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The Female Complaint

LAUREN BERLANT

I. The Awful Truth about Women's Lib

Imagine my dismay when I was virtually booed off the stage by a feminist audience of the lesbian-separatist variety for reading a series of poems that celebrated pregnancy and birth while affirming a woman's strength and power. The poems in no way idealized pregnancy, but you couldn't prove it by an audience of women in rebellion against fifties notions of happy motherhood. To say anything positive about motherhood was to push every one of their emotional buttons. I left the stage devastated and confused . . . This experience plunged me into one of the deepest depressions of my life (and did, by the way, end my career as a nursing mother).¹

This horrifying confrontation with the exiling voices of lesbian-separatists sent Erica Jong running to the arms of the April, 1986 *Vanity Fair* to write an article titled "The Awful Truth about Women's Lib." This essay describes how "the storm troops of radical feminism have lost touch with the grass roots: all those women who wanted to live with men and have babies."² Jong's betrayal by the tender "buttons" of the feminists who resisted her seeming conflation of motherhood and women's power violates her vision of feminism as a populist movement: one that speaks potentially for all women. She argues that her constituency is at once the central power bloc for such a populist feminism and, tragically, a neglected body of women, marginalized by a "feverishly anti-male and anti-nuclear family" feminist ideology.³

Jong experiences her political abandonment by feminism as a kind of castration: both a symbolic and a literal drying up of her power. But the lesbian separatist radical feminists (sic) in the audience must have felt similarly betrayed by Jong. After all, Erica Jong's power as a professional feminist derives from her high visibility as an early spokeswoman for sexual liberation and mainstream feminism: for many in the early days, Erica Jong virtually meant "feminist art," art full of female rage and *ressentiment*, sexual fantasy, and experimentation. Yet to this audience her domestic, domesticated poetry misrepresented the personal conditions that bring women politically together. For this poetry reading was

to have been a public event that had, nonetheless, the status of a private meeting: the audience came to have the mass experience of intimate female identification central to feminist politics.

This politics of identification, in which the public testimony and witnessing of female struggle plays a central theatrical and political role, is founded on a paradox in the social construction of female marginality.⁴ Unlike other victims of generic social discrimination, women are expected to live with and to desire the parties who have traditionally and institutionally denied them legitimacy and autonomy. These contradictory tendencies of social organization impede for women the production of the kind of group consciousness generated by, for example, the physical ghettoization of many ethnic, racial, and religious communities. Thus the “complaint,” which I will discuss as a paradigm of public female discourse, is shot through with anxieties about audience that in part derive from the absence of a theatrical space in which women might see, experience, live, and rebel against their oppression *en masse*, freed from the oppressors’ forbidding or disapproving gaze. Feminism aims to create such a vital space of communal political consciousness—a female-centered public sphere.⁵ Along with this almost physical fragmentation of women is the colonizing effect patriarchal fantasies of women have on female self-consciousness: woman’s very entrapment within a reductive and genericizing patriarchal fantasy—vulgarly put, that “all women are alike”—becomes the distinguishing mark of gender for women. The symbolic and political content of patriarchal fantasy is culturally and historically particular: what is universally powerful about its mode of domination is that it creates the situation it imagines. The fantasy that all women are, more or less, alike produces a meta-symbolic order in which the female sex is defined as that element which needs *to be explicated* or contextualized in one or another patriarchal narrative. Indeed, feminism’s crucial fusing of the personal and the political comes from turning women’s individual gyno-genealogical scars into diacritical marks in different kinds of oppositional narrative and social practices.

Thus it is not surprising that in the moment of public display, feminists deploying their gender as if alone in a private, protected, intimate space, became shocked and horrified by their mutual alienation: at the very moment when feminism was supposed to operate its own relatively autonomous public sphere, a place where female speech takes place without fear of erasure or humiliation, the movement reveals its power to exclude, to be yet one more index of female failure. This rupture of identification must open the question of *whether feminism does, in fact, have “a” potential constituency in “all women.”*

Such an inquiry into a populist feminism will engage current feminist, post-structuralist, psychoanalytic, and Marxist inquiries into the construction of

the gendered subject, the female spectator or reader, and the female audience.⁶ For, with few exceptions, these projects assume a singularity of female spectatorship or subjecthood, and would ask us to recognize one kind of subject activity over another as the distinguishing mark of femininity.⁷ Female subjects have been constituted as victims, receivers, viewers, reproducers, even sites of contradiction; but *there is as yet little work on explicating the overdetermination of woman—even of the individual subject*—in her various and uneven historical interpellations.⁸ For example, in Jong's narrative she, the speaker, and they, the audience, are transformed into two speakers and two audiences simultaneously speaking in outrage and betrayal at their mutual exile from the scene of female intimacy that feminism promises. These transformations of position take place because each member of both of the audiences, and all of the speakers, expected that the contradictions that arise from speaking, seeing, and hearing as gendered subjects would fall away in the face of the need for identity.

Feminist theory needs to lead feminism away from the impulse to minimize the fractures within the female subject in its attempt to unveil a continuum or identity among all women. Post-Lacanian theories of the subject, for example, that overstate the *meaningfulness* of a single interpellation into a gender category are unable to account for the multiplicity of historically available subject positions.⁹ But rather than conceiving gender as merely one among many affiliations that organize identity—in order to avoid the conceptual dead end brought about by the notion that race, class, and gender, for example, are each relatively simple, analogous categories that feminism needs to “bring together”—the gendered subject would be best distinguished by the incoherences traversing even the distinguishing mark of sex.¹⁰ Gender, in this view, is defined as a category that absorbs certain questions about the historical life of the subject; and its transformative power is in gender's potential *to be deployed* rather than in its inherent or even Imaginary meaning.

One historical example of this powerful deployment of female gender is the phenomenon of “women's culture.” In American culture, which shares with other national cultures the phenomenon of “gendered industries,” the assignment of gender to a set of cultural productions has had both more and less content than the it appears. On one hand, the authors and the audience for the “woman's” text has historically been white and identified with bourgeois values of female domesticity. On the other hand, the manifest ideology of these women's texts—in which the duties of domesticity and motherhood produce pleasure generated by the harnessing of libidinal energy both to heterosexual desire and social and economic ambition¹¹—is never explicitly delimited to a body of women among women, but rather addressed to “woman” herself. In this way, a particular notion

of woman, identified with a race, a class, and a national culture, is culturally deployed on all women. At the same time, women whose racial and class positions mark differential relations to the Bourgeois Symbolic will have an alienated, half- or just less-articulated relation to its inescapable and universalized popular and mass cultural productions. In late Capitalism, these kinds of disarticulations of the subject with “her” culture are absorbed by a notion of *style* that ostensibly liberates the female subject by linking her membership in her gender to the consumption of goods and services that operate as the expression of what the woman “always already” was.

Thus the assumption Jong and her audience make—that all feminist women, underneath, are alike—enacts the gender gap produced within “woman” by the didactic and indiscriminate practices of American bourgeois ideology. *From this position I’d like to argue that the scene of feminist horror, shame, and embarrassment narrated by Jong is a symptom of a quandary within feminism about what it means to be a woman, and thus about where, if anywhere, the movement’s populist energies reside.*¹²

Having established the parameters of this inquiry within the conditions marking female discourse, and seeking a way of reading their general effects on the social, political, and cultural productions of the female subject, I will spend the remainder of this essay suggesting how such a transformation in our understanding of colonized consciousness might change, for example, the literary history of women’s genres. In particular, after describing the genre of contested discourse I call the “female complaint,” I will rehearse a very condensed version of the history of the emergence of dominant modes of American female cultural discourse. I will argue that the populist potential of American feminism is not located in the imaginary sphere of public-feminist intimacy, which relies on a patriarchal fantasy of women’s sameness to herself to produce an adversarial politics. Rather, feminist populism will emerge from the engagement of the female culture industry with the patriarchal public sphere, the place where significant or momentous exchanges of power *are perceived* to take place. This notion of the public sphere should not be confused with conventional designations of public (political) and private (domestic) space, although these polar associations have some historical basis in Enlightenment political theory. Instead, the public sphere is a place designated by a group or a subject’s perception of where socially, politically, and culturally normative value is determined and regulated.¹³ Such a definition accommodates the shifting operations and perceptions of power within a culture, allowing for more consideration of the confusions of identity within subcultures of race, gender, or nationality, where complex identities are formed in the light (and in the shadows) of an apparently dominant and exclusionary social nexus.

II. "Why'd You Have to Make a Record 'Bout Me?"

In 1985 the rappers UTFO—whose name stands for “Untouchable Force”¹⁴—brought out a hit single named “Roxanne, Roxanne.” The song concerns the efforts of the group’s members—The Kangol Kid, Dr. Ice, and The Educated Rapper—to provoke a response from a woman they desire named Roxanne. Each man has a chiefly solo narrative about the confrontation of his sexual and linguistic *savoir faire* with the autonomous and unyielding Roxanne, all of which amount to: “She’s all stuck up, (why do you say that) because she wouldn’t give a guy like me no rap” even though I’m in UTFO. The refrain they all use is “Roxanne Roxanne, don’t you understand?” as if, of course, if she understood the skill of the rap, she would feel it, and succumb to its seduction. Her refusal of all the men, with their varying institutional and rhetorical expertise, frustrates UTFO, and the song transfers their failure to her—it becomes manifestly about *her* failure to understand them, to comprehend their value.

“Roxanne, Roxanne” is no more demeaning to women than most urban R & B songs: still, a “real” Roxanne, named Roxanne Shantee’, was infuriated by it. The origin myth that accompanies her genre-shattering response to this song is that one day, between loads of her mother’s wash, Roxanne Shante’ cut a song called “Roxanne’s Revenge,”¹⁵ the chorus of which is: “Why’d you have to make a record ’bout me, the R-O-X-A-N-N-E.” This song retells UTFO’s narratives, and then responds to them: it is completely radical in its refusal to be silenced by their previous narration of her position and their mode of production. She takes back her name and vocalizes it: as Guy Trebay writes, “Anyone who thinks Roxanne is through, Roxanne has a message for that person. Not yet. Roxanne is not and will not ever be through until she has her last say. And that’s the way it is.”¹⁶ And this is just the beginning: seventeen response songs have been produced since UTFO’s original rap, including at least two songs by two other “real” Roxannes, one authorized by UTFO’s own record label *after* the first Roxanne produced her response.¹⁷ Some of these have been released on an album, “The Complete Roxanne,” the cover of which sports a Rorschach blot (a “butterfly”) that serves as a background to a picture of a model posing as an ur-Roxanne.

Read as a set of narratives and a social phenomenon, the aim of this anthology record is to legitimate the findings of UTFO about Roxanne by creating a dialectic between any Roxanne’s public assertion of her refusal to be narrated and any male rapper’s desire to rule the discursive space either by successfully winning her with the “freshness” of his rap (and on the way, impressing his male friends with his technique), or, should she resist, by using

his rap to hystericize and humiliate her. The song that comes after hers on the album is in the voice of “Roxanne’s psychiatrist,” who opens by addressing Roxanne: “Feel the rap, feel the rap, feel the rap, because you got no class.” He then shifts his attention to the audience, and comments: “To support the boys [UTFO] I will say this, I am Roxanne’s psychiatrist,” after which he vocalizes a catalogue of her problems. The album progresses by alternating raps by various “Roxannes”—all of which either respond to the men’s raps or compete among themselves (in the cut, “Sparky’s Turn [Roxanne You’re Through]”) for the privileged status of sole “Roxanne”—with other male rappers’ responses to the real Roxanne’s backtalk, plus an instrumental selection for the benefit of the record buyer, “Rap Your Own Roxanne.” By the end of the record, we discover among other things that the reason Roxanne has scandalously resisted their charming mastery is that “Roxanne’s a man,” a homosexual transvestite.

Within rap culture these insult songs have their own tradition. Deriving from the blues complaint, the spiritual, scat singing, rock and roll, street talk, and the sounds of urban machinery, rap was born from technological innovations that made overdubbing and other kinds of refunctioning relatively inexpensive.¹⁸ This palimpsestic technology means that rap is intrinsically intertextual and parodic. Its *bricolage* of singing, scating, and spoken performance turns rap’s referents—American mass and urban (mainly Black and Hispanic) culture, American mythic politics, and heterosexual desire—into a scrap heap of quotations organized narratively and often didactically as well.¹⁹ In this mode its general tendency toward self-parody and hyperbole is often explicitly employed in politically oppositional ways.²⁰ My purpose here is specifically to address rap’s employment in sexual politics: its use as a weapon against the public speech and overall legitimacy of women viewed outside of a domestic or heterosexual context, its re-use as a weapon against male rappers themselves, confronted by the woman’s brazen public refusal to be called into the symbolic order as a site of humiliated silence; and finally to understand what it means about the social context of female speech that “Roxanne’s Revenge” provoked a wave of patriarchal rationalizations of her rap, aiming to transform any response she might make into a symptom of her “problem.”

The vulnerability of “Roxanne’s Revenge” to hystericization by a readily available phallic discourse is immanent in the very genre of her expression. Roxanne’s revenge is a discursive deployment of her rage, a litany of injuries, an enumeration of desires, addressed at different times to her “listening audience” and her absent violators. The literary precedent for “Roxanne’s Revenge” is the form called “the complaint.” Historically, the complaint has addressed personal, social, or institutional struggles witnessed by a powerful voice that aims to reveal (to the reading audience, and often to the recalcitrant or disappointing object

of the invective) an injustice perpetrated against the speaker or something the speaker represents. Complaints concerning classical church and state politics, for example, arguably the earliest concerns of the genre, were written both on behalf of the claims of institutions and the rights of victims.

A third major sub-category of complaint, descending from Ovid's *Heroides*, is the lover's complaint, which makes injustice in a private relationship a matter both of public record and public concern, often on behalf of all "lovers".²¹ The lover's complaint is always an implicit rupture of privacy, an admission that private communication no longer works: the message falling on deaf ears, the author takes her/his case to "the public" for adjudication. The fact of this double audience constitutes the complaint as simultaneously a genre of self-expression and self-circumscription: self-expression in that the conceit of the complaint is to release to the public news of suppressed injuries; self-circumscription in that the complaint implicitly marks the conditions and the probability of its failure to persuade the addressed subject. Often a last ditch deployment, the complaint is a performative plea that implicitly holds no hope for change in the conditions of the author's misery—apart from whatever response the complaint itself might elicit from the audience.

The female complaint serves in particular to mediate and manage the social contradictions that arise from women's sexual and affective allegiance to a phallogocentric ideology that has, in practice, denied women power, privilege, and presence in the public and private spheres. To the extent that women employ the complaint as a mode of self-expression, it is an admission and a recognition both of privilege and powerlessness: it is a powerful record of patriarchal oppression, circumscribed by a knowledge of woman's inevitable delegitimation within the patriarchal public sphere.²² The *a priori* marking of female discourse as *less serious* is paradoxically the only condition under which the complaint mode can operate as an effective political tool: the female complaint allows the woman who wants to maintain her alignment with men to speak oppositionally but without fear for her position within the heterosexual economy—because the mode of her discourse concedes the intractability of the (phallogocentric) conditions of the complaint's production.

For it is not the woman who first calls her self-articulation a complaint, a whine, a plea: rather, the patriarchal social context in which she makes her utterance hystericizes it for her, even before she speaks. *As a euphemism for menstruation, "the female complaint" typifies the banality of female suffering: every month we (that is, all of us, those who can think of the woman as Other) hear woman's litany of the ills done to her, but we can't be moved by it, because she brought it on herself, she's weak, that's just the way she is.*²³

The female complaint is thus an aesthetic "witnessing" of injury. Situated

precisely in the space between a sexual politics that threatens structures of patriarchal authority and a sentimentality that confirms the inevitability of the speaker's powerlessness, the female complaint registers the speaker's frustration, rage, abjection, and heroic self-sacrifice, in an oppositional utterance that declares its limits in its very saying. Roxanne's *Revenge* is to witness, to testify. But because she articulates her position within the dialectic of desire that produces her rage, her resistance is also easily absorbed into that economy, and easily transformed into a kind of nonsense, chatter, hysterical or seductive patter.

Public female protest discourse is always in danger of ending up like this, written as it is in a context in which it is always vulnerable to be so named: a nag, a whine, a complaint. Women's inability to sustain a right or left wing female discourse that fully resists and refunctions the negations of the public sphere stems from the historical antinomy between women and public authority. One instance of this phenomenon, the age-old controversy over the value of women's popular discourses, might be traced through American cultural history. In particular, the failure to achieve a fully legitimated public female presence in American culture can be read in the transformations of the various dominant *modes of containment* of which the female complaint is both a model and a symptom.

While the association of women with an inability to produce "high" art, with its accompanying prejudice against women for overconsumption of romance literature, reaches back to the Renaissance, "women's genres" arise most powerfully as a cultural *problem* in America in the 1820's.²⁴ The problem, for those satisfied with the traditional operations of public discourse, was not only that women were debasing culture by producing sensationalist drivel; it was also in the apparently tautological construction of a market and culture in which women spoke only as women, to women. The discourse of virility so central to the rhetoric of literary realism during the latter nineteenth century was in part an attempt to keep distinct "quality" writing from the creeping sensuality of romance. Realist novels that included sentimental-romance elements tended either to denigrate actively those modes of "feminine" excess or to embrace those plots, motivated by a desire to speak female discourse better (technically and perceptually) than the woman herself. In short, the novel-romance opposition was both cause and effect of the cultural struggle over the proper form in which women might write. Literary form absorbed worries about the future of American culture, the nature of gender and other sub-cultural affiliations, and the proprieties of authorship and consumption: the sentimental novel, the melodramatic "women's" narrative in radio and in cinema, and the domestic irony of the contemporary situation comedy can be viewed as the central historical matter of American bourgeois-female self-identification.

In establishing the cultural history of modes of containment for bourgeois white American women I do not mean to imply that this particular staging of the public sphere stands in for all women's experiences of American culture—far from it. Rather, I assume here that the dominant ideology of women in a hegemonic class and racial position will appear to be a culturally powerful normative index in all spheres of social life; and that the less racially and socially privileged in American culture will also occupy relatively autonomous “public” spheres or spheres of value, partly constituted by their exclusion from the culturally dominant formations.²⁵ I offer this condensed history, then, in the expectation that future research will tell a very different historical tale about the very same period from the point of view of less privileged social formations.

III. The American Female Culture Industry: Notes Toward a History

From any position, genres of self-containment like the complaint can be read as sites of resistance to the messages and practices of patriarchal dominance. We can trace this resistance historically by measuring what I would call the negative space between the extent of the complaint—in its demystification of these women's situations—and its usually implicit foreclosure of any action to change the fundamental condition of the complaint's production. Because these modes are dedicated to managing the resistance to masculine privilege, we can also historicize the ways complaints and have operated as “safety valves” for surplus female rage and desire, rendering comfort to the women who enact the sentimental will to-not-know.

These three modes of containment—sentimentality, melodrama, and domestic irony—developed within American bourgeois-female ideology in contradistinction both to patriarchal and to feminist discourses, retreating into the complaint's witnessing mechanism while also *gradually incorporating an ever-widening range of “feminist” issues* into the sentimental-critical gaze. The main impulse behind these mechanisms was to construct some leverage for the speaking woman: to deploy her gender to comment on and to circulate within the public sphere, to see gender as the site of a potential alliance that could, through the family and later the aura of the family discourse, disarm phallic domination, and to oppose without explicitly representing women's threat to the reigning order.

Uncle Tom's Cabin is perhaps the most famous of American sentimental novels, although Nina Baym has suggested that the novel's brand of liberation theology actually excludes it from the comforting confines of “women's fiction,” because Stowe's concerns are less about “women” and their moral education than they are about the ethics and politics of social life.²⁶ More common than Stowe's

appeal to women's political/ethical responsibilities is the strictly sentimental deployment of family discourse in women's fiction. It would be wishful to think that sentimental fiction called for radical social change in the spheres of male or female privilege. Instead, American women's fiction in the mid-nineteenth century needed to figure the world's inadequacies and provide a domestic antidote for them, ostensibly from "within." Fanny Fern's introduction to *Rose Clark* dramatizes this complex rhetorical operation:

When the frost curtains the windows, when the wind whistles fiercely at the key-hole, when the bright fire glows, and the tea-tray is removed, and father in his slippers feet lolls in his arm-chair; and mother with her nimble needle "makes auld claes look amaist as weel as new," and grandmamma draws closer to the chimney-corner, and Tommy with his plate of chestnuts nestles contentedly at her feet; then let my unpretending story be read. For such an hour, for such an audience, was it written.

Should any *dictionary on legs* rap inopportunately at the door for admittance, send him away to the groaning shelves of some musty library, where "literature" lies embalmed, with its stony eyes, fleshless joints, and ossified heart, in faultless preservation.²⁷

The function of this literature is to bond the family within the family. It is a scene of reading that includes all genders and generations, read to by some invisible voice of domestication. In contrast, the dictionary on legs belongs to the public sphere of language and meaning (here represented as a lifeless, obscure library), and is in exile from this hearth. Thus while Fern's revenge on high culture is to represent it as a grotesque, half-human but fully masculine creation, and to force it to return to the home of dead literature, she never articulates the relation between that privileged discourse and the position of the man who lolls in his arm chair in slippers while the mother weaves, making old things look new, in her magical and conservative web. It is this silence that marks sentimental-domestic fiction as a genre of containment. Woman's control over the scene of reading opens up the space for female dissonance while maintaining the economy of exclusion that otherwise marks the domestic sphere.

Uncle Tom's Cabin uses sentimental discourse for its own ends: to show women how to interfere in patriarchal politics under the sign of Christian justice, the only context within which such feminine interference is uncontestedly legitimate. The clear and direct language of Fanny Fern becomes, in Stowe's more worldly novel, paradoxically both indirect and exemplary in a way that is instructive for this discussion of the "negative space" of ideology that the complaint mode occupies.

The astounding chapter of Uncle Tom's Cabin titled "A Senator is but a

Man,” in which Senator Bird learns to be led by the feelings and experiences that move virtuous women toward justice, is a rhetorical minefield: Stowe must map out the ethical and political terrain without alienating well-meaning but tragically flawed supporters of slavery both in the novel and in the reading audience. She must simultaneously expose the evil and represent the evil-doers as spiritually and politically salvageable. The text manages this by representing the manifest oppositions between classes of politically powerful and powerless subjects as vulnerable to the effects of proper reading. The powerful association of tears with interpretation extends from the actual scene of novel reading to any exceptional scene in life: in life, as well as in the text, tears dissolve oppositions of gender, class, religion, and race.²⁸ Within this set of associations, reading becomes the counter-hegemonic response to voting, the other private act with enormous public consequences.

Senator Bird is said to have vocally supported and influenced other senators to vote for the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. This Act appears especially threatening from the point of view of the home’s self-sovereignty, for the law claims to regulate the actions of conscience performed by “private” citizens. The narrator comments that Senator Bird “was as bold as a lion about it . . . but then his idea of a fugitive was only an idea of the letters that spell the word,—or at the most, the image of a little newspaper picture of a man with a stick and bundle with ‘Ran away from the subscriber’ under it.”²⁹ The Senator derives his values not from personal experience or religious belief, but from language and newspapers. He knows only what he reads: a flawed citizen of the public and private spheres, he must be taught to derive his information from different, “living” texts.

In contrast to the Senator, Mrs. Bird rarely engages the public sphere: “it was a very unusual thing . . . ever to trouble her head with what was going on in the house of the state.”³⁰ Nonetheless, she has one surprising quality, so surprising, her son calls her “crazy.” “Anything in the shape of cruelty would throw her into a passion, which was the more alarming and inexplicable in proportion to the general softness of her nature.”³¹ The horrifying “thing” in this tale is, of course, slavery; only the extremity of its violence justifies her extraordinary questioning of her husband, in the name of all that is “right and Christian.”³²

Stowe’s narrator calls the consciousness-raising shots: each sad event, in the heightening drama of Eliza’s flight from slavery, aims to create an immediate emotional response in the reader that eventuates in the construction of an “instinctive” sense of right and wrong. The authority of unjust federal laws about slavery shrivels in the human face of Eliza’s need. The narrator appeals directly for sympathy to the mothers in the audience who may have just lost or risked the loss of a child: “And oh! mother that reads this, has there never been in your house a drawer, or a closet, the opening of which has been to you like the

opening again of a little grave? Ah! happy mother that you are, if it has not been so.”³³ Faced with the death that hovers around the the family, the hand of mournful maternal identity reaches across racial and textual spaces.

In turn, the wife reaches across the space of sexual difference to educate her husband. The problematic relations of wife to husband are never directly appealed to as sites of injustice or domination. Although the text represents the Senator’s patronizing affection for his wife as a component of his general political problem, their marriage is clearly represented as the most sacred of “states”; politics is, likewise, figured as taking place in “houses.” As long as men like the Senator can learn to read and cry with the women, there will be no domestic crisis, in the house or the state. But the wife can educate the husband only under the tremendous pressure of the political moment—and crucially without calling attention to her power: “Now, little Mrs. Bird was a discreet woman,—a woman who never in her life said, “I told you so!”³⁴ Thus the institutional separation of male and female spheres remains completely valorized; the separation of spheres according to gender is called into question only under extraordinary circumstances. Stowe implicitly offers the sentimental home and female political silence as a blessed reward to which America will return on the dissolution of slavery.

The inevitability of the domestic context that characterizes sentimental literature in nineteenth century America is undermined when melodrama emerges as the dominant aesthetic mode of women’s culture in accordance with a late nineteenth century move toward greater mimetic “realism.”³⁵ Female melodrama represents more danger to the woman and the privacy she guards, situated in the family’s inability to contain and to manage the world without injury to its members. These narratives record the bruises the (ontologically domestic) woman gathers from her forced contact with the outside world: in female melodrama, there is no hiding, no protection in the home.³⁶ “Good“ women will maintain domestic ideology despite its archaic status; but this genre frames the gap between domestic ideology and the historical changes that have made the family a window of vulnerability.

As a result, the female melodrama represents the humiliation of the woman who is unable to understand what it means that the sentimental world in which she naturally [sic] operates is archaic to the contemporary economy. Sometimes this humiliation makes the mother a martyr in a world that has passed on to heartless values; sometimes the mother is construed as painfully inadequate, contained as she is in a world of her own circumscription. As Peter Brooks notes about the melodramatic scene, “What counts is clarification and recognition of the signs in conflict, and this may be true even when expulsion cannot be achieved and virtue succumbs.”³⁷ In melodrama, of utmost importance is the

staging of the complaint, rather than its narrative: “clarification” and “recognition” of female suffering would indeed be legitimation enough.

Stella Dallas, a much-discussed 1937 maternal melodrama starring Barbara Stanwyck, generates both of these readings of maternal ideology.³⁸ Stella Dallas, a working class daughter with aims and desires for the power of money, loses her right to moral due process when her class ambitions supercede and denigrate the love of a good man—we learn that Steven Dallas is a good man because he gives up hereditary privilege and a socially correct marriage to “find himself” by seeking his own fortune in the capitalist meritocracy. But Stella also demonstrates her right to moral hegemony (in the context of sentimental culture) by dedicating her entire life to the happiness of her truly sweet and sentimentally perfect daughter, Laurel.³⁹ Marriage and maternity in this film, then, generate antithetical kinds of moral context within which to evaluate Stella Dallas. Thus the question posed by Steven Dallas’s lover Helen Morrison—“I’m a mother. Do you think I could ever deprive another mother of her little girl?”—receives both the sentimental affirmative answer (no) and the melodramatic negative (yes). In contrast to a characterization of its utility as a positive political alternative to the phallocratic public sphere,⁴⁰ sentimental discourse, in this maternal melodrama, evokes a kind of historical pre-Oedipal context for the woman. By deliberately acting the part of a “loose woman” in order to alienate her daughter Laurel from the biological/sentimental covenant of love and loyalty, Stella preserves the hegemony of the archaic sentimental code by displaying the simulacrum of its failure. The (typically melodramatic) inability of maternal desire to manage the competing claims of the social and domestic realms ends up reconstructing the sentimental in the space of its negation, in order that the propriety of motherhood follows the logic of class identity established by the wife of the *nom du pere*.

Finally, a word on television’s role in the formation and dissemination of female discourse. Television, which absorbs and employs all genres of popular female discourse, reinforces the female-domestic hedge against the incursions of the horrifying “outside” world. John Ellis among others argues convincingly that after the mid ’50’s, when television became the organizing axis both of household topography and activity, the television viewer joined with the television to look through a mutual eye at the increasingly threatening outside world, a world that paradoxically gets more alienated from the scene of viewing the more it is represented.⁴¹ The manifest “mode of address” characteristic of television genres thus situates it in an ambiguous space both in and outside of the family.⁴² The medium expands the represented horizons of the public sphere—the area whose political and cultural productions are considered as “of interest” to the viewing audience, (“interest” here a pseudo-neutral term that veils the presence and constrains the expression of various “interests”); but television also has the job

of managing the material so as not to augur the dislocation of the audience from the scene of viewing, the seat of contemptive authority television provides for its consumers. Gallantly it sifts, lifts, and brings into narrative “our” world’s anarchic forces. And in the event of scandal, as Jean Baudrillard has spectacularly argued, the very fact of television representation serves the audience by dislocating their own lives from that of the polluted *socius*.⁴³

For women in particular, addressed by daytime television as an audience “in the know,”⁴⁴ television functions as an agent for the revalorization of bourgeois privacy by speaking directly, intimately, and uniquely to its female audience about the “special” knowledge women need and desire to possess. Sometimes, as in soap operas, the attitude struck is of a longing for a world of sentimental plots and for poetic justice enacted against the forces of melodrama that keep rupturing the heterosexual bond, women’s friendships, and the family.⁴⁵ In the nighttime soaps that occupy television’s prime time public sphere, there is only the trace of sentimental possibility: the family “contains” all social life, but here the family appears as a monster overgorging itself on the surplus desire and commodity production that characterizes the personal and institutional practices of modern America. This is why, (most parodically) on *Dynasty*, the largeness of all the central female characters so dominates the screen. In their struggle to take over the valorized and desired gaze of all men they violate the proper pact among “civilized” women *not to intrude* on the public space, except as some man’s “relative,” visible on request only.

Finally, situation comedies have traversed the path from nineteenth-century-like sentimental light entertainment that extends the world from the safe home, to a new mode—that of bourgeois irony.⁴⁶ Comedy, satire, parody mark the representation of domestic ideology on the situation comedy, especially where the woman no longer protected by the nuclear family is concerned. The comic self-erasure of comediennes like Mary Tyler Moore and Carol Burnett condenses the pain of the unabsorbable female subject who lives in the space between public and private failure. Female bourgeois irony enables the narration of women’s humiliations only because she always carries with her the desire to instantiate a privatizing, formal female propriety wherever she goes. Her suffering is the female complaint, and her irony—the paradigmatic gesture of shrugging her shoulders and looking into the camera as if to say, What did I expect?—makes her suffering an endearing embarrassment. But her sacrifice to self-erasure is a small price to pay for the privilege of maintaining that subtly and conspiratorily ironic shrug in the context of prime time TV.

The most powerful, widely read, and self-reflective theorist of bourgeois irony deployed as a mode of female containment is Erma Bombeck. Bombeck calls the complaint the woman’s genre, and says explicitly that comedy is her way

of refunctioning that complaint in order to help herself and other women make it through the inevitable degradation, horror, madness, and humiliation enacted on the bourgeois mother. Her book *Motherhood, the Second Oldest Profession*, insists on erasing the images of perfect women disseminated by '50's-style television: "I once bragged," she writes, "that I saved a diabetic's life by throwing my body in front of a Donna Reed rerun."⁴⁷ This book about the prostitutions of motherhood raises vivid images of female alliance as the necessary salve, the life-saving grace of the bourgeois white woman:

It was the not-ready-for-prime-time mothers who questioned it [television representations of flawless motherhood in the nuclear family] in the late Sixties . . .

It started out as a ripple of discontent, gathering momentum through the Seventies. By the Eighties the dissidents were a force to be dealt with, as fifty-two percent of all mothers had jobs outside the home.

Whatever happened to the Insulin Seven: Donna, Barbara, Shirley, Harriet, Marjorie, Jane, and Florence? They disappeared beneath a tidal wave of reality . . . these dinosaurs in aprons who roam the Earth smiling wisely and pouring milk.⁴⁸

Evoking the "Not Ready for Prime Time Players" of "Saturday Night Live" and the political theatre of the Chicago Seven, Bombeck records the triumphant demand for representational realism by women—not called "feminists" here, but "dissidents," political actors virtually imprisoned or silenced in the negative space of mainstream American culture. Here it is Bombeck's purpose to reverse the burial of mothers in their ungrateful families and in the fantasies of a culture unwilling to represent to itself its exploitation of women. Her column gives a voice to and represents this exploitation "humorously." She further demonstrates the extent of women's need to stand (for) each other by representing numerous cases of real and fantasy child murders. Not only does her essay "Hansel and Gretel's Stepmother" narrate a sympathetic story about child-killing, but the introduction to *Motherhood* contains a letter Bombeck received from a "real" child killer:

This book was written too late for Judy, a mother in her early twenties I met a few years ago through brief correspondence. Judy was incarcerated in a Southern prison for the unspeakable crime of killing her child. Withdrawn, unable to communicate, and living in her own particular hell, she passed time in solitary confinement reading some of my earlier books. After she had read and reread them, she wrote to me, 'Had I known mothers could laugh at these things, I probably wouldn't be where I am today.'⁴⁹

Yet against this litany of violence received and violence perpetrated within the family, Bombeck violently defends the propriety of assigning the woman the heroic and self-sacrificing function of disseminating private values wherever she breathes, enveloping within her the alien, the imperfect, and especially the undeserving (a category that includes most people, especially children and husbands).⁵⁰ This heroic mother, whose tears represent suffering and joy, is not at her best when she acts or speaks. Instead, Bombeck insists that maternal silence is the apex of maternal perfection: "Mother's face is a mask that reveals nothing and reacts to nothing that is said," she writes.⁵¹ "I love my mother for all the times she said absolutely nothing."⁵² In this view the mother's imitation of life through a representation of death or absence is the moment of the greatest female power: a fold within a fold, marked by a crack, a tear, a tear of self-expression that is a sign of activity, the mother's ability to absorb makes possible her endurance of the daily humiliation of family life.

Bombeck thus contains within her all of the elements of the female complaint, historically viewed. Spokesmodel for domestic ideology, demystifier of the power relations that work within the family and between the family and commodity culture, epic poet of female sexual self-alienation, Bombeck provides potentially explosive material for arguments against the nuclear family, arguments deployed on behalf of what Bombeck would call the most erased women of all—middle class housewives and mothers.

We might also read the sentimental context of Bombeck's work as if it were a parenthesis, there to contain the radical content about the liberating undecidability of the woman. For like post-Lacanian, post-structuralist feminists,⁵³ Bombeck's battle is against the phallic cultural phantasy of woman's simple identity to herself. She would agree absolutely with such feminist theoreticians that woman is undefinable and unwritable, where definition and writing are tools for the genericization of women.

But for Bombeck, the often accompanying "feminist" denial of the value of sentimental truths about the divinity of female duty and female suffering would constitute a violation of the female alliance that keeps her and other women sane in the face of family madness—an inevitable psychic condition, in Bombeck's world, and also a priori. Bombeck maintains the utopian space of a mass female intimacy with her female audience only by positioning "woman" in the bedlam of the normative family and speaking her complaint for her, advocating all the while an ideal image of female self-erasure and public silence in the face of sexual and occupational exploitation. Like Erica Jong in the den of the radical lesbian separatist feminists, what Bombeck wants to effect in her reader is consciousness without politics, female power without rupture of feminine privilege. It is this

internal limit on the voice of even the white bourgeois woman that must be perforated in order for a feminist politics to rise from within the ranks of all women.

Conclusion

I have outlined here a (speculative) history of female discourse as it has emerged in American culture.⁵⁴ The full history of the modes of containment that have empowered the female private sphere to protect women from public humiliation would reveal to us the local historical content of the patriarchal fantasy about a particular kind of white bourgeois woman, and would document her ways of resisting it within her enclosure in that privatizing semiotic of which the complaint is the paradigm genre. It is this heritage, of the self-contained, performative modes of complaint, that feminist discourse unfortunately shares: it marks both the foundations and the limitations of the movement, at least in its present American mode. The historical and internal limit of women's social presence is the fear that her privacy will be ruptured by something phallic like a politics, an incitement to action or a deployment of knowledge. This is a fear of female self-legitimation men have, one which gives the movement great potential. But this is also women's fear, as we see both in Jong's narrative, and in Bombeck's rage against successful women (a rage she later repudiates). This fear, a fear of flying, or as Bombeck half-parodies it, a fear of landing and a fear of buying, reflects the historical exile of the woman from cultural activity outside of privatizing quotation marks.

But the antidote to this situation is not to insist on a narcissism that embraces those marks, for this reproduces the view that woman is reducible to the distinguishing incision of patriarchal fantasy that gives her sex a gender. Women and feminism must rather struggle to eradicate the scene of monstrous doubling, of narcissistic horror that reproduces the dominating fantasy of female self-identity. We should see feminism as a metamovement that names the emergence of shameless, self-privileging and not self-erased public female voices. It is, and should be, a collection of local and specific guerilla actions addressed to particular problems and dedicated to making the public sphere safe for women.

Thus feminists must embrace a policy of female disidentification at the level of female essence. What we share is a history of oppression by patriarchy in its various alliances with other hegemonic economic, state, racial, and religious practices; what we do not share is our relation to these systems of oppression. We must align ourselves, in our differences from each other, to perform, theorize, constantly intensify the rupture of the private, and inhabit, as much as we can,

the constantly expanding negative terrain that will transform the patriarchal public sphere. We must not be horrified by women who refunction their relations to masculine modes of authority in ways that seem senseless to us. While feminism should operate in a tradition of ruthless self-criticism, women should not expect all women to have the same “imaginary relations to the real.”⁵⁵ For the configurations of the “Real” change significantly as class, nation, race, economy, and cultural traditions vary. Only under a regime where we refuse to make a singular example of ourselves, where we refute global arguments for local and decentered moves, will we be able to burn our privacy passbooks and to look with intelligence at the overdetermined and incoherent activity that passes for, or simulates, something like the essence of woman.

NOTES

This essay is dedicated to Julia Lesage.

1. Erica Jong, “The Awful Truth About Women’s Lib,” *Vanity Fair*, v. 49, no. 4 (April 1986), p. 118.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 118.

4. I am grateful to have been instructed on this point by Susan Stanford Friedman.

5. I am not alone in suggesting that a politics of the public sphere is an essential ingredient in the social struggle against patriarchal capitalism; Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge suggest that the working classes have much the same need “to become involved in a life-context, that is, in a form of public sphere specific to them” in order to break the hold bourgeois practices have over the language and the ideology of social experience and identity. Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, “The Proletarian Public Sphere,” in eds. Armand Mattelart and Seth Siegelaub, *Communication and Class Struggle II* (New York/Bagnolet, France: IG/IMMRC, 1983), p. 92.

6. To map out the different positions in the argument over the construction and reproduction of the female “subject,” see the useful interpretations of the “subject” of feminist theory in these books and anthologies: Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocínio P. Schweickart, eds. *Gender and Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics* (London: Methuen, 1985); *Feminism and Social Change*, eds. Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt (New York: Methuen, 1985); Alice Jardine, *Gynesis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985); Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams, *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, The American Film Institute Monograph Series, Vol. III (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1984).

7. For kindred critiques of the individualist tendencies of feminist psychoanalytic and reader-response models, see: Teresa De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn’t* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984); Annette Kuhn, “Women’s Genres,” *Screen*, v. 25, no. 1, (January-February 1984), 18-29; Cora Kaplan, “Pandora’s Box: subjectivity, class, and sexuality in socialist feminist criticism,” in *Making a Difference*, eds. Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn (New York: Methuen, 1985), pp. 146-176; Steve Neale, “Masculinity as Spectacle,” *Screen*, v. 24, no. 6 (November-December, 1983), 2-16.

8. The most promising work being done in this area is, not surprisingly, located in “third world” cultural theory, where political and national history is intimately tied up with questions about the constitution of the subject, and the effects of *a priori* negation on subjects born into a context of personal, social delegitimation. The most fully worked-out application of notions of “colonized”

consciousness with respect to feminism and literary study is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivack's brilliant work in "subaltern studies," which includes theoretical essays and translations of Mahasweta Devi's short works "Draupadi" and "Breast-Giver," in *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York and London: Methuen, 1987). See also: Homi K. Bhabha, "The Other Question . . . the Stereotype and Social Discourse," *Screen* 24, no. 6 (November and December, 1983), 18-36; Teresa de Lauretis, "Through the Looking Glass," in *Alice Doesn't* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) and "The Technology of Gender," in *Technologies of Gender* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 1-30; Biddy Martin and Chandra Talpede Mohanty, "Feminist Politics: What's Home Got to do with It?" in Teresa de Lauretis, ed., *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 191-212; Cherr'ie Moraga, "From a Long Line of Vendidas: Chicanas and Feminism," in de Lauretis, *Feminist Studies/ Critical Studies*, pp. 172-190

A more sociological work on gender, class, and national culture is exemplified by Paul Willis and Philip Corrigan, "Orders of Experience: Working Class Cultural Forms," *Social Text* (Spring and Summer 1983), pp. 85-103 and Popular Memory Group, "Popular Memory: theory, politics, method," in Richard Johnson, Gregor McLennan, Bill Schwartz, David Sutton eds., *Making Histories*, Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), pp. 205-252.

9. I do not mean to oppose "theory" to "experience" here: for a useful critique of that opposition, see Jonathan Culler's explication of the intersection between feminist theory and post-structuralism in *On Deconstruction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984). I mean to replace the (post-Lacanian) inquiry into the subject's prostration to the Symbolic/Language/Law with a model of the multiply-designated or affiliated subject, defined by his/her engagement with disparate and dissimilar discourses.

Certain guidelines follow such a shift: that while the subject *in theory* might negotiate fully articulated relations with his/her multiple sites of affiliation, *in practice* the subject's critical task would be more humble: to identify relations of colonization, suppression, positive association, and so on, in an always provisional attempt to map out the dominant logic of identity. These "logics" are always shifting, especially as they are articulated and responded to. Second, this critical project would, as Stephen Heath has suggested, attend to the sutures among these discourses and not to the discourses themselves, seen in isolation. See Stephen Heath, "On Suture," in *Questions of Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), pp. 76-112. Third, neither gender should be presumed to be more colonized (deformed, inscribed . . .) than the other: women have not cornered the market on historicity. Such assumptions confuse the ruse of self-presence with self-presence. Historically marginalized or oppressed classes of people will have less access, historically, to the ruses of self-presence: but even (to be vulgar) white men are always engaged in negotiations.

10. The specifically "feminist" contribution to this rethinking of "the subject" is best articulated by Chantal Mouffe, "The Sex/Gender System and the Discursive Construct of Women's Subordination," in eds. Sakari Hanninen and Leena Paldan, *Rethinking Ideology* (New York: International General/IMMRC, 1983), pp.139-143. See also Teresa de Lauretis, "Through the Looking Glass" in *The Cinematic Apparatus*, eds. Stephen Heath and Teresa de Lauretis (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980) pp. 187-202. In addition, Michel Pecheux has proposed a "subject of interdiscourse," with respect to which critical analysis would view the subject as a vehicle for the social contradictions that characterize any subject's historical situation. For a significant deployment of Michel Pecheux's work in a materialist counter to the ahistorical and individualist tendencies of post-structuralism, see Dave Morley, "Texts, Readers," in eds. Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe, and Paul Willis, *Culture, Media, Language* (London: Hutchinson and the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham, 1980), pp. 163-173, and Stuart Hall, "Recent developments in theories of language and ideology: a critical note," *Culture, Media, Language*, pp. 157-162.

11. Such a reified distribution of libidinal energy is articulated as a founding principle of

capitalism by Marcuse. Marcuse doesn't discuss the implications of libidinal alienation specifically for women—he uses a non-generic “he”—but his description of the production of a “pleasure ego” by a culture that constructs pleasure-for-use by the labor economy is clearly relevant and suggestive for thinking about the reproduction of the “woman” in the lives of “working” (that is, all) women. See especially Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), pp. 20-105. See also John Brenkman, “Mass Media: from Collective Experience to the Culture of Privatization,” *Social Text* 1 (Winter 1979), pp. 94-109.

12. I am especially indebted to the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London: Verso, 1985). Especially relevant to this discussion are pp. 130-145, their discussion of the relation between popular and democratic struggles in the context of post-hegemonic cultural politics. In their reevaluation of the concept of hegemony in light of the social fragmentations of late capitalism they interestingly meet up with Raymond Williams, in *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977). Williams argues that “One way of expressing the necessary distinction between the practical and abstract senses within the concept [of hegemony] is to speak of “the hegemonic” rather than the “hegemony”, and of “the dominant”, rather than simple “domination”. The reality of any hegemony, in the extended political and cultural sense, is that, while by definition it is always dominant, it is never either total or exclusive The specific functions of “the hegemonic”, “the dominant”, have always to be stressed, but not in ways which suggest any *a priori* totality” (113).

13. For example, in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe aims to shift the popular public sphere from the workaday world—where racist and patriarchal practices no longer serve true justice—to the relatively uncorrupted domestic space, (the space of reading), where politics and sensibility find their just and married proportion. But this shift in the public sphere is irrelevant to slaves, who inhabit social spaces marked by different rules. For the Black slaves in the novel, multiple and contradictory public spheres dominate slave life and consciousness: the sites of exchange between whites and blacks such as ships and whipping houses constitute one sphere where public value is designated; the domestic space of the owner's family is potentially (and naturally, according to Stowe) different, because of the master's intimacy with and dependance on his servants; there are also spaces relatively free of white hegemony (the slave house and the master's kitchen) that constitute other significant determinations of value in the slave community while often also parodying the master's techniques of hierarchy and domination; and, finally, heaven itself becomes the public sphere redeemed, where justice can be distributed according to some absolute essential version of value.

14. Guy Trebay, “Cool Crush,” *Village Voice* July 2, 1985, p. 71. I'd like to thank Denis Dworin for bringing this phenomenon to my attention.

15. Franklin Soultz, *Grey City Journal*, April 18, 1986.

16. Trebay, *op. cit.* p. 71.

17. There is no published list of response records: this number comes from a representative of Select Records, who commented that such a list is kept because of the numerous lawsuits over copyright infringement that arise when “response” records quote from the original.

18. The phenomenon of the rap response record has flourished since “Roxanne's Revenge,” with radio stations barely able to keep up with songs and counter-songs. The representative of Select Records with whom I spoke commented that responses are encouraged now, to extend the playing life of singles. For a brief exposition of the phenomenon of sexual debate in rap music, see Vince Aletti, “Dirty Talk”: *The Single Life*, *Village Voice* vol. 31, no. 4 (January 28, 1986), p. 78. The biggest speech-response event following “Roxanne” came at the end of 1986, when Oran “Juice” Jones scored big with a single called “Rain.” This is a ballad of sorts, a male complaint about a woman's betrayal of him: but the last two minutes of the record, dubbed over the soft background of the song, are taken over by a spoken rap invective against his cheating woman that features sentences like: “Now close your mouth cause you're cold busted . . . I gave you silk suits, Gucci Handbags, blue diamonds, I

gave you things you couldn't even pronounce . . . Silly Rabbit, Tricks are made for kids, don't you know that? You without me like cornflakes without the milk. It's my world, you're just like a squirrel tryin to get a nut, now get on outa here . . ." Donny Simpson, VJ (video jock) of the show "Video Soul" on the Black Entertainment Cable network, commented that the song's great popularity was due in large part to the final rap, with men in bars often standing up and reciting the tirade aloud, in unison with Jones. According to *Rolling Stone* magazine (as of 1/25/87, quoted in *The Wisconsin State Journal*) *thirty-three* "answers from enraged females" had been received by Jones, who commented in response, "I'm not chauvinistic . . . I'm realistic. Relationships have evolved into business ventures. If she has as much gold as me, then we have to decide who's gonna make the rules. But if I've got the gold, then I'm gonna make the rules. That's the golden rule."

19. Iain Chambers, *Urban Rhythms* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1985); David Toop, *The Rap Attack* (Boston: South End Press, 1984); Dick Hebdidge, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979).

20. For example, in raps like Kurtis Blow's prophetic "America," and in the current crop of remixes that feature speeches by Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, rap content comments explicitly on Anglo- and Afro-American nationalist politics. This feature of much rap music partakes in the general movement toward social action through rock and roll currently transforming the scene of popular music; even the Reagan administration "war on drugs" is currently disseminated via the lite-heavy metal number "Just Say No," whose rock video features an appearance by Nancy Reagan.

21. For a brief history of the complaint as a literary form, see Nancy Dean, "Chaucer's *Complaint*, A Genre Descended from the *Heroides*," *Comparative Literature*, vol. 19, no. 1 (Winter 1967), pp. 1-27.

22. Saying that the complaint both expresses and establishes limits to its own effectivity is not to imply that it always cancels itself out. The witnessing and even documentary value of the female complaint depends entirely on the context of its inception and the context of its utterance. Julia Lesage, for example, has suggested to me that the complaint is currently a dominant and politically powerful form of Central American female literary self-expression. See also John Beverley's essay, "Poetry and Revolution in Central America," in Mike Davis, Fred Pfeil, and Michael Sprinkler, *The Year Left: An American Socialist Yearbook* (London: Verso, 1985), pp. 155-180.

23. According to Sarah Stage, female complaint was "the catchall nineteenth-century term for disorders ranging from painful menstruation to prolapsed uterus" (p. 27). For a provocative reading of the medical- and capitalization of American female sexuality in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, see Sarah Stage, *Female Complaints* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1979).

24. For discussions of the emergence of women's culture into the American public space, see Nina Baym, *Women's Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979); Mary Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985); Barbara Welter, *Dimity Convictions* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1976).

25. See, for example, Manning Marable, "Historical Prologue: Towards a General Theory of Black Politics" *Black American Politics* (London: Verso, 1985), pp. 1-73.

26. Baym, *op. cit.*, pp. 15-16.

27. Sara Payson Parton [Fanny Fern, pseud.], *Rose Clarky* (New York: Mason Brothers, 1856), pp. iii-iv; quoted in Baym, *op. cit.*, pp. 32-33.

28. Jane Tompkins reads the novel's pedagogical sentimentality as a powerful form of feminist discourse. See "Sentimental Power: *Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Politics of Literary History*," *Sensational Designs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 122-146.

29. Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852; rpt. New York: Viking Penguin, Inc., 1981), pp. 155-6.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 142.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 142.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 143.
33. *Ibid.*, pp. 153-154.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 152.
35. Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984). Brooks' suggestion that the representation of the "moral occult" motivates signification in melodrama—and that the specific content of this category varies with its cultural context—seems exactly right to me, describing as it does the hinge between gothic and domestic genres of popular women's literature.
36. See Mary Anne Doane, "Woman's Film: Possession and Address," in *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism* eds. Mary Anne Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams (Los Angeles: AFI Monograph Series, 1983), pp. 67-82; Jane Feuer, "Melodrama, Serial Form, and Television Today," *Screen* 25, no. 1 (January-February 1984), pp. 4-16; Annette Kuhn, "Women's Genres," *Screen* 25, no. 1 (January-February 1984), pp. 18-28; E. Ann Kaplan, "Theories of Melodrama: A Feminist Perspective" *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 1, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 1983), pp. 40-48; Chuck Kleinhans "Two or Three Things I Know About Her: Godard's Analysis of Women in Capitalist Society," in *Sexual Stratagems*, ed. Patricia Erens (NY Horizon Press, 1979), pp. 72-81. Tania Modleski, *Loving With a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women* (New York: Methuen, 1982); Tania Modleski, "The Search for Tomorrow in Today's Soap Operas," *Film Quarterly* vol 33 no 1 (1979), pp. 12-21; Christian Viviani, "Who is Without Sin? The Maternal Melodrama in American Film, 1930-1939," *Wide Angle* 4, no. 2 (1980): pp. 4-17.
37. Brooks, p. 202.
38. See, for example, Mary Anne Doane, *op. cit.*; Christian Viviani, *op. cit.*; E. Ann Kaplan "The Case of the Missing Mother: Maternal Issues in Vidor's *Stella Dallas*", *Heresies* 16 (1983), pp. 81-85; Linda Williams, "When the Woman Looks," in *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism* eds. Mary Anne Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams (Los Angeles: AFI Monograph Series, 1983); pp. 83-97, Linda Williams, "'Something Else Besides a Mother': *Stella Dallas* and the Maternal Melodrama," *Cinema Journal* 24, no. 1 (Fall 1984), pp. 2-27.
39. Most of the work on *Stella Dallas* has been done on the film: significantly, the novel by Olive Higgins Prouty and the radio serial of the same name—between 1938 and 1955—also enjoyed tremendous popularity. "Picking up the plot where it had ended in the successful Barbara Stanwyck film of 1937 . . . *Stella Dallas* (the radio serial) [was] a tribute to both the sacrificial nature and the sheer resourcefulness of the All-American mother." Raymond W. Stedman, *The Serials* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977), p. 313.
40. See Jane Tompkins, *op. cit.*
41. John Ellis, *Visible Fictions* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982). For sympathetic discussions of television's unique mediation of "public" and "private" spaces, see also Stuart Hood, *On Television* (London: Pluto Press, 1980); Jane Feuer, "The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology," in E. Ann Kaplan, *op. cit.*, pp. 12-22; Todd Gitlin, ed. *Watching Television* (New York: Pantheon, 1986); John Fiske and John Hartley, *Reading Television* (London: Methuen, 1978), esp. pp. 85-100; Douglas Kellner, "TV, Ideology, and Emancipatory Culture," in Newcomb, Horace, ed. *Television: The Critical View* 3rd edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 386-421; Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (New York: Schocken, 1974); Robert Stam, "Television News and Its Spectator," in ed. E. Ann Kaplan, *Regarding Television*, (Los Angeles: A. F. I./University Publications of America., Inc., 1983), pp. 23-42.
42. Stuart Hood, *On Television* (London: Pluto Press, 1980), pp. 22-4.
43. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. by Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman (New

York: Semiotext(e), 1983), pp. 36-79. See also Jane Feuer, "The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology," in ed. E. Ann Kaplan, *Regarding Television*, (Los Angeles: A. F. I./ University Publications of America., Inc., 1983), pp. 12-22; Daniel C. Hallin, "Network News: We Keep America on Top of the World," in Gitlin, *op cit.*, 9-41; Robert Stam, "Television News and Its Spectator," in E. Ann Kaplan, *op cit.*, pp. 23-43.

44. For example, in Autumn, 1986 and Winter, 1987, all advertising for daytime television on CBS was enunciated as a predicate to the phrase: "Rumor has it." When advertising a soap opera, a montage sequence of the soap's most currently breaking story would follow the imaginary colon at the end of the overdubbed phrase: for example, "Rumor has it—on *As the World Turns*:". The female audience, privileged site of all information and speculation (the viewing condition appropriately called "epistemophilia, the love of knowing," by Robert Stam, *op. cit.* p. 23) is explicitly articulated as an active component of a discursive community. But CBS stretches this by advertising its game shows via the same locution: "Rumor has it: on *The Price is Right*." In making such an association of game show pleasure with soap opera pleasure the network asks its audience to situate the pleasure of knowledge in self-interest itself, rather than in the represented world social narrative that presumably forms the basis of soap opera attractiveness.

45. See David Thorburn, "Television Melodrama," in Newcomb, Horace, ed. *Television: The Critical View* 3rd. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 529-546; Ruth Rosen, "Soap Operas: Search for Yesterday," in Gitlin, *op cit.*, pp. 42-67.

46. For complementary readings of situation comedies as contained discourses (where women are concerned), see Todd Gitlin, "Prime-Time Ideology: The Hegemonic Process in Television Entertainment," in Newcomb, Horace, ed. *Television: The Critical View* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); Patricia Mellencamp, "Situation Comedy, Feminism, and Freud: Discourses of Gracie and Lucy," in Tania Modleski, ed. *Studies in Entertainment* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 80-95; Mark Crispin Miller, "Prime Time: Deride and Conquer," in Gitlin, pp. 183-228.

47. Erma Bombeck, *Four of a Kind* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1985), p.444.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 444.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 437.

50. *Ibid.*, pp. 603-4.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 540.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 601

53. Feminists who take as a given the undecidability and unspeakability of the feminine within the logic of patriarchal discourse: see Alice Jardine, *Gynesis*, for a critical rehearsal of this position.

54. Many other areas will be accounted for in the full version of this study: of major technologies, newspapers, magazines, radio; of literary genres, "the article," the popular poem; of "popular" cultures, religious and local publications; plus other female practices that collaborated with the conditions under which the complaint prospered as the form in which the "sentence" of culture against American women was carried out.

55. This is Louis Althusser's description of the generic subject's inscription within ideology. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Toward an Investigation)," in *Lenin and Philosophy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), pp. 127-186.

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²¹ **Chaucer's Complaint, a Genre Descended from the Heroides**

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³⁶ **The Search for Tomorrow in Today's Soap Operas: Notes on a Feminine Narrative Form**

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³⁸ **"Something Else besides a Mother": "Stella Dallas" and the Maternal Melodrama**

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Cinema Journal, Vol. 24, No. 1. (Autumn, 1984), pp. 2-27.

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