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GeniusAdd Women and Stir?

**A critical analysis of the essence of
genius and the exclusion of women
from Art History**

By

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Introduction

On November 18th 1992 a major exhibition opened at the National Gallery of Ireland in Dublin. The exhibition celebrated the rediscovery of the missing "Taking of Christ" painted by Caravaggio and was publicised as "the greatest Irish art discovery in centuries" (Fallon, 1993, p.1). Since news of the discovery was detailed for weeks by the media the sense of excitement as the opening day drew near was palpable and the exhibition in celebratory mood was called *The Master Revealed*.

The gallery launched a massive publicity campaign and as the words "The Master Revealed" reverberated around the city I was forced to wonder what the exhibition would have been called had Caravaggio been female? Certainly the idea of an exhibition being titled "The Mistress Revealed" and the very obvious sexual connotation of a revealing mistress, would seem laughable if it didn't reflect many unspoken truths about women's relationship to the art world.

One such truth is that art history usually posits women as objects rather than subjects of art. "The Mistress Revealed" suggests that the mistress is the object of art by pointing to the many female nudes that exist as objects of art throughout its history.

As I pondered a suitable name for an exhibition of a female Caravaggio.... "The Mistress Discovered" (No - definitely not!) "The Great Mistress" (worse still!)... I realised that even if she wasn't revealed, the mistress still has sexual connotations, and even the possibly more respectful term "Old Mistress" seems to refer to the idea of an "Old Maid" and dried up female sexuality. It is not even possible to say "Old Female Master" since "old" seems to have negative connotations when coupled with "female", suggesting something worn out and discarded, whereas it suggests timelessness and value when referring to the term master.

The fact that there is no suitable equivalent term for a renowned woman artist of the past raises many questions. If as Muriel R. Schulz argues in her essay *The Semantic Derogation of Women*, "a rich vocabulary on a given subject reveals an area of concern of the society whose language is being studied" (Schulz, 1975, p.134) does the absence of language suggest that female art is not an area of concern? Art history's omission of almost all women from its canon could be said to support this argument.

Conversely, it could be argued that language reflects need and that the absence of vocabulary in this instance supports the idea that there are no female equivalents of the old masters. From this stance it could be argued that the lack of women in art history merely reflects their lack of ability!

Lack of ability or lack of recognition? As a female art student the question of why women are largely absent from art history is of particular interest to me. It is therefore the purpose of this thesis to examine art history's omissions of almost all women from its canon, through a critical examination of the concept "great artist" or "genius" and how that concept relates to women.

In this college approximately 65% of the Fine Art students are female yet most of the art history we study is that of male artists. Given the fact that students normally gain access to art college on the basis of ability and that most art students are now female (Lippard, 1976, p.33; Mondale, 1979, p. vxi) are we to believe that female interest and ability in art is only a feature of the late 20th century?

If we support the idea that women have always made art and that the lack of a female term for "Old Master" does not reflect a lack of ability, then we must address the question posed by Linda Nochlin in her essay of the same title *Why have there been no great women artists?* However, we must also consider the fact that, as Nochlin argues, the reproachful tone of this question falsifies the nature of the issue while at the same time "insidiously" supplying its own answer which implies that women are incapable of greatness (Nochlin, 1971, p.145).

Since this thesis was prompted by Nochlin's essay, addressing her question is one of the main concerns of this thesis. I wish to put forward the supposition that the answer to her question can be found by questioning the construction of the concept of genius rather than in the capabilities or incapability of women artists.

In her essay Nochlin refutes the "golden nugget theory of genius" which holds that artistic genius is an innate essence that will always out irrespective of the odds against it and regardless of what circumstances and conditions prevail. The "fairy tale" nature of this theory she concludes prevents us from asking more serious questions about the conditions necessary to produce great art. It holds that "If women had the golden nugget... it would reveal itself. But it has never revealed itself Q.E.D. Women do not have the golden nugget of artistic genius." (Nochlin, 1971, p.156).

While Nochlin recognises the "white western male viewpoint" of art history and its failure to take account of its "unacknowledged value system" (Nochlin, 1971, p.146) she argues that rather than trying to "dig up forgotten flower painters" (Nochlin, 1971, p.147) we must accept that there have been no great women artists, just as we must accept that

there have been no ...great....Eskimo tennis players, no matter how much we might wish there had been. That this should be the case is regrettable, but no amount of manipulating the historical or critical evidence will alter the situation: nor will accusations of male chauvinist distortions of history. (Nochlin 1971, p.150)

Nochlin states that lack of education and access to facilities and institutions was a major cause of this fact "the fault lies not in our stars, our hormones, our menstrual cycles or our empty internal spaces but in our institutions and our education" (*ibid.*).

While I concur that lack of education has hindered women's progress in the arts, I would disagree with her acceptance as utter fact that there are no great women artists. Nochlin totally dismisses the idea that women were incapable of greatness, and rightly so, yet she accepts the "white western male viewpoint" of what makes great art as absolute. While I agree that there have been no female equivalents to Van Gogh for example, I question whose value system decides which artists should be the geniuses of art history. Nochlin fails to question the value system at work in the selection of great artists. "If there actually were large numbers of hidden great women artists, or if there really should be different standards for women's art as opposed to men's - and one can't have it both ways - then what are feminists fighting for?" (*ibid.*)

My immediate response to this question would be - recognition! While, I don't believe that there should be different standards for male and female art perhaps the value system in operation needs to be challenged. Were this value system to be replaced by a broader and truly universal one the history of art would change radically.

In this argument Rozsika Parker & Griselda Pollock's views in *Old Mistresses* (1981) are perhaps more in tune with my own. They acknowledge that "women artists have always existed" (Parker & Pollock, 1981, p.180). Rather than dismissing the idea of great women artists they suggest that we should

analyse why art history ignores the existence of women artists, why it has become silent about them, why it has consistently dismissed as insignificant those it did acknowledge, to confront these questions enable us to identify the unacknowledged ideology which informs the practice of this discipline and the values which decide its classification and interpretation of all art. (Parker & Pollock, 1981, p.47).

Nochlin herself in a later article recognises this oversight in her initial essay. In a later article entitled "Towards A Juster Vision - How feminism can change our ways of looking at art history" (1973), Nochlin acknowledges this flaw in her initial essay

My involvement with feminism has led me to question some of the standards and values by which we have judged art in the past. In the article I wrote 'Why have there been no great women artists', I thought that by simply looking at women artists of the past would not really change our estimation of their value. I went on to look at some women artists of the past, and I find my estimations and values have, in fact, changed.... my whole notion of what art is all about is gradually changing (Nochlin, 1973, p. 6)

In this article rather than dismissing totally as "fairy tale" the concept of genius she suggests that looking at questions such as "why there are so few women who have pursued successful careers or are what we call geniuses in the fine arts" in the light of feminism "forces us to be conscious of other questions about our natural assumptions" (Nochlin, 1973, p.5). Nochlin now asks the question she failed to ask in her earlier essay "Why has art history focused so exclusively on certain individuals and not on others, why on individuals and not on groups?" (*ibid.*)

In this thesis I wish to demonstrate how a feminist reappraisal and deconstruction of the concept of genius reveals a gender bias in that concept which resulted not only in the lack of recognition of women artists by art history but in forceful discrimination against them. The concept of genius, its construction and definition reflects a kind of "cultural apartheid" (Battersby, 1989, p.3) and is used to exclude women from art history and to justify that exclusion.

I would therefore support Griselda Pollock (1986) when she argues that "art history is not just indifferent to women; it is a masculinist discourse, party to the social construction of sexual difference. As an ideological discourse it is composed of procedures and techniques by which a specific representation of art is manufactured" (Pollock, 1986, p11). Pollock adds that the view of the artist as individual creator is central to this representation of art. Further this individual is always male and is the "major articulation" of the "ideals of masculinity". She argues that "it has become imperative to deconstruct the ideological manufacture of this privileged masculine individual in art historical discourse." (*ibid.*)

Bearing Pollock's argument in mind in this thesis I wish to examine how the ideologies of patriarchy and art historical discourse are closely linked. It is not the aim of this thesis to pick out individual women artists and exhalt them but rather to look at the society that failed to value them and ask why this was so. For in re-examining the history of art and

the category of genius it is not good enough to "add women and stir" (Harding, 1986, p15) we need to examine the reasons why women were excluded and to question the ideologies and discourses surrounding the concept of genius that defined, limited and evaluated women's participation in art. The task required is not to add but to question and re-conceptualise the concept of genius and how it relates to art history. I believe that an investigation into the concept of genius, a category from which women are excluded, is central to any study of women and art history.

I wish to put forward the argument that the idea that women in art were incapable of greatness or genius was based primarily on three factors. Firstly, the position of women within patriarchal culture which allowed for a discourse of women as "Other" and which therefore excluded women from dominant discourses. Secondly, the cultural construction of the categories of "genius" and "femininity" which were mutually exclusive. Thirdly, the construction and use of a language of art that glorified male sexuality and relegated woman to a second class position.

In chapter one I propose to examine the first of these factors by showing how the culturally constructed concept of genius reflects patriarchal ideology. Chapter two will address the second factor by reviewing the "romantic" concept of genius from the historical perspective of the 18th and 19th centuries, demonstrating how genius discriminates against women. Finally, chapter three will consider the third factor, revealing an innate gender bias in the language of art and art history that fails to recognise, or undervalues, the contribution of women artists.

Chapter One Genius and Patriarchal Ideology

"Every genius born a woman is lost to humanity' Stendhal" (de Beauvoir, 1966, p18)

The ambiguity of the above quote raises some very important and fundamental questions. What exactly do we mean by genius? Why is woman's genius in particular lost to humanity? Why does Simone de Beauvoir, considered by many to be the mother of French Feminism, claim to support this statement by Stendhal?

What is genius? An incognizable gift? A magical power? Superior mental agility? Extraordinary creativity? Brilliance? Or just mere talent and hard work? While the term genius has been constantly defined, analysed and debated by psychologists, philosophers and academicians throughout history no consensus has been arrived as to the exact nature of genius.

Despite this fact, it is possible to argue, that there are widely held cultural perceptions of genius. Perhaps the most basic of these is the assumption that genius actually exists. While some would argue against the existence of genius, the fact that the term is still part of our vocabulary, together with its acknowledgement by some scientists (thereby connecting it to science, which is perceived to be a rational, objective and empirical discipline) would seem to suggest a general belief in the existence of genius.

While the exact nature of genius is debatable the general perception of genius is of extraordinary talent and innate ability. Genius is not perceived to be a learned ability but rather a natural essence, and the idea of Einstein swotting over mathematical concepts is incongruous with cultural perceptions of genius or with the romantic portrayal of genius in popular culture (for example, as in Carol Read's film "Lust for Life" based on Irving Stone's biography of Van Gogh.)

Why then if genius is an innate natural talent is the female genius "lost to humanity"? Are women incapable of developing genius? Is genius incompatible with femininity? Or is the female genius lost to humanity because society fails to recognise her?

Is Genius Innate?

Simone de Beauvoir in her essay *Women and Creativity* (1966) uses Stendhal's quote not to acknowledge an intrinsic deficiency on women's part, but rather to support her argument that genius depends on external factors in order to develop. She argues that

...however gifted an individual is at the outset, if his or her talents cannot be exploited because of his or her social condition, because of the surrounding circumstances, these talents will be stillborn. (de Beauvoir, 1966, p.18)

I would support de Beauvoir's argument that certain conditions and opportunities are necessary in order to create anything of value. One needs to have some financial resources, enough time to devote to one's work, a place to work, regardless of how talented one is. Opportunity and encouragement are just as important as ability and de Beauvoir points to the necessity of these factors when she states "talent is not something you are born with, anymore than is genius." (de Beauvoir, 1966, p.19)

The argument that genius is not a static innate essence but that it depends on external conditions has been put forward by many women writers and art historians over the years. Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) argued that if Shakespeare had been a woman she probably would have been a non-entity as opposed to a genius since she would have been denied the opportunities and conditions necessary to develop her talent. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1953) puts forward a similar argument in relation to Van Gogh.

Linda Nochlin (1971) argues against the "Golden Nugget" theory of genius, which asserts that genius always finds expression no matter what social conditions prevail. Nochlin argues that when we dismiss the golden nugget theory we are more likely to ask relevant, revealing and useful questions regarding the production of great art, thereby revealing that "...genius is a dynamic activity rather than a static essence and an activity of a subject in a situation" (Nochlin, 1971, p.157, 158).

Like Nochlin I disagree with the idea of genius as static innate essence that will always come out no matter what the circumstances. I add however that even though one may have the right subject in the right situation that does not mean that genius will necessarily be acknowledged. For just as 'genius' depends on certain conditions to develop it also depends on certain conditions to be recognised!

Genius as a Culturally Constructed Concept

I wish to put forward the argument that genius is not a static innate quality or "golden nugget" but rather a historically and culturally constructed concept. Considering genius in this light forces us to question the cultural perception of the term. For instance the belief that to call somebody a genius is to merely describe their innate ability. I argue that in attributing genius we are also attributing value. To say that "x" has genius is not the same as saying that "x" has blue eyes... nor indeed is it the same as acknowledging talent. Talents are definable and can be tested, genius however seems to be indefinable. To talk of a culturally constructed concept as if it were a definite quality is to obscure the fact that a value judgement is being made.

I would therefore support Christine Battersby's assertion that genius is "...a complex value judgement". (Battersby, 1989, p.124) which forces us to ask just who is doing the judging, what exactly is being judged, by what criteria and on whose terms?

Genius and Patriarchal Ideology

In her book "Genius the History of an Idea " Penelope Murray states that "the study of genius is ultimately the study of **human** creativity" (Murray, 1989, p.6, emphasis added). I wish to argue instead that the study of genius is ultimately the study of patriarchal "culture" - its values and prejudices. I shall attempt to show how the culturally constructed concept of genius reflects some of the basic ideologies of patriarchy in its discourses and systems of thoughts.

Patriarchy, according to the Oxford English Dictionary is "a system of society, government etc. rules by a man and with descent through the male line." (Oxford English Dictionary, 1990, P872) If we take the definition of ideology as a "set of ideas which are used to legitimate the interests of a dominant groups or class and subordinate other social groups to those interests" (Grimshaw, 1986, P.100) then the ideology of patriarchy is one that sees males as the dominant groups legitimises male interests and subordinates female interests to male ones.

Feminist writer Marilyn French in *Beyond Power: On Women, Men and Morals* claims that patriarchy has been "the dominant morality of the West for more than three thousand years". (French, 1986, pxviii). According to French, over the centuries patriarchy has,

through literature, philosophy, theology and law, relegated women to second class citizenship. Patriarchy has come to identify "two poles defining the limits of human experience segregated by gender" which she calls the "masculine and feminine principles" and summarises as follows "'Masculine' experience is rooted in power-in-the-world, with its epitomising act: to kill. 'Feminine' experience is rooted in nature with its epitomising act to give birth" (French, 1986, p.77). French adds that women who try to claim the male principle are considered monsters and unnatural.

Genius & the Patriarchal System of Binary Thought

This idea of polarity, reflected in French's masculine & feminine principles, is a feature of patriarchal thought. The either/or nature of thinking is so "normal" that it often goes unquestioned. Helene Cixous in her essay *Sorties* examines patriarchal binary thought. She asserts that

thought has always worked by opposition by dual, oppositions... wherever an ordering intervenes, a law organises the thinkable by (dual, irreconcilable or mitigable, dialectical) opposition. And all the couples of opposition are couples... is the fact the logocentrism subjects thought to two term system, related to the couple man/woman? (Cixous, 1981, p.90)

In challenging binary thought Cixous identifies two major features of the binary system namely, its underlying reference to gender and the inbuilt hierarchy that exists. Cixous points out that the following examples of binary opposition are related to the couple man/woman

" Activity/Passivity

Sun/Moon

Culture/Nature

Day/Night

Father/Mother

Head/Heart

Intelligible/Sensitive

Logos/Pathos" (Cixous, 1981, p.90)

Cixous claims that these oppositions, in order to acquire meaning, must engage in combat with one another, with the "masculine" side always being the victor. Man is therefore associated with the positive side while woman is always found on the negative side of

these oppositions. Everything, she tells us, the "theory of culture, theory of society... art, religion, family, language... elaborates the same system" (Cixous, 1981, p.91).

The binary system is so ingrained as to appear natural, we are encouraged by patriarchy to think in black and white! Cixous' argument that this system is woven into the very fabric of society is evident when we consider that even our education system reflects the dichotomy and hierarchy between mind and body by implementing a curriculum which treats children as brains on stilts - giving them little or no physical education.

The idea that binary opposition is not natural but that it serves a particular function has been put forward by many feminist writers. Monique Wittig has argued that "Binary opposition always serves the purposes of hierarchy" (Butler, 1987, p.134) while Toril Moi (1985) takes this argument a step further by asserting "these binary oppositions are heavily imbricated in the patriarchal value system." (Moi, 1985, p104). Catherine King supports Moi's stance by her argument that the binary system is important for keeping any group in power (King, 1992, p.17). Could this perhaps point to the true function of the system?

We can see how the binary system keeps a group in power and reflects patriarchal values when we consider how it can be used to define a category or concept. If we take the system as a model for the concept of artistic genius a set of oppositions or polarities could possibly read

Subject/object

Culture/Nature

Active/Passive

Artist/Muse

Genius/Non-Genius

and of course the inevitable opposition -

Male/Female

If we consider, as argued, that the binary system is hierarchised and relates to gender, what are the implications for women artists if this binary system automatically places them on the negative side?

I would argue that women's omission from and devaluation by art history reflects the hierarchy of binary oppositions. Throughout the history of art man is placed at one pole

as active, genius and creator or subject, while woman is placed at the opposite pole as passive, object of art or image created by art. Woman is the muse that inspires the male genius. If, as John Stuart Mill suggests "... everything which is usual appears natural" (Mill, 1983, p23) then we can justify discrimination and exclusion on these grounds.

The binary system works by contrast "in the opposition masculine/feminine each term only achieves significance through its structural relationship to the other: 'Masculine' would be meaningless without its direct opposite 'feminine' and vice versa" (Moi, 1985, p.105). As we have seen in the above model genius in order to establish itself as a definite category, must be compared to an "Other" non genius. De Beauvoir in her introductions to *The Second Sex* says that no group can be set up without automatically creating a category of "Other" i.e. those outside the group that help to define the group by their very exclusion. The category of genius would be meaningless if it included everyone. For as Hegel has argued "the subject can be posed only in being opposed". (de Beauvoir, 1953, p.xli).

Woman as Other

The category of "other" according to de Beauvoir is "as primordial as consciousness itself." Usually among groups "otherness" is not absolute, in the case of women, however, it is, she has no history, religion or past of her own.

She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her, she is the incidental the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute - she is the other (de Beauvoir, 1953, p.xxxix & p.xl)

This idea of woman as other reflects the hierarchy of binary opposition. De Beauvoir's idea of woman as "other" is very clearly seen in the binary opposition model of artistic genius already presented. As we define concepts in positive terms and since these positive terms or qualities are male, woman being on the negative side stands for what is not in the category - what is "Other".

Judith Butler commenting on de Beauvoir's writing says that according to de Beauvoir women are other in so far as they are defined by and identified with "the bodily sphere".

By defining women as "Other", men are able through the shortcut of definition to dispose of their bodies, to make themselves as other than their bodies... from this belief that the body is other, it is not a far leap to the conclusion that others are their bodies, while the masculine I is a non-corporeal soul." (Butler, 1987, p.133)

This idea of the body as being "other" and of lesser importance reflect the hierarchy of "Binary Oppositions" and the patriarchal value system. This value system it can be argued sees "culture" as more valuable than "nature".

"Nature" versus "Culture"

Marilyn French says that man has asserted his "divine" nature by curbing his associations with nature and creating an alternative environment where he appears to be independent of nature (French, 1986, p.361). Man, it seems, is culturally exalted by severing his ties with nature while woman is culturally subordinated through her association with nature.

Feminist anthropologist Sherry Ortner argues this point in her essay *Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?* Ortner states that women's "pan cultural second class status" is due to the fact that women everywhere are "identified or symbolically associated with nature, as opposed to men who are associated with culture." (Ortner, 1974, p.73) According to Ortner

Women's body seems to doom her to mere reproduction of life; the male, in contrast, lacking natural creative functions, must (or has the opportunity to) assert his creativity externally, artificially, through the medium of technology and symbols. In so doing he creates relatively lasting, externals, transcendent objects, while the woman creates only perishables - human beings ¹(Ortner, 1974, p.75)

Ortner's arguments have been challenged by other writers. Carol McCormack dismisses her essay as "a biological reductionist argument." ²(McCormack, 1993, p.84) Lynn Segal points to the fact that the association is sometimes reversed with man being considered "forceful", "violent" and "animal-like" and woman being seen as tame and domesticated. She argues that since the terms "nature" and "culture" are culturally constructed and therefore have no absolute meanings, neither man nor woman can be said to be consistently associated with nature (Segal, 1982, p.7-8).

I argue however that even though the male can sometimes be associated with nature this association is always seen as empowering - as in "forceful" and does not take from the male's status or his ability to create culturally. When women are associated with culture it is in a passive and negative sense as in "tame", "domesticated" and does not contribute to

¹Ortner acknowledges the fact that women do create culturally but asserts that they are still seen as having more affinity with nature. (Ortner, 1974, p.73)

²McCormack misinterprets Ortner's argument when she accuses her of biological reductionism. McCormack challenges the fact that women are closer to nature but does not seem to realise that Ortner is not arguing that women are but rather that they are seen to be closer to nature.

her being seen as culturally creative. McCormack and Segal's arguments do not take from the idea that woman's reproductive abilities lead her to be seen as lacking in creative ability.

To create biologically is seen as less valuable than to create culturally and it would seem that it is not possible to do both if you're a woman. The idea that women cannot create culturally because they create biologically has been rife throughout history (as we shall see in chapter two) Men however, are either able to do both or else play no part in procreation!

Certainly it could be argued that patriarchy encourages the disassociation of the male with procreation. For while the naturalness of motherhood is emphasised the "natural" role of the father is dismissed (Sisson, 1994) so much so that some males seem to forget that they can create biologically. Anthony Burgess seems to suffer from this particular type of amnesia when he states "I believe that artistic creativity is a male surrogate for biological creativity." (Battersby, 1989, p.19).

Conversely, contemporary male authors also seem to forget that woman can create culturally as Christine Battersby's survey of male authors' attitudes to the creative capacity of women would seem to suggest. Battersby concluded that "all take maleness as the norm for artistic or creative achievement, however "feminine" that male might be/ Great Artists and Scientists have male sex drivers, whether or not they are biologically female" (Battersby, 1989, p.18).

These attitudes and opinions support the hierarchy of binary oppositions which associates women with the body and with nature, thus supporting her role as "Other" and excluding her from dominant discourses, and as such they reflect the basic ideologies of patriarchy.

Patriarchy and Genius - Ideologies

The ideologies of patriarchy and genius are closely intertwined. Both seek to assert man's superiority over the animal by associating man with nature and identifying him with culture: "for it is not in giving life but in risking life that man is raised above the animal; that is why superiority has been accorded in humanity not to the sex that brings forth, but to that which kills" (de Beauvoir, 1953, p.59) and both asserted man's god-like nature. According to French patriarchy claimed that man's superiority was based on his "contact"

with God and man's goal was to shed all animals' residue and realise fully his "divine" nature. (French, 1986, p.361)

Christine Battersby states that in the 18th century man searched for reasons to confirm his seniority over nature - man was special in that he had feelings, imagination, sensibility and "genius". By the 19th Century creativity and genius made man god like genius separated the man from "animal" and the "civilised " from the "savage". (Battersby, 1989, p.2 -3). By proclaiming his "genius" man showed that he had shed his animal residue and had realised fully his divine or god-like nature. Genius was the proof of man's superiority.

His- story of Genius

Genius is not an absolute term but a conceptual and culturally constructed one. By her research Christine Battersby shows that while the meaning of genius has changed throughout history the category of genius has almost always excluded women and has been connected to male procreativity and by association to male "divinity".

In tracing this history of genius Battersby tells us how even in prehistoric times the word genius changed from being a household spirit to being connected with divine male procreativity. By the third century B.C. each free male was seen as having genius from birth. This genius was his potential life giving force or virile energy. By the last century BC genius had become a god celebrated by each male on his birthday.

A woman however honoured her "Juno" on her birthday. Genius was strictly for the male. The female Juno was not the equivalent of the male genius and women only had "Juno" while they were fertile. Juno was inferior to genius (Battersby, 1989, p53, 53, 57). By the middle ages genius was a character in a number of allegories. He is however always male, mystical and connected with divine male reproduction. In one of his aspects genius becomes creative rather than procreative and is said to have drawn, written or painted reality into existence. He is God like (Battersby, 1989,p62). The male ego it seems has always needed boosting!

Battersby reports the existence of two different concepts of "ingenium" and "genius" during the Italian Renaissance Ingenium was associated with good judgement and knowledge (Battersby, 1989, p.26) and "natural disposition or innate ability" (Murray, 1989, p.3). Both Murray and Battersby agree that by the 18th century the two terms had finally merged to form our modern day concept of genius, thus linking human creativity to

male procreativity. Murray states that the idea of genius as a personal protective spirit possessed by every man was prevalent up until the 18th century when a major fundamental change took place and genius became "an extraordinary creative power" which was "the prerogative of a highly selected and privileged few." (Murray, 1987, p. 3)

The association of genius with creativity and originality dates back to the 18th Century when the word was first used to describe "a person endowed with superior powers." Murray adds that by the end of the 18th century the genius, especially the artistic genius, is considered as "the highest human type" replacing the hero and the saint. (Murray, 1989, p.3) Murray, however makes no reference to the fact that this human type is always male!

The "Romantic" concept of the genius on which most modern cultural perceptions of genius are based, originated in the 18th century and developed over the 19th century according to Murray (1989) and Battersby (1989). While women were absent from the early history of genius, they were forcefully excluded in this period. During the 18th and 19th centuries two mutually exclusive categories or stereotypes emerged - the "genius" and the "feminine" women. Chapter two examines the relationship between genius and femininity in this period.

Chapter Two - The "Romantic" Genius 18th - 19th Centuries

Genius & Femininity - Discrimination and Double Standards

"One is not born a woman one becomes one" (de Beauvoir, 1953, p.xli)

In every known society, the males' need for achievement can be recognised. Men may cook, or weave, or dress dolls or hunt hummingbirds, but if such activities are appropriate occupations of men, then the whole society, men and women alike, votes them as important. When the same occupations are performed by women they are regarded as less important. In a great number of human societies men's sureness of their sex role is tied up with their right, or ability, to practice some activity that women are not allowed to practice. Their maleness, in fact, has to be underwritten by preventing women from entering some field or performing some feat. (Mead, 1962, p.157, 158)

In putting forward the argument that women have always created but that their contributions to the world of art have been dismissed or undervalued I hope to show how women have been denied access to the category of genius. For women in the 18th and 19th centuries the idea of pursuing a career as a professional artist meant choosing between their "femininity" and their "genius". Women usually had to sacrifice one at the expense of the other, since to develop or reveal one's "genius" meant putting one's reputation as a woman - one's "femininity" at risk. Patriarchal society presented women with the age old choice of "either/or" which reflected patriarchal value linking sexual difference to a binary system of opposites.

By considering the Romantic concept of genius thematically rather than chronologically one becomes aware of the many double standards used in defining genius that discriminated against women and led to their exclusion from the categories of genius.

The writers of the "Enlightenment and of the "romantic" era debated the nature of genius and the characteristics of women. While it is not possible to review all of their many and varied contributions the writings of Rousseau and Schopenhauer shall be considered as part of this chapter. I have chosen these philosophers because they reflect the spirit of the age and have both written on "women" and "genius".

I have chosen Rousseau because of his enormous influence in the late 18th Century and early 19th century (Figs, 1978, p.104) especially with regard to his part played in the construction of "femininity". Schopenhauer is of interest since his theories of genius

relate very much to the romantic stereotype of genius and thus to the 20th century cultural perceptions of the term.

Discrimination and Double Standards

By examining double standards relating to genius that were prevalent during the romantic era we can perhaps find some clue towards answering the questions of just whose values and interests are built into the concept of genius and whose values are used when we attribute genius? For it is possible to argue that "value" is not an absolute term, a definite sign of worth but rather that all values are relative.

I wish to propose that the system of patriarchal binary though seems to normalise/naturalise these double standards. For example, if we accept the dichotomy nature/culture and consider this opposition to be hierarchized and related to the couple male/female, thus accepting the theory that women are closer to nature than men, then it is possible to support the argument that **"males can transcend their sexuality females are limited by theirs"** (Battersby, 1987, p.18).

I propose that this double standard is really the key towards understanding all other forms of discrimination against women - it is in a way the foundation or cornerstone of most other discriminations and double standards.

The idea that women are limited by their sexuality and their biological functions is reflected in the writings of Jean Jacques Rousseau who argued in his book *Emile* that women unlike men were limited by their sexuality. "the consequences of sex are wholly unlike for men and women. The male is only male now and again, the female is always a female, or at least in her youth; everything reminds her of her sex" (Rousseau, reprint, 1992, p.324, emphasis added). In this argument Rousseau is guilty of biological reductionism at its best, for not only is a woman limited by her reproductive ability, his argument suggests that she is defined by it. Is the menopausal female not really a female?

The Special Purpose of Women

The primary association of woman with motherhood was a major feature of the ideals of "femininity" that developed over the 18th and 19th centuries. Rousseau in *Emile* praised motherhood. He argued that mothers should be encouraged to breastfeed their young, as

opposed to hiring wet nurses, thus strengthening her ties with nature and reinforcing the "special purposes of woman" (Rousseau, 1992, p.321) He saw woman's reproductive role as their primary function "women, you say, are not always bearing children. Granted, yet that is their proper business" (Rousseau, (reprint) 1992, P.325). If women had any spare energy after her child rearing duties were over, these should not be put into developing her own talent or art but rather "a woman's thoughts, beyond the range of her immediate duties, should be directed to the study of men...for the works of genius are beyond her reach..." (Rousseau, 1992, p.349).

The association of women with their role as mother developed during the 18th century and was reflected in the art of the time. While scenes of illicit love were popular at the time, works on themes such as the joys of motherhood increased in number.³ Rousseau's work *La Nouvelle Heloise* with his description of the self-sacrificing Julie as happy mother and wife as well as his *Emile* influenced this cult of motherhood according to Carol Duncan (Duncan, 1982 p208)

Whitney Chadwick in her book "Women Art and Society" points to the increasing popularity of blissful motherhood as a subject of painting in the 18th Century. Even Marie Antoniette, realising that she was losing popularity among the population, commissioned Vigee Le brun to paint her portrait with her children in an effort to revive her reputation. (Chadwick, 1990, p.156).

These ideas of women being associated with nature were carried into the 19th century by Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) the German romantic philosopher who first called women "the second sex". In his famous essay "On Women" Schopenhauer wrote "at bottom, women exist solely for the propagation of the race with which their destiny is identified." (Schopenhauer, 1978, (reprint) p.618)

Childbearing and domestic bliss were advocated as woman's true role in the 18th and 19th centuries. The cult of femininity was supported by many enlightened male minds. Motherhood was romanticised and praised and women were firmly tied to nature. While it is not possible to claim absolutely that this was done for ulterior motives - it is questionable that it was done to assert the special place of the family since the male was not encouraged to embrace fatherhood. The romanticization of motherhood resulted in

³A full account of this development can be found in Carol Duncan's essay "Happy mothers and new ideas in the 18th century French Art" in "Feminism and art history - questioning the litany" edited by Norma Broude and Mary Garrard.

the exclusion of woman from the dominant discourses of the time and positioned her as "Other". It also led to a belief that woman was inferior to man and outside culture.

They are the sexus sequior, the sex that takes second place in every respect... when nature split the human race into two halves, she did not make the division precisely through the middle. In spite of all polarity, the difference between the positive and negative poles is not merely qualitative but also quantitative. (Schopenhauer, 1978, p.621)

It could be argued that the philosophers of the 18th and 19th centuries who constantly debated the nature of woman her capabilities and incapacities were guilty of the "most noxious of prejudices" which took "male discourse about women to be the objective truth." (Crampe-Casnabet, 1993, p.318).

Women's Art and The Women Artist

Schopenhauer argued that women as inferior beings were incapable of producing art. He used the age old method of denying women's genius by applying the terms of Linda Nochlin's "golden nugget" theory of genius when he stated

we cannot expect anything else from women when we reflect that the most eminent minds of the whole sex have never been able to produce a single, really great, genuine and original achievement in the fine arts, or to bring anywhere into the world a work of permanent value. This is most striking in regard to painting, for its technique is at any rate just as suited to them as it is to men and thus they pursue it with diligence; yet they cannot boast of a single great painting, just because they lack all the objectivity of mind, the very thing that is most demanded of painting (Schopenhauer, 1978, P.620)

Schopenhauer does not question whose values are being used in attributing greatness, nor does he question the society that denied them access to education or the fact that women were often kept in second place by the type of art that they were encouraged to make.

For the most part women were encouraged to be amateurs and to stick to the medium of water-colour, especially in the 18th century. "Excellent was not encouraged" and Mme Roland in her book on art education for women gave the following advice " I should wish that her talents might be such, that they should neither excite the admiration of others, nor inspire them with vanity... she should attach by her good qualities, rather than shine by her accomplishments" (Borzello, 1993, p.11).

Rousseau in *Emile* advocated this amateurish approach to female art education and discouraged women from being single-minded.

I would not have them taught landscape and still less figure painting. Leaves, fruit, flowers, draperies, anything that will make an elegant trimming for the accessories of the toilet... women, whose life... should be.. more uniformly employed in a variety of duties, so that one talent should not be encouraged at the expense of others. (Rousseau, 1992, p.331)

Women were encouraged to be well rounded, good at everything but excellent at nothing. For a woman was considered less feminine if she was determined ambitious and ruthless and selfish if she devoted too much time to her art. Woman's art was also seen as less serious if it was produced at home rather than in a studio as was often the case.

Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker (1981) support this argument when they state that

women often perform tasks similar to those of men, but their work is awarded a secondary status because of the different place the tasks are performed. The structures of difference are between private and public, domestic and professional work (Pollock & Parker, 1981, p.70)

While many professional women artists did exist during this period and while many worked outside the domestic sphere. Nochlin argues that being denied access to nude models they were virtually excluded from the genre of history painting which was held in highest esteem. (Nochlin, 1971, p.158)

This exclusion and the large number of amateur women artist would seem to support Sherry Ortner's argument that "women perform lower level conversions from nature to culture, but when the culture distinguishes a higher level of the same function, the higher level is restricted to men". (Ortner, 1974, p.80).

Rousseau encouraged women to develop the "feminine arts" such as needlework and lace making (Rousseau, 1992, p. 331 & p.357). Chadwick argues that Rousseau's influence in creating an "ideal of femininity" which saw women as lacking in creativity and suited to detailed work was encouraged by the paintings of many professional women artists which depicted women "engaged in amateur traditions". (Chadwick, 1990, p.138)

This fact would seem to show just how ingrained the ideals of femininity were at this time. Thus supporting the argument that it was difficult for women to deviate from the norms by developing her genius.

Pollock and Parker state

one of the most important aspects of the history of women and art was¹¹ the interaction in the 18th and 19th century of the development of an ideology of femininity, i.e. a social definition of women and their roles with the emergence of a clearly defined separation of arts and crafts (Pollock & Parker, 1980, p.58)

Women were not encouraged to make art with a capital "A". No matter how creative their craft work was it was still considered a lesser form of creativity. In general women's art and craft work was taken as non serious pretty and pleasing, like the woman herself, but of no great value.

Genius as "Active/Passive" - Positive Women as "Passive/Active" - Negative

The ideals of femininity associated women with passivity. Man was considered active and therefore superior. Rousseau linked woman's passivity to her sexuality for ever in the sexual act he argued that

the man should be strong and active; the woman weak and passive, the one must have both the power and the will; it is enough that the other should offer little resistance. (Rousseau, 1992, p.322)

It could be argued that the stereotypes "genius" and "feminine Woman" represent the opposite poles active/passive - the male genius being the active creator and the feminine woman being the object of art. Indeed this is the idea put forward by 19th century writer and art critic John Ruskin in his book *Sesame and Lilies* (1867) where he states that

the man's power is active, progressive and defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator. His intellect is for invention and speculation. But the woman's intellect is not for invention or creation but sweet ordering, arrangement and decision. Her great function is praise (quoted in Parker & Pollock 1981 p.9)

I wish to put forward the argument that, on closer inspection the idea of activity and passivity in relation to genius is not quite that simple and one recognises many double standards at work.

Although Ruskin and Rousseau equate passivity with negativity this rule only holds true when the female is passive. The male genius, it seems, can also be passive, but in his case passivity is seen as a positive quality. Schopenhauer explains this anomaly by stating that

"woman is the passive pawn of nature" (Battersby, 1989, p.109). Although the male genius is also a passive pawn he is "a pawn of cultural and radical revolution" and he "actively permits himself to be a pawn... to become a passive thing, to become the mouthpiece of all that is divine in man". (*ibid*)

Schopenhauer's theories of genius reiterate the nature/culture debate put forward by Ortner in that "the male fulfils his potential in cultural production; woman's only potential is reproduction." (Battersby, 1989, p.109).

Genius ~~is~~ seems is both active and passive. Battersby states that "by the 19th century the rhetoric of genius was different: the passivity of the creator was stressed but so also was the "labour" involved in the work of genius" (Battersby, 1989, p73). Woman, however, was always passive except in her roles of muse or patrons - where like genius she could be seen as both active and passive (Runte, 1990, p.144). The female muse was the active inspirer of male genius, just as the female patron actively supported his career. Both, however, were often depicted in portraits as passive objects of art. (*ibid*).

The qualities of activity/passivity in relation to the genius and the muse/patron were interchangeable, the perceptions of these qualities were not. The connotations varied according to gender with the male always being positive. Either way woman loses out. The passive patron/muse is more passive than the genius while the active patron/muse is *less* active than the genius, thus calling to mind Francoise Borin's comments that "Eve is more sinful than Adam, Mary less sacred than Jesus" (Davies/Farge, 1993, p.257). Woman, it seems, even in her seemingly positive guise, always represents the negative.

Schopenhauer's argument that as the genius matures he "transcends the motivational drives and urges that are integral to masculinity and acquires female passivity" (Battersby, 1989, p.107) not only echoes the idea that males can transcend their sexuality, but points to the existence of another double standard in the concept of genius i.e. the idea of genius as feminine man.

Genius as Feminine Man

The idea of the genius as a type of "feminine" man is perhaps one of the most blatant double standards that surround the concept of genius, and points to the inherent sexism in the concept. For although many stereotypical "feminine" qualities such as emotion, imagination and intuition were attributed to, and praised in men of genius these very same qualities were seen in women as reasons for their inferiority!

For although Rousseau argued that "no woman ever had the heavenly fire of genius" (Figes, 1978, p.107), the very same qualities that he praised in women were seen by John Ruskin as essential for creativity. For example Rousseau in *Emile* stated that "Women's reign is a reign of gentleness" (Rousseau, 1992, p.350). Ruskin argued that in order to create man needed to be "a seeing and feeling creative, to be an instrument of tenderness and sensitiveness. It is not his business either to think, or to judge, to argue or to know" (Clarke (Ed), 1982, p.142)

Even Schopenhauer, considered the genius to a kind of "third sex - the female male" (Battersby, 1989, p.107). While he distinguishes between the genius, the ordinary male and bottom of the list - the woman he attributes to genius certain aspects of "femininity" such as passivity and receptivity (Battersby, 1989, p111).

The Romantic genius was like a woman, but was not a woman, for the fact that the genius was "feminine" however did not make him any less male "The genius was male full of "virile" energy - who transcended his biology: If the male genius was "feminine" this merely proved his cultural superiority. Creativity was displaced male procreativity: male sexuality made sublime" (Battersby, 1989, p.3).

The Madness of Genius

In literature and film mad women and artists seemed to have something in common as they are said to inhabit the same space i.e. the attic! The attic was also the place where "great artists" made "great art" - where they unleashed their own "madness". The artist like the madwoman lived in the attic as an outsider, and since as Showalter suggests it was often poverty that drove people to madness the madwoman was probably as poor as the artist who "starved in the attic"! One however had a key the other had not. For unlike the madwoman the artist possessed his madness - it did not possess him. Madness was just one of the characteristics of the "romantic" genius: it was not his permanent state of being.

Just as the attic can be seen to represent two different states, the attic as head of the house and mind of the body, - so too can the different types of madness, associated with its inhabitants. While the female's madness put her in an inferior position, locked as she was in the mind of her body and often seen as mad because of her "sexuality" and associations, with nature; the genius' madness unleashed in the head of the house (a symbol of culture)

put him in a superior position (like the head of the house?) and was related to his associations with culture.

The argument that "madness" made the genius superior to the ordinary mortal is supported by Neil Kessel. Kessel claims that romanticism brought the idea of the mad genius to the fore - "the aura of "mania" endowed the genius with a mystical and inexplicable quality that served to differentiate him from the typical man, to the bourgeois, the philistine and quite importantly "the mere" man of talent (Kessel, 1987, p.199).

Schopenhauer supports this idea when he argues that genius is "closer to dementia than to the ordinary mind". (Hubuscher, (reprint) 1989, p.144) However, while the genius possessed madness the writers of the 18th and 19th centuries firmly asserted that the genius was not actually insane.

Schopenhauer says that while the borderlines between genius and insanity may be hazy; geniuses can often display insanity and the insane can show traces of great abilities; they cannot be transgressed (Hubuscher, (reprint) 1989, p.145). This idea is also put forward by Dryden when he wrote "great wits are sure to madness near allied and thin partitions do their bounds divide". (Kessel, 1987, p.197). While the romantics believed that genius and insanity were similar states there were boundaries which could not be crossed - thin and hazy though they may be.

The madness of genius was associated with culture while woman's madness was because of her association with nature. This idea is put forward by Elaine Showalter in her book *The Female Malady* points to a

fundamental alliance between "women" and "madness" .. women, within our dualistic systems of language and representation, are typically situated on the side of irrationality, silence, nature, and body - while men are situated on the side of reason, discourse, culture and mind. (Showalter, 1987, p.4)

So it seems that reason and irrationality could be added to Cixous' list of binary opposites which relate to the couple male/female. This idea also suggests that culture is more sane than nature and constructs an image of woman as wild and insane - belonging to nature. This wild crazy woman could be argued to suggest sexual wildness.

Showalter argues that male insanity was fundamentally different to female insanity. Male mental disorder was "associated with the intellectual and economic pressures on highly civilised man" whereas, female mental disorder was "associated with the sexuality and

essential nature of women" (Showalter, 1987, p.7). It could be argued that since the madness of genius reflects male madness this reiterates the fact the genius is male.

This idea of the wild madwoman was popular in the Romantic era three major stereotypes were popular - that of the suicidal Ophelia, the sentimental crazy Jane and the violent Lucia. While the insane female was often represented as having wild sexuality - her sexuality was linked to her insanity. (Showalter, 1987, p.10-11). The prevailing view among Victorian psychiatrists according to Showalter was that women were more vulnerable to insanity than men because of the instability of their reproductive systems interfered with their sexual, emotional and rational control". (Showalter, 1987, p.55)

As a result of the widely held 19th century view that female sexuality was the cause of female insanity and other mental disorders, the resultant cures were very often an attempt to control female sexuality. Showalter tells of many cruel attempts to control women's minds by controlling their bodies. (Showalter, 1987, p.74)

From the above, it can be argued that female sexuality was a negative quality that in excess often led to madness whereas male sexuality however excessive was positive and associated with the madness of genius and the virile traditions of art making. Women were dominated by and powerless over their sexuality, whereas the male genius used his "sublime sexuality" to create.

While the male genius had "divine madness" the same status however was not accorded to women of genius. According to Buck and Dodd until recently Georgia O'Keefe was just Alfred Stieglitz's eccentric wife; just as Gwen John was only Augustus John's neurotic sister. Women were never tortured geniuses "a woman was never an insane genius, she was just insane". (Buck and Dodd, 1992, p.51)

Genius as Saint/Sinner- Problems for Women Artist

Genius made man Godlike but unfortunately it seemed to apply the opposite term to a woman. The godlike status was for the male only - it was non-transferrable. In the 18th and 19th centuries "the artist not only inherited the mantle of priests and became the revealer of divine truths, but also assumed a semi-divine status as an heir of the original creator himself" (Parker & Pollock, 1981, p.82).

This idea is supported by Kemp who states that in Schinkel's designs for the hall in which the Durer festival was to be celebrated in 1828. "the focal point was a great altarpiece at the centre of which stood an image of the "divine" artist himself." (Kemp, 1987, p.32).

If a woman of great talent was finally recognised and attributed the status of "genius", this term suddenly acquired a negative quality and rather than becoming an "altarpiece" she was more likely to have her morality questioned! Peterson and Wilson state that both Angelica Kauffman and Vigee-lebrun were victims of endless speculation about their private lives (Peterson & Wilson, 1978, p.45 & 52).

The negative connotations associated with women who made art often dissuaded many potential women artists from becoming professional for fear of losing their respectability. Louisa Marchioness of Waterford, 1818 - a well known amateur "lady" painter who received advice from Ruskin, stated that she would not become a full time artist since "art is amoral and a woman must be virtuous and moral" (Parker & Pollock, 1981, p.100)

In the 18th and 19th centuries women artists experienced a conflict between their roles as women, which were confined to the domestic and the reproductive, and society's view of the character of a true artist. The artist was "associated with everything that was anti-domestic, outsidership, anti social behaviour... disorder and the sublime forces of untamed nature" (Parker & Pollock, 1981, p.99). The artist was therefore considered the antithesis of "femininity".

Some women artists disregarded the roles expected of them as women in favour of their role as artist. ...but always at a price. The American sculptor Harriet Homer, who was considered an eccentric, travelled throughout Rome with a group of women sculptors. However, for her daring at adopting the independence of a man by walking unaccompanied in the streets and riding in the countryside without a male escort, she received an official warning from the chief of police! (Parker & Pollock, 1981, p.101).

Rosa Bonheur cut her hair short and wore male clothes which she said was necessary for her work. For this privilege however she had to request a special permit from the police. (Peterson and Wilson, 1978, p.76) Bonheur's sexuality was often questioned as a result of this behaviour however. (Greer, 1979, p.59).

The woman artist was often held up for ridicule. It could be argued that the more talented she was the more she was chastised. Any woman seen to be talented enough to possess genius was severely criticised as in Rousseau's comments about one woman artist:

from the lofty height of her genius she scorns every womanly duty and she is always trying to make a man of herself... she is rightly a butt for criticism, as we always are when we try to escape from our won position into one for which we are unfitted. (Rousseau, 1992, p.371- 372)

Rousseau leaves us in no uncertainty as to his views on the compatibility of woman and genius. The status of genius it can be argued celebrated male sexuality and called a woman's sexuality into question. One 19th century writer stated that "So long as a woman refrains from unsexing herself by acquiring genius let her dabble in anything. The woman of genius does not exist but when she does she is a man" (Parker & Pollock, 1981, p.8)

Genius it seems was positive and glorifying when associated with the male but negative when associated with the female - questioning not only her "femininity" but also her very womanhood.

The Consolation Prize

All is not lost however for the female artist for she is offered some consolation by the 19th century writer Willfrid Meynell writing in the 19th century periodical "The Magazine of Art". Meynell sympathetically acknowledges "potential artists may and in fact do abound among women, but a thousand causes are at work to prevent the executive fulfilment of their promises"; but puzzled by the "providence" that gives women talent but prevents them from using it. Meynell surmises that "we should find it hard to understand the rich, significant, an yet abortive gifts which are given to women, if we did not remember the **all -important female vocation of transmission** which may solve the riddle" (Meynell, 1879, p.304) (Emphasis added)

Meynell, by claiming that women can transmit their unused creativity, offers women the consolation prize of seeing her genius live on in her offspring- her male offspring that is! He does not however point to any medical evidence to prove that such a feat is indeed possible. Meynell praises the

women of genius who have, in all time of the world's history, bequeathed their latent art, their science, their philosophy - that is to say, their large capacity for those things- to aftertimes and to the emancipated executive faculties of their sons (Meynell, 1879, p.304)

So while Meynell acknowledges women's genius he does not see it as necessary for a women to use it herself she can pass it on insuring that genius even if it is lost to the woman is not lost to mankind! One feels pity for the female artist who does not bear sons

to which she can transmit her genius.. she it seems must bear the agony of her "abortive gifts" (*ibid*).

The double standard that Meynell points to is that women don't need to express their genius, unlike the angst ridden male genius who must express his at all costs:- even at the cost of his sanity. If Van Gogh had been a woman perhaps he would have lived till a ripe old age! This notion ties women, even potential geniuses, firmly and once and for all to their biological function, and indicates an entirely new angle in the nature/culture debate. Women it seems can create culturally after all - by creating male geniuses they can be said to embrace a type of cultural procreation!

The 18th and 19th centuries' attitudes to genius reflect very clearly the ideologies of patriarchy by reiterating the binary opposition model of genius whereby the male is always located on the positive side.

Patriarchal discourses on women and "femininity" served to further exclude woman from the category of "genius" by tying her to her sexuality which was seen to have many negative connotations - passivity, madness and lack of creativity. By the end of the 19th century genius was firmly linked with male sexuality. In chapter three I shall examine the construction and use of a language of art. (i.e. related to the artist, the artwork, art that glorified male sexuality and relegated woman to a second class position.)

Chapter Three - Language and Silence

But glory doesn't mean "a nice knockdown argument" Alice objected. When I use a word, Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less. The question is, said Alice, to whether you can make words mean so many different things? The question is, said Humpty Dumpty, who is to be master - that's all. (Carroll, reprinted, 1984, p.100)

In considering the genius as "great Artist", this chapter examines how the analogy between artistic creativity and male sexuality is revealed in the use of language. I put forward the argument that the language used to describe the artist and the artwork, by art criticism, art history and society in general, is sexist in that it speaks in terms of male sexuality thereby excluding women. The role of art history and the idea that it is a masculinist discourse shall also be examined. While this chapter focuses primarily on written and spoken language the role played by visual language, and the absence of language, or silence shall also be considered.

Language

If, as Cixous suggests, language and thought are closely intertwined then, I argue that the importance of deconstructing the language surrounding any concept cannot be underestimated if we are to discover its true meaning. i.e. the ideologies and values imbedded into the concept. Parker and Pollock argue that "women's struggle" must take place in "the field of language" for not only is language the means by which we speak ourselves but "on a deeper level it controls what can be said, or even thought and by whom" (Parker & Pollock, 1981, p.114).

Dale Spender reiterates the idea that language creates thought and culture in *Language and Reality - Who Made the World?* She argues that those who have the power to create the "symbols" and their meaning are in a privileged position

They have at least the potential to construct a language, a reality, a body of knowledge in which they are the central figures, the potential to legitimate their own primacy and to create a system of beliefs that is beyond challenge (so that their superiority "natural" and "objectively" tested) (Spender, 1993, p.408).

While feminist writers have debated the exact implications of language, most would agree that male dominance of language needs to be challenged.⁴ Cora Kaplan argues that "control of high language is a crucial part of the power of dominant groups" and that the "refusal of access to public language is one of the major forms of the oppression of women" (Kaplan, 1986, p.70). The language of genius and indeed the language of "art" has served the interests of dominant groups by reproducing their values and beliefs, it emphasises the position of woman as "Other " by speaking in terms of male sexuality.

The Artist

The language used to describe The Artist leaves us in no doubt as to the sex of this individual since it links male sexuality with creative ability. According to Lucy Lippard "art making has had a particularly virile tradition " (Lippard, 1976, p.33). The idea of the "virile" artist is not new. It is interesting to note however "the absence of a feminine equivalent to virility " (Swann, 1992, p.57) which implies that women are excluded from the category of "Virile" artists. What are the implications for women artists, if the artist is "virile" and woman by definition cannot be so?

This idea of the virile male artist or genius was reflected in the writings of Flaubert who called the artist "a Fouteur " who feels "his sperm rising for an emission", and in the advice given the Renaissance artist who were advised to be continent and chaste to save their "virility" for their art" (Parker & Pollock. 1981, p.83). It seems that virility or at least male sexuality is a necessity for producing genius - that is, if one is to believe the myths that surround the making of great art.

Techniques of Virile Artists

The secret techniques said to be used by male geniuses are ones that would never be found in any manual on painting , and if they are to be believed are ones that could not be used by women artists. Renoir's secret, as he is alleged to have disclosed, is that "He painted his paintings with his prick" (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979, p.6) (Obviously nobody ever told him that the paintbrush was only a metaphorical penis!)

⁴Schulz considers Spender's arguments to be extremist, proposing instead that language reflects reality rather than creates it. (Schulz, 1990, p.134)

Van Gogh disclosed his secret to a fellow artist when he said "eat well, do your military exercises, and don't fuck too much and because of not fucking too much your paintings will be more spermatic!" (Parker & Pollock, 1981, p83) How can women compete with spermatic paintings?!

Artists/Metaphors

The many and varied metaphors used in describing the creative process all seem to point to the gender bias associated with genius. While most relate directly to male sexuality, as in the artist fathering his creations, even the ones that refer to female sexuality, claim that sexuality as male - as in male motherhood! The genius it seems was not only a "feminine" male but was indeed truly hermaphroditic!

Christine Battersby states that "metaphors of male motherhood " and "male Midwifery " became common towards the end of the 19th century " the artist conceived, was pregnant, laboured (in sweat and pain) was delivered, and (in an uncontrolled ecstasy of agonised - male - control) brought forth" (Battersby, 1989, p.75).

These metaphors, used by the 19th century Romantic artists to describe the production of art, helped to sustain the "golden nugget" theory of genius as an innate essence and natural gift, which like the unborn foetus must be delivered, must out no matter what the circumstances. While the Romantics appropriated the language of motherhood for themselves, this did not result in the female artist being considered equal, for as we have seen the "golden nugget" theory militates against the recognition of women artists.

It is quite ironic that the Romantics, whose wish to disassociate themselves with woman was so strong, chose the language of female procreation to describe the creation of culture. It is interesting to note that very many of these terms are still used in relation to the making of art.

However, the male sexuality of the artist is reinstated by John Ruskin's account of the "penetrative imagination" of the artist which is loaded with metaphors of male sexuality. The opening lines could almost be said to bear more relationship to the sexual urge that the creative urge "it never stops at crusts or ashes or outward images of any kind, it ploughs them all aside and plunges into the very central fiery heart. Nothing else will content it spiritually".

Ruskin's language it can be argued claims the artists' imagination as most definitely male, he continues "once therein, it is at liberty to throw up what new shoots it will, so always that the true juice and sap be in them". (DeSlyva, 1981, p.204, 205) Ruskin's language reiterates the analogy between creativity and male sexuality.

The language of male virility is still used to describe the artist. Buck & Dodd draw our attention to the back cover of Irving Stone's Novel "Lust for Life" the biography of Vincent Van Gogh - it reads "he didn't just kiss - he crushed,! He didn't propose - he demanded ! He was not just a man - he was a lover ! With a consuming lust for life!" (Buck & Dodd, 1991, p.26). It is interesting to note that there is not one reference to Van Gogh's artistic skills on this cover nor indeed any reference to the fact that he was an artist!

Women Artists in Art History and Criticism

While the language used to describe the artistic genius was linked to virility, the language used to describe 18th century women painters usually referred to their beauty or their well rounded characters. "Horace Walpole wrote of Kauffmann, "she was pretty, sung well, and had a good character. She painted in oils, genteel but lightly". Vigee LeBrun received similar treatment. She was described by her contemporaries as "The Pride of France, the immortal pencil Elizabeth (sic), the modern Rosabella but more stunning than she, she joined to the voice of Favart (an opera singer) the smile of Venus" (Parker & Pollock, 1981, p.92).

The language used in these accounts reveal the patronising attitude women artists. Kauffmann is presented as passive and weak, whereas nothing could be further from the truth. Kauffmann according to Petersen and Wilson exemplified the idea of a successful women artist of international acclaim, in the 18th century for, since she had no contrast wasn't rich and married nobody famous, her success was entirely her own. (Peterson & Wilson, 1978, p.43).

The description of Le Brun seems more like a description of women as object rather than subject of art and points to the fact that a woman artist was only acceptable "in so far as her person, her public persona, confirmed to the current notion of woman, not artist". (Parker & Pollock, 1981, p.96)

The language used to describe the female artist was very different from that used to describe the virile male artist and shows how she was considered less important.

The Woman Artist

This idea, I argue, is reflected in the very term "women artist", which seems to qualify the term "artist" and serves to distinguish the female artist from the "norm" which is male. For the term male artist is gender specific it never has to be prefixed with the qualifier "Male" when describing an artist who is a man. Men who create are never grouped together as "male artists" in the way that women artists are—they are simply individual artists. The term "woman artist" creates a category which views individual artists collectively as some sort of stereotype which sees the term "woman" as absolute, regardless of age, race, class, experience or ability.

Art Criticism

The language of art criticism shows how male and female artists were judged differently, and reveals how the work of women artists was often stereotyped. These ideas are clearly shown in the way the work of two artists of the "abstract expressionist" school were described and valued - namely Jackson Pollock and Helen Frankenthaler. According to Battersby Pollock's paintings were praised for their scale, size, force, "vigour", and "aggression" and his "drip" technique was termed "action painting". (Battersby, 1989, p.40).

Helen Frankenthaler also worked on large scale paintings which like Pollock were laid out on the floor and into which she poured fluid paint. Her "soak and stain" technique was associated with "colour field painting" (Parker & Pollock, 1981, p.46) a much more passive term I add!! Despite her work being abstract, critics according to Parker & Pollock, associated it with nature and their use of "organic metaphors echo the well known feminine stereotype." Frankenthaler's work was constantly referred to as "intuitive", "flowing" and "flowering". Parker and Pollock argue that Frankenthaler's work bridged abstract expressionism and colourfield painting (Parker & Pollock, 1981, p.49), but she was not called an action painter for "how could a woman be acclaimed as an 'Action-Painter' and achieve the semi-divine heights of the creator?" (Parker & Pollock, 1981, p.145).

This example of Helen Frankenthaler reveals how modern day critics continue to see women artists collectively as part of a feminine stereotype which removes them from their place in art history.

Catherine King discussing language and art criticism cites the way art historians described Sonia Delaunay's "Instinctive feeling for Colour " while her husband's Robert Delaunay is attributed with having formulated a colour theory " despite the fact that their paintings are virtually identical.

This example clearly reflects the sexism that exist in art criticism. It also reveals the underlying value system at work in apparently innocent binary oppositions, by showing how the terms of reference can shift depending on who produces the work. Although the works are almost identical, because they are created by artists of different gender, the works are reviewed as opposite and are linked to masculine and feminine polarity. Robert Delaunay's work is active and intelligible like the male . Sonia Delaunay's work is passive and sensitive like the female. This shows that other factors are at work in the choice of language used.

The many examples of re-attribution in the history of art also reveals the double standards at work in art criticism. One such example tells of how a highly praised and "unforgettable and perfect" world of art by Jacques Louis David was purchased in 1917 for \$200,000 and bequeathed to the metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. However, in 1951 it was re-attributed to Constance Charpentier altering dramatically the way the picture has been seen ever since. The painting is now considered to be "attractive" but "weak" and "sentimental" (Pollock & Parker, 1981, p.106).

Visual Language

Since the visual is also a language it too creates and carries meaning. As this language is created by patriarchal culture and is male dominated it too reflects the ideals and values of patriarchal ideology. Visual language is male dominated. In the visual language of art woman is most definitely "Other" she is the passive object of art and excluded from the dominant discourse of art. In visual language woman undergoes a process of objectification- "The process by which people are dehumanised made ghostlike, given the status of other - an image created by the oppressor replaces the actual being. The actual being is then denied speech... denied self definition..."(Cliff, 1992, p.140). Examples of this process abound throughout art history - as in the pre-Raphaelite movement.

Albert Gelpi states that "the artist kills experience into art temporal experience can only escape death by dying into the "immortality" of artistic form" (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979, p.14). This theory refers to the fact that while the mortal living and real woman dies, the created, imagined and fantasised woman who is object of art is immortalised. Consequently the real woman is silenced while the woman constructed by the male artist, who reflects patriarchal ideals of ideal femininity speaks forever.

Woman as object of art created by the male artist often exists for male gratification. She is the passive object of the male gaze and is seen from his viewpoint. The male artist as creator and controller of the gaze is the privileged signifier of meaning. He decides what shall be looked at by whom, how and with what effects. The woman as object of male art is denied self definition and autonomy. She has no language, she is silenced.

This lack of autonomy has serious implications for the woman artist and raises many questions. Since language creates identity what happens to the woman's identity if she has no language? What of the conflict of identities if she is both subject and object of art?

All is not lost however for feminist artists have seriously challenged the visual language of art, the supremacy of the male gaze, the romantic concept of the genius and the value system that defines great art. Cindy Sherman's work addresses the question of female identity and challenges patriarchal ideas of ideal femininity. The *Gorilla Girls* have questioned the notion of value in art (plate 2). Jenny Holtzer and Barbara Kruger have both exposed the hidden male voice in visual language. Their choice of "anonymous" media also challenges the romantic concept of the artist as creator. In her work *We won't Play Nature to Your Culture* (plate 3) Kruger addresses women's association with nature, which she suggests denies woman the right to see for herself and create her own vision.



Plate 2: Barbra Kruger, (Untitled)
Black & white photograph, 1993

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Rosalba Carriera
Mary Cassatt
Constance Marie Charpentier
Imogen Cunningham
Sonia Delaunay

Elaine de Kooning
Lavinia Fontana
Meta Warwick Fuller
Artemisia Gentileschi
Marguerite Gérard
Natalia Goncharova
Kate Greenaway
Barbara Hepworth
Eva Hesse
Hannah Hoch
Anna Huntington
May Howard Jackson
Frida Kahlo
Angelica Kauffmann
Hilma af Klimt
Kathe Kollwitz
Lee Krasner

Dorothea Lange
Marie Laurencin
Edmonia Lewis
Judith Leyster
Barbara Longhi
Dora Maar
Lee Miller
Lisette Model
Paula Modersohn-Becker
Tina Modotti
Berthe Morisot
Grandma Moses
Gabriele Münter
Alice Neel
Louise Nevelson
Georgia O'Keeffe
Meret Oppenheim

Sarah Peale
Ljubova Popova
Olga Rosanova
Nellie Mae Rowe
Rachel Ruysch
Kay Sage
Augusta Savage
Vavara Stepanova
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Sophie Taeuber-Arp
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Marietta Robusti Tintoretto
Suzanne Valadon
Remedios Varo
Elizabeth Vigée Le Brun
Laura Wheeling Waring

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Plate 3: Guerilla Girls
Black and White Poster, 1987

While these artists and others are successfully deconstructing the male language of art there still are many issues to be addressed. The question of whether the woman artist can represent the female nude and her own body without falling prey to the argument that she is reinforcing woman's position as object is still a contentious issue. Is the representation of the female nude to remain the territory of the male artist? Can women only represent themselves clothed and standing? Women artists must claim back their own imagery. We must continue to challenge the male domination of visual language and the value system that has been prevalent for many centuries. While the successes of women artists in these areas is still acknowledged, there is still much work to be done to redress the balance.

Silence

Art history by its exclusion of the woman artist has silenced her. It has constantly ignored her existence and written her out of history. Linda Nochlin (1973) points out this fact when she states that "Approximately 3,000 names of women artists were listed in Grove's Dictionary of Art who exhibited in London during the 19th century. She acknowledges that while some of them might have just ~~showed~~ "one flower painting" many of them were prominent artists, "these women, 3,000 strong have simply been dropped from the roles of art history" (Nochlin, 1973, p.8).

This fact raises some very serious questions surely art history didn't just forget to include them? 3,000 missing women could hardly be seen as an oversight!

Geremane Greer recounts a similar tale of forgotten women artists when she states that

On the 1st of December 1976 an exhibition entitled "Women Painters 1550-1950" opened at the Los Angeles County Museum.... The organisers might have been surprised to learn that seventy years earlier in the Hotel du Lyceum France "Une Exposition Retrospective d'Art Feminin" had covered the same ground" (Greer, 1979, p.1).

The 1976 exhibition did not build on the knowledge revealed in the 1906 exhibition because its existence had been forgotten, instead it had to start from scratch re-discovering artists who had been re-discovered in 1906!

These facts suggest finally that it was lack of recognition not lack of ability that excluded women from art history. A lack of recognition that was supported by the ideologies of patriarchy, the language of art, and the culturally constructed concept of genius.

Conclusion

In conclusion I propose that the concept of genius must be taken on board by women artists and its terms must be re-defined. The question of genius and how it relates to women is not just an 18th century and 19th century notion but has relevance for women creating art today. For as long as the "Romantic" concept of the artist remains part of our culture and goes unchallenged woman shall be seen as culturally inferior. It is not enough to claim that genius is meaningless in the 20th century while the whole history of western art remains littered with examples of male genius leaving woman conspicuous by her absence. Nor can we adopt the post-modernist stance that proclaims the death of the author and by implication the death of the genius. How can the female genius die if she never lived? Simply dismissing genius as dead and meaningless leaves the value system, that underlies art history's exclusion of almost all women from this category, unchallenged.

Art history must be challenged and revised or perhaps as Linda Nochlin (1991) "The canon should be fired" (quoted in King, 1992, p.186). We must question what goes into the archives for as Griselda Pollock (1993) states

What is preserved, conserved and classified as the material for historical study and the valued heritage of culture was put there according to selective social interests and the desires of selected classes, culture and genders. The library and the museum are not innocent sites of storage: they are already texts shaped according to the interests and needs of certain groups. This canonised archive then actively shapes the present for us. (Pollock, 1993, p.12).

Women need to take art history to task. While this is already happening some books published in the last decade still largely exclude women artists. For example Lourda Sheppard's *Sight Insight Excite* (1987) which is used as the text book for Leaving Cert art history includes almost no women.

Feminist revisions of art history have largely been of the "add and stir" variety. While this is useful it does not challenge the value system at work. This system needs to be replaced by a broader and more universal one that includes the values of women and artists of colour. The equation of "femininity" and "female sexuality" with negativity in art history and criticism must be addressed. We may not be able to change the ideologies of patriarchy overnight but we must challenge them. It is time for a celebration of the female in art history, and criticism! Women have always made art - good art, bad art and great art! I leave you with a thought from Christine Battersby

Men would not have needed to make silence a virtue for women unless women talked - and unless men were afraid that women would be heard. Men would not have insisted that creativity was a male prerogative unless women created - and unless men were afraid that women's creations would be taken seriously. (Battersby, 1989, p.160)

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