

FEMINISM WITHOUT WOMEN

Culture and Criticism in a "Postfeminist" Age

TANIA MODLESKI

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To the women

I would like to end, however, with a fantasy, which involves reading the scene I have discussed in *Ghost* against the grain. This may be a fantasy that for many reasons black woman will not fully share, since it points in a utopian direction and wishes away some of the contradictions I have been analyzing. Without for a moment *forgetting* these contradictions, without denying the force of Hazel Carby's observation that feminist criticism (to say nothing of a "woman's film" like *Crossing Delancey*) has too often ignored "the hierarchical structuring of the relations between black and white women and often takes the concerns of middle-class, articulate white women as the norm," I nevertheless want to point to an alternative to the dominant fantasy expressed in *Ghost*.²⁶ If in the film the black woman exists solely to facilitate the white heterosexual romance, there is a sense in which we can shift our focus to read the white male as, precisely, the obstacle to the union of the two women, a union tentatively suggested in the image of the black and white hands as they reach toward one another. I like to think that despite the disturbing contradictions I have pointed out in this chapter, a time will come when we eliminate the locked door (to recall an image from *Ghost*) that separates women (a door, as we see in the film, easily penetrated by the white man), a time when we may join together to overthrow the ideology that, after all, primarily serves the interests of white heterosexual masculinity and is *ultimately* responsible for the persecutions suffered by people on account of their race, class, and gender. But since it is white women who in many cases have locked the door, it is their responsibility to open it up.

Lethal Bodies

Thoughts on Sex, Gender and Representation, from the Main Stream to the Margins

ANTI-ANTI-ANTI-PORN

If there ever was a quintessential postfeminist issue, pornography is it. Feminists have been largely responsible for theorizing and politicizing the question of sexual representations, and they now find their "point of view" being used as the means by which men may affirm their interest in pornography and claim it as a "realm of empowerment."¹ That men *do* feel disempowered by the anti-pornography feminists becomes clear when, for example, in his book *No Respect*, Andrew Ross discusses the problem faced by "straight male intellectuals," even "reconstructed" ones, when asked by feminists about their interest in pornography: such a man, Ross laments, is "bound to fail to explain why he likes pornography."² Ross himself finds a way around the dilemma by rehearsing the pornography debates that have occurred within feminist intellectual circles. He champions women like the lesbian sadomasochist Gayle Rubin, who has defended pornography on behalf of sexual minorities and, for reasons we will be exploring, has stressed the importance of separating sexuality from gender; of course, once sexuality is liberated in this way, the straight male is empowered to speak with as much authority on the subject as anybody else.

By now there is an entire genre of "anti-anti-porn writings," to use Ross's term (p. 190) (does this mean we should be "pro-porn"? the double negative seems symptomatic). Typically, anti-anti-porn essays isolate the writings of Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon (admitting perhaps that the field of anti-pornography criticism is not a unified one, but then proceeding to ignore this fact), chastising the stand taken by these two women on

ensorship and pointing out that the distinctions made by earlier feminists between pornography and erotica are ultimately untenable because sexuality can probably never be uninflected by issues of power and violence. It is argued, with considerable justification, that the anti-pornography stand often does most damage to sexual minorities (insofar as it stresses censorship) and, further, may work in various ways to repress women whose sexuality has traditionally been inhibited through their socialization as females.

My sense is that among intellectuals the "anti-anti-porn" position has pretty much won the day, although no one seems to admit this is the case; thus Andrea Dworkin, for example, continues to be berated as if she weren't already sufficiently discredited by the majority of intellectuals. However, a recent, fascinating essay by Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" which appeared in a special issue on AIDS in *October*, reopens the case argued by Dworkin and MacKinnon, finding in their writings much that is useful for a gay male critique of sexuality and sexual representations. Among other accomplishments, Bersani's essay presents a welcome respite from the standard tirades against the radical feminists, and I would like to consider it here in the context of a larger discussion of sex, gender, and representation. My aim in this chapter is twofold. First, I want to look at recent attempts by feminists to abolish the category of gender altogether or at least to separate it from the category of sexuality. Second, I would like to work out some of the points of conflict about the issue of representation between sexual minorities and women (some of whom are of course *members* of sexual minorities) as well as to elucidate problems and aims these groups share in common (thus this chapter continues in the spirit of the previous one). I will begin at the opposite pole from Ross, by considering "straight male" fantasy—in this case, as it is expressed in two mainstream films, *Dead Poets Society* and *Lethal Weapon* (also considering its sequel); I will then move to the margins of the discourse on sexuality, specifically considering gay male sexuality, and then to the margins of the margins, as it were, focusing on some writings of lesbian sadomasochists and considering the challenge they pose to feminist orthodoxies. My concern at that point, however, will also be to show that in a postfeminist age some of the *most* marginal positions may be unwittingly bringing us back to the center.

The films I would like to look at before turning to a consideration of

Bersani's attempted rapprochement between feminists and gay men are works which taken together indicate the range of response found in contemporary mass culture to male homoeroticism and homosexuality: the first seems to be one of sheer repression, the evocation of a desire to return to a supposedly presexual and pastoralized—yet really very disciplinary—past; while the second response takes male homoerotic impulses, embedded in homosexual panic, to their most murderous extreme.

DEAD WHITE MALE HETEROSEXUAL POETS SOCIETY

In an earlier chapter I examined contemporary films' preoccupation with male regression, and I considered various *kinds* of regression—physical, psychological and historical—connecting nostalgia for the past and for childhood with male fears of the body and with a search for literalness in language. Nowhere are these fears and this quest more evident than in the hit film *Dead Poets Society*, which is set in a boy's boarding school in 1959. Here the insistence on boyhood sexual innocence is so extreme that the film may be said to mark the return of the "hysterical" text, in which the weight of the not-said, that which is again rapidly becoming "unspeakable," threatens to capsize the work's literal meaning. According to Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, who uses the term in discussing the family melodramas of the 1950s, the "hysterical text" is one in which the repressed sexual content of a film, banished from the film's narrative, returns to manifest itself in various ways in the *mise-en-scène* and through textual incoherences.³ In *Dead Poets*, the repressed content is related to homoeroticism and gay sexuality. It is interesting to speculate on how the film's meaning would have changed were it to have introduced one literary figure in particular—Oscar Wilde, whose writing is judged by some critics to be the first in which "it was generally recognized that a literary work had a meaning other than its face value," whose work, then, posed a threat to the transparency and innocence of language, seeming to contaminate it with duplicitous double meanings.⁴ In Wilde's case, of course, as a result of the trials, this doubleness has been lost to us and it has become impossible not to perceive the "gay" meanings of the texts.

So it is not surprising that the film turns to Walt Whitman as a more sexually ambiguous figure through whom to work out its ideologically

conservative projects: first, not only to deny the homosexuality of Whitman but more generally to evade its own relation to homoeroticism; second, to appear, in true post-gay rights fashion, to be endorsing rebellious anti-authoritarian modes of behavior, but, third, to be actually evoking a longing for a closeted world in which such behavior would only serve to perpetuate a power structure that would ceaselessly punish it. Thus, despite the fact that Whitman's sexuality has been contested throughout many decades of literary criticism, the film makes no references to the debates over Whitman's homosexuality, focusing only on Whitman as the good grey poet: the free-thinking English teacher Mr. Keating, played by Robin Williams, insists on being called "Captain" or "Oh Captain, My Captain," singling out the one poem that exhibits pious deference to male authority—the very authority the film pretends to be challenging. It is not, incidentally, without relevance and certainly not without irony that Whitman's "corporeal utopianism" has recently been seen by one gay critic as existing in opposition to the moral-purity writers of the nineteenth century who were especially alarmed by the possible depravity of such homosocial environments as the male boarding school.⁵ Welton, the setting of *Dead Poets*, would have given these writers no cause for concern.

Although the film exists in a genre of boys' boarding school films, some of which (like *The Devil's Playground*) brilliantly explore the homoerotic tensions of such an environment, and although it is directed by Peter Weir, whose previous work (e.g., *Gallipoli*, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*) is suffused with a lyrical homoeroticism, *Dead Poets* denies this dimension of boarding school life so resolutely that its repression can be systematically traced, the duplicitous meanings emerging after all. For example, one of the characters is a kind of misfit and a loner, unable to articulate his feelings and hence marginal to the group forming around Keating: in fact, the character reveals many of the signs of a sexual identity crisis, and in a more honest version of the film might have been shown struggling to come to terms with being gay in a heterosexual, homosocial environment. That the possible "latent" homosexual theme is overdetermined is suggested in one rather amazing scene in which Keating instructs the boy to come to the front of the room and, since he has been unable to complete the poetry writing assignment, to stare at a picture of Walt Whitman and spew out poetic phrases, while

Keating spins him round and round, violently extracting the speech the boy has been withholding.

As for Keating, whose presence spawns the boys' secret society, lest anyone suspect his motives in returning to the repressive boys' school in which he had been a student, we see him in a carefully staged scene writing a letter to his fiancée whose picture is conspicuously propped on the desk. (Performing similar roles as "disclaimers" are the girls whom the boys entertain at one point in their cave, reciting poems that one of them claims to be original compositions.⁶) Asked by a student why he stays in such a stifling place, Keating responds that he loves teaching more than anything in the world; he gives no explanation of why he left the school in England, where his fiancée still lives, or why he has ruled out teaching in the public schools—clearly a more congenial place for his democratic, free-thinking sympathies. Such "disclaimers" as the photo (as well as a banal subplot in which a boy falls in love with a cheerleader and becomes rivals with a football hero in one of the public schools) and such narrative incoherences might be taken as indicators of the film's repressed homoerotic content—the symptoms in the "hysterical text."

At the end of the film one boy, whose father has forbidden him to act in a play, defies his father by playing the role of Puck in a student production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and then ends up killing himself because his father forbids him to continue in the role. Of all the roles to have chosen, this one seems most filled with latent—and because latent, homophobic—meaning, as if the struggle between a boy and his father were over the boy's right to "pose as a fairy." In the investigation that follows the suicide, John Keating becomes the scapegoat and is forced to leave the school, and the boys are called individually up to the principal, who orders them to "assume the position," and then paddles them. Implausibly, Keating comes to collect his things in the middle of an English class, which the principal has taken over, and as he leaves, one boy stands up to voice his support of his former teacher and then climbs up on his desk, repeating an act Keating had earlier urged the students to perform in order to encourage nonconformity. The other class members, conforming, as it were, to the boy's gesture of nonconformity, follow suit. In the final shot of the film, the camera frames the student as he stands looking at John Keating, the legs of another

student straddling the image in the shape of an inverted V—the sexualized body which has been so systematically denied throughout the narrative emerging here, in hysterical fashion, in the body of the film itself, its *mise-en-scène*.

Like the films discussed in some of the other chapters, *Dead Poets Society* is a profoundly regressive film, fixated on adolescence and a mythical moment in the past that it appears to repudiate but really longs for: a moment of repression and discipline and stable authority, represented by fathers, high school principals, and dead poets. By no means does the film anticipate the real rebellions that were shortly to erupt, even though it presupposes an audience that has lived through them. Thus the film: challenges the literary canon and the orthodoxies of the “discipline” of literary studies (represented, for Keating, by the “realists” and by the textbook’s editor whose introduction Keating instructs the boys to tear out), but returns us to this canon via a sanitized image of one of our most heterodox and sexually explicit authors; pays lip service to feminist demands for an end to exclusionary male societies, but on the grounds that male sexual needs will be better served (i.e., as one of them jokes, so the boys won’t have to masturbate); and encourages such marginalized people as gay youths to speak, but only in unintelligible language. Far from anticipating the specific struggles of the 1960s and 1970s, the film lyricizes life in the closet, yearning for the time just before these rebellions—a time when, for example, there were no dead women poets (not even Emily Dickinson) and live females apparently could not tell the difference between Shakespeare and a schoolboy’s poetry, a time before gay men would aid in problematizing the very notion of adolescent sexual innocence and Whitman would be brought further out of the closet. Like Keating and despite its disclaimers, its bad-faith mockery of “tradition,” the film chooses the particular chronotope of the 1950s boys’ school because it *wants* to be there: at a time and place in which rebellion seemed entirely a white male heterosexual affair and could itself appear innocent, devoid of substance and body.

LETHAL WHITE AND BLACK MALE HOMOSOCIAL BODY/MACHINES

If *Dead Poets* deals with the fear of the sexualized male body by repressing it, other films deal with the fear very differently and increasingly seem

to court the pleasures and dangers of homosexuality—with what explosive consequences we shall see.

In the film *Lethal Weapon* Detectives Riggs (Mel Gibson) and Murtaugh (Danny Glover) begin a criminal investigation by visiting the house of a prostitute to look for clues. As they approach the house they remark on the “thinness” of their conjectures about the crime, thus inaugurating a running joke in the film—for as they approach the house it explodes and bursts into flames, thereby spectacularly confirming the accuracy of their suspicions. As the men’s speculations continued to be confirmed, Murtaugh at one point invokes the ritualistic line, “Thin, very thin,” and Riggs replies, “Anorexic.” That the concern with “thin” plots is linked with an idea of thin men—thus connecting us to the thesis of the chapter dealing with the anorexic mentality of certain contemporary masculinities—is suggested in a scene where the two detectives are at target practice. Discussing the thinness of their evidence, Murtaugh says, “Thin is my middle name,” to which Riggs responds, “With your wife’s cooking I’m not at all surprised”—thereby invoking the other running gag of the film regarding Trish Murtaugh’s culinary incompetence.

In *Lethal Weapon 2*, the gag about the wife’s cooking is reprised, this time in yet another scene involving explosion. The black partner, Roger Murtaugh, has been sitting on a toilet all night long, having become aware that a bomb has been placed underneath him, set to explode when he stands up. Riggs has discovered him in this position, alerted the bomb squad, and now sits holding his partner’s hand in preparation for a leap into the bathtub, into which they have one second to jump before the bomb goes off. Murtaugh jokes that it’s too bad the bomb wasn’t placed in Trish’s stove instead, and Riggs says, “Yeah, think of all the needless suffering that could’ve ended right there.” Now, when a script calls for a bomb to be placed underneath the naked bottom of a black man sitting on a toilet (holding hands with his white partner) and has the man express the desire for that bomb to have been placed in his wife’s *oven*, a feminist/psychoanalytic critic is entitled to regard the ingredients of the film’s formula as a heavily condensed mixture of racism, misogyny, homoeroticism, and heterosexual panic.

The joke about thinness seems related to a masculine fear about the body that is also central in *Dead Poets Society* (as well as, we saw, in the Pee-