, is one of the triumphs of gender theory) also means that we fail to consider the ontological dimension of sex as the Real. We see this phenomenon even in the current cultural climate. On the one hand, we have any number of new gender identities proliferating, claiming a space in the culture; on the other, we have a vicious reaction against this very proliferation and a brutal conservative insistence on the tidy distinctions between men and women and the roles they are "supposed" to play. What we miss, however, is that even this antagonism is predicated upon the ontological status of sex itself, which, as the Real, requires more contemplation and theorization than reducing it to sexual practices which simply replicate the politics of the antagonism I have outlined above.

These are the stakes for thinking through the ontological implications of sex; it structures the conditions of these debates. Sex, as Lacan says, is marked by the Real, but we should be careful here. It is not independent of the Symbolic; rather, the gap or inconsistency produced by sex is that which the Symbolic contends with and tries to articulate itself around. And the effect of that articulation (or disarticulation, if you prefer) *is jouissance*. Here we now return to the impasse in Lacan's thought I described earlier. It is in this space that the signifier emerges as a kind of compensation for this gap or inconsistency; it is the site, in other words, for the production of a logic around its very failure or impasse. This is why, in paying attention to this impasse, we cannot fall into the snare of a) reducing sex to gender, and b) assuming that femininity is simply the "other" or "the second sex" to masculine libido. Freud tells us that explicitly—that even if we are tempted to, with any number of problematic assumptions about feminine desire in play, mark sexuality as "masculine," we discover that the libido has no consistent sexuality ("Three Essays on Sexuality" 219). The idea of man and woman are, in the Platonic sense, exactly that—ideas—that have no reliable correspondence in reality.

Another way of thinking about it is that sexual difference exists because there are no ideal men or women. Sex is neither masculine nor feminine; sex itself is indifferent to gender or sexuality because it is not even One. It is a surplus that throws the possibility of the two into question. This is how sexual difference in the Lacanian sense functions; sexual difference is not something to be prescribed. It is an attempt to contend with this surplus; the splitting into the Two is a marker of the failure of the One to be One. Put another way, the One is, as Lacan puts it in *Seminar XIX* and

Seminar XX (*Y a de l'Un*), "some kind of One" but not exactly One. It is One minus … something. In this respect, Lacan is not doing ontology; for him, the One is not Being, but it *makes* being (*Seminar XIX* 198). More specifically, the One makes being our problem. And that problem, that ontological problem, is jouissance. This, in short, is the phallic function. The phallus is not some masculinist fantasy of potency and control—the phallic function, the master signifier, if you will, is always already at a loss. It is marked by a minus, an absence of some sort, for which signification itself is supposed to compensate. The phallic function is the mark of difference itself; it does not designate itself as "the masculine One" and Woman as "the feminine Other." The minus of castration applies to every neurotic (regardless of gender or sexuality). In a sense, the myth of the Primordial Father, or of The Woman, for that matter, as exceptions or as exemption mirrors the minus or gap or inconsistency around which everyone else is constituted. We could say that castration is akin to Lacan's notorious definition of love in that castration demands that "we yield what we never had to someone (the Primordial Father) who never existed" in the sense that love is "giving what you do not have to someone who does not want it." In repressing castration (that is, that the master signifier will know what I need to know for me, so I don't have to), the masculine subject opens up the very gap or lack (that is, desire) that permits *objet petit a* to occupy it. *Objet petit a* is encountered as an object cause of desire, but it cannot be reduced to sex as cause.

In terms of sexuation, this encounter is a dimension of the status of "not-all" in relation to the phallic function. If we return to the question of sex as cause, then the feminine subject as "not-all" cannot be castrated because "she" does not have the phallus. However, as Lacan's troubling of Aristotelian logic shows, simply because "she" cannot be castrated does not mean that "she" is perforce excluded from it. If "man" is necessarily marked by the phallic function, or castration, then "woman" is not by contrast a site of impossibility. Rather, "not-all" logically implies that the possibility of castration exists for "her." But it also opens up another possibility, from which the masculine subject is excluded: (nonsexual) feminine jouissance. Lacan punctuates his contention saying that, "Contrary to what Aristotle put forward, the possible is the opposite of the necessary," and that, since castration for the feminine subject is "impossible as a cause" in herself, a masculine relation to the phallic function shows that "woman is not linked to castration essentially and access to woman is possible in its indeterminacy" (*Seminar XIX* 35). Sexuality may be borne of castration, but what makes castration function performatively

is repression. Masculine sexuality represses castration, and thus opens up desire; on the other hand, feminine sexuality performs castration, and thus hides behind the performance of castration rather than represses it. The problem of sexuality cannot then be divorced or isolated from the performance of gender because it is not merely a question of "unmasking" the truth behind the performer or the performance; as Zupančič, in her reading of Butler's theory of performativity, argues, gender "refers to a process in which sociosymbolic constructions, by dint of repetition and reiteration, become nature—'only natural,' as the saying goes" (40). It is not a question of being given the role of "essence" and thus performing it for the Symbolic Order's "audience." It is that essence and performance are, in their "naturalization," on the one hand, utterly coextensive but, on the other, indelibly marked by slippage. The gaps, confusions, and inconsistencies in the performances themselves are not the result of "inadequate rehearsal" but are productive in the sense that they set the stage for the Real. The Real "acts" or "acts up," even upstages the demands of Symbolic performance; if we want to put it in more theatrical terms, the Real irrupts onstage as forms of jouissance. In other words, the enjoyment of gender performance—whatever its painful pleasures—is the result of the Real of sex and is not separate from it.

The link between sexuation and gender becomes even more clear if we return to the question of semblance. Semblances are tasked with generating the very "sociosymbolic constructions" that mask the impossibility of the sexual relationship. As we saw earlier, semblances are not "lies." Rather, they are the necessary fictions that are produced and performed for the other. It is a performance enacted in "negative" terms. That is, gender performance is not a question of aping a "masculine" or "feminine" ideal (since they do not exist). In effect, the necessary fiction of gender is predicated upon a gamble, on the chance that the other will, by contrast, show the subject how to define itself. As Chiesa explains, our status as speaking beings prompts us to define our individual performances of gender in relation to an other (and vice versa) but that we do so: a) without a coherent gender ideal to follow; b) with a desire that is unconscious; and c) without a conscious knowledge of the other's desire. Chiesa iterates a neat maxim that captures the predicament: "There are two sexes, but there isn't a second sex" (80). Thus gender performance is the semblance that not only masks the impossibility of the sexual relationship, but it is also an anxiety that informs gender performance as marked by an enjoyment of its necessarily fictive status. The paradox of gender performance is that it supports the truth of the sexual relationship's non-existence, even as

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it masks it. The anxiety that surrounds gender performance is the threat it poses to the truth of desire itself. Is this gender performance what the other truly desires? Is this gender performance true to my desire? But there is yet another problem. The invective heaped upon trans people is the result of anxiety. It is a particular anxiety produced by the fact that, in their questioning of the role gender plays in speaking both to their own desire and the desire of the other, they disrupt the naturalization of gender as semblance.

The reactionary cultural phenomenon of doubling down on what constitutes "*the* masculine" and "*the* feminine," in all of its phallic hysteria, is a desperate attempt to distract us from another truth: the impossibility of the sexual relation. Perhaps even more absurd, the realization that trans people are asking us, implicitly or otherwise, to "pay attention to the man behind the curtain," is that the phallus itself does not exist. Trans people are blamed for revealing what was always true: the Symbolic Order itself is a fiction—a necessary fiction, granted, but nevertheless a fiction.

In a time when, in economic, geopolitical, and environmental terms, the Symbolic Order is clearly in crisis, we cannot be surprised that these fictive truths are being questioned, that being subject to the phallic function becomes more difficult, a formation of unconscious identification that itself seems increasingly perverse, if not psychotic. We are at an impasse. Much of humanity would seem to be on the brink of two stark choices: continue as we are, and walk into what appears to be apocalypse, or radically reimagine our relationship to the Symbolic Order. This is not merely a question of recognizing that "there is no other of the Other" that can affirm and ratify the Symbolic. The questioning of sexual difference is, I would argue, a dimension of this reimagining. It is an important question. Gender performance or transitioning should not be reduced to a neoliberal consumerist choice. Rather, this questioning is an index of an ontological crisis. One of the current problems in critical theory more generally is that ontology, like sex, has been relegated to the conceptual dustbin (except, perhaps, for objects). Lacan says repeatedly that he is not creating an ontology. He is nevertheless engaged in theorizing an ontological question but not in the name of rescuing "essences" of gender. As Zupančič explains, it is not that psychoanalysis reduces everything to sex. Instead, it is that it reduces sex and the sexual "to the point of ontological inconsistency, which, as such, is irreducible" (39). This irreducibility is the point of entry to Lacan's exploration of the Real of sex.

When we speak of this irreducible element of sex, I hope that what I have made clear is that it cannot be resolved simply by multiplying genders

that, whatever their admixture, remain dependent upon the concepts masculine and feminine. Because sexuation is not a binary, one cannot name non-binary as a position. (Well, one can go ahead and do so, of course, but the problem is that, in doing so, one is not escaping binary thinking; one is unwittingly setting up another binary: gender/non-gender.) In questioning gender, in challenging the gender one has been assigned, we must acknowledge that it points to a failing in the Symbolic Order (or the Big Other). It is not that the Symbolic Order "failed" to gender the trans person correctly; it is that there is a "useful" failure in the phallic signifier itself that trans people can seize upon. And what they are seizing upon is the Real of sex: jouissance. One of the ironies of the current castigation and marginalization of trans people is that they are *not* the cause of the radical questioning of gender and its performance. Rather, they are merely exemplars of another issue: that the ontological status of sex itself remains a question that cannot be fully answered. I would contend that they are quite sensibly reacting to a larger failure in the Symbolic Order itself. That failure emerges in discourse that the Big Other's attempt to dictate or legislate bodies, as if sexuation were in its hands. In effect, the backlash against trans people should be read psychoanalytically. Trans people are reacting to an ontological anxiety *in the Big Other*. This does not mean that more people are transitioning because of the Big Other's uncertain future. It is that the Big Other's uncertain future is predicated on exercising control over the Real of sex: jouissance itself. If humanity's very existence is under threat, capitalism would seem to grant us two choices: liberal or reactionary. That is, we either reduce gender to a consumerist choice or spectacle, or we use the fictional threat of trans people, or 2SLGBTQI+ people more broadly, as a smokescreen, as the "underlying reason" for the larger existential crisis. If, as Copjec tells us, "sex has no domain," reactionary forces are not only claiming it does but are also insisting that this domain can be utterly symbolized.

But the attempts to do so (in its various forms, however rationalized, as sexism, homophobia, transphobia, or economics) are themselves perverse disavowals of what sexuation does. On the one hand, sexuation offers a choice: all or not all. On the other, the gap or minus in the phallic function is also the site of surplus enjoyment (Zupančič 62). But that is not all, as it were. As Colette Soler reminds us, "Lacan said even more about sexuated beings: they authorise themselves. In other words, they are not authorised either by bodily anatomy or by the Other of the Symbolic" (120). She goes on to say that the "all/not all" that operates in the phallic function is a choice; speaking beings "do not have a choice regarding the

motérialité of their unconscious which, through contingencies, creates *fixions* of their symptomatic jouissance" (120). This symptomatic jouissance (or surplus enjoyment) are, however contingently created, products of the phallic function, one that gives particular subject's unconscious relation to the word (*mot*) its "weight," its materiality. The phallic function is, in effect, always already subverted by a Real that renders the sexual relation impossible (Soler 120). In other words, the Big Other, or even the phallic function, cannot legislate or symbolize the formations of the unconscious or its jouissance. Because of the lack in the Big Other, coupled with the issue that there is no other of the Big Other, means that it cannot dictate the subject's satisfaction; it cannot be our Real sexual partner, much less "resolve" the problem of sex. That is the stuff of fantasy: sadistic fantasy. The idea of "the One" would be, in this logic, replete, overwhelming, decimating the subject's desire, symptom, and jouissance with impunity.

In its sublimity, the Big Other as "One" would, at a stroke, eliminate not only desire but also the unconscious and its symptoms; the Imaginary productions of gender, the Symbolic surpluses of sexuality, and the Real impossibilities of sex would vanish with them. This sadistic fantasy is of course absurd and disturbing. In this sense, gender and sexuality are not the result of relationship problems; they are not to blame. Rather, they are the forms of non-relation that contend with, and are perforce implied by, the impossibility of the sexual relationship. That is why we tend, paradoxically, to nominate sex as both the obstacle and the path to "healthy relationships." More bluntly, just as one cannot blame consensual people for the ways they enjoy their bodies with other people, one cannot blame people for being authorities over how they shape, or authorize, their bodies. What then is to blame? These forms of enjoyment and authorization are the result of a fault *in* the phallic function. That is why if the Symbolic Order has an uncertain future it will not be rendered more secure by endangering other people's lives, by claiming to transform "deviants" into smoothly desiring, fully enjoying consumers. In ontological terms, both of these forms of enjoyment—of other bodies, of authority over one's body—are crucial to one's future and cannot be dismissed as trivial or as a commodity marking nothing more than a "gender or sexual trend" or narcissistic "flexing." (It does not mean that some people will not use them regardless for precisely those purposes. Just as reactionaries are past masters of cherry-picking, it must be acknowledged that some people cherry-pick their identities, with capitalism's blessing.) But such are some of the political vicissitudes of desire and enjoyment. Another

way of putting it is that the symbol cannot abolish the symptom. Nor can it produce the *sinthome*.

I want to spend my conclusion focusing on some of the aesthetic and ontological implications of the introduction of the *sinthome* by Lacan. The *sinthome* emerges as a radical rethinking of the symptom and of our unconscious relationship to the signifier and its phallic function. The *sinthome* in its radicality abolishes the symbol that ensnares the trapped trans body. As I have suggested, I suspect, with Gherovici, that Lacan's work with a trans analysand was one of the reasons for this shift. The case study that explicitly appears in *Seminar XXIII* (although Lacan denies it as such) is James Joyce. The questions the concept of the *sinthome* attempts to answer is: Is it possible to be free of the phallic function without falling into psychosis? Is there another form of subjectivity possible? These questions redound upon Lacan's insistence that sexuation is an ontological, rather than biological, question. But we must keep in mind that the ontology he is investigating is riven, partial, marked by absence.

His theory of the *sinthome* is that it is a supplement that reimagines the subject outside of the empty signifier of symbolic castration. As Gherovici argues, the *sinthome*, in its creative unbalancing, is a conceptual leap from the symptom insofar as it is utterly independent of the symbolic and is thus unanalyzable, but nevertheless it has rich theoretical consequences to sexual difference (146). The *sinthome* sustains the Borromean knot of RSI (Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary) which, as Lacan points out, is no longer sustained by itself but by the *sinthome*, and yet it is in no way dependent upon it (*Seminar XXIII* 13). There are two kinds of *sinthome*; a *sinthome* is, as he puts it, a heresy: the etymology of heresy is simply "choice," a choice someone, a person rather than an institution makes about something. For my purposes, I will focus on one kind. In a word play reflective of Joyce, one can choose what Lacan names, in a portmanteau word play of symptom and Saint Thomas Aquinas, a *sinthome masaquinas* or *madaquin*. That is, there is an aesthetic choice about the configuration of the *sinthome*—one that resonates with the body—as it is a form of *sinthome* that enables the person to avoid the blandishments of psychosis and construct a semblance, a mannequin, and adorn this semblance with all the radiance its desire can muster.

In "Joyce the Symptom," Lacan gives this form of embodiment a further name—*escabeau*—which of course is the French word for ladder that facilitates ascension but is yet another of Lacan's puns: *escabeau/es que beau* or "[you] are that beautiful." With the shift to the *escabeau*, the *sinthome* in turn becomes an "event of the body"—the *sinthome* as semblance

It is, in other words, a form of becoming.

is not just a tool or bauble. The semblance forms, forges strangely erotic relationships in the name of critical self-love or in the name of constructing or saying farewell to a particular myth of being. It is, in other words, a form of becoming. In short, it is a way of having or finally making use of a body. In this regard, Lacan has not resolved the impasse I described earlier; he gives us a ladder to be able to see over it. At the level of jouissance, we should also recall that the Greek word "*klimax*" literally means "ladder." Beauty is, in this configuration, the means by which to fashion a qualitatively different form of jouissance, by casting a klieg light on its opacity. Utterly artificial, this form of self-fashioning enables the speaking being to claim finally their body. It is accomplished by the building of an ego irreducible to the Imaginary.

The beauty of the *sinthome* resides in the naming of this new ego; in its *motérialité*, essence coalesces heretically with the embodied name. Paradoxically, I daresay the *escabeau* creates *essecabeau*. Crucially, Paul Verhaeghe and Frédéric Declercq's reading of the *sinthome* focuses in part on its implications to gender; specifically, it produces the "Other gender": "To be sure, this Other is a fiction, but it is a fiction that does not turn the subject into a dupe because he has created it by himself, based on his particular way of jouissance" ("Lacan's Analytic Goal" 74). The *sinthome*, in the hands of a trans person, has the potential to translate, sensuously, the subject into an object by being an observer of its own farewell, by what Leo Bersani calls a process of "impersonal narcissism" (92). They seize upon the glittering beauty of the *sinthome*, a means of knotting or weaving that makes it possible to carry one's enjoyment, that is, the burden of one's psyche. (The creation of the *sinthome* is no mean feat.) That is, the trans subject dares to stage the shattering of their ego in order to imagine other possibilities for love of another, one that occupies the threshold—one of shame—between desire and drive, in the gap between knowledge and being. Maybe trans people, so often chastised for their failure to perform gender "correctly," for their artificiality, offer us the chance to see how the viciously defended borders between ego and other, between idea and accident can be fashioned into an impersonal but nevertheless loving relation based upon the *sinthome*. Trans people are not failures; in confronting the Real of sex, they are perhaps allegories of redemption or warning for what naming their bodies have failed to provide.

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