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The Newly Born Woman

Hélène Cixous and
Catherine Clément

Translation by Betsy Wing

Introduction by Sandra M. Gilbert

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A Woman Mistress

If the position of mastery culturally
comes back to men, what will become of
(our) femininity when we find ourselves
in this position?

When we use a master-discourse?

Mastery-knowledge, mastery-power:
ideas demanding an explanation from us.

Other discourses?

C: Let's start out with the difference between our discourses. Yours is a writing halfway between theory and fiction. Whereas my discourse is, or tries to be, more demonstrative and discursive, following the most traditional method of rhetorical demonstration. That doesn't bother me; I accept that method: it is the method of teaching and of transmitting ideas. We see there can be two women in the same space who are *differently* engaged, speaking of almost exactly the *same things*, investing in two or three different kinds of discourse and going from one to the other and then on to the spoken exchange.

H: I distrust the identification of a subject with a single discourse. First, there is the discourse that suits the occasion. I use rhetorical discourse, the discourse of mastery, orally, for example, with my students, and obviously I do it on purpose; it is a refusal on my part to leave organized discourse entirely in men's power. I never fell for that sort of bait.

C: There is no reason at all not to steal that discourse from men. . . . Besides,

that doesn't mean anything; we don't steal anything at all—we are within the same cultural system. Granted it is a phallogocentric cultural system but trying to make another in advance is unfounded; perhaps we can think that, hypothetically, one day there might be another system but to will that it suddenly be there—at any minute—is utopian.

H: There will not be *one* feminine discourse, there will be thousands of different kinds of feminine words, and then there will be the code for general communication, philosophical discourse, rhetoric like now but with a great number of subversive discourses in addition that are somewhere else entirely. That is what is going to happen. Until now women were not speaking out loud, were not writing, not creating their tongues—plural, but they will create them, which doesn't mean that the others (either men or tongues) are going to die off.

C: In any case, there is no reason for women not to assume the transmission of knowledge. The term causing a problem is the word *mastery* in the phrase “discourse of mastery.” If inspired by Lacan, it refers to a relationship between mastery and university, which is such that the master's discourse—from the point of view of its political and economic power—is transferred onto and shapes any discourse dealing with knowledge to be transmitted.

H: I think one has a hard time escaping the discourse of mastery when using, for example, as a teacher, discourse I'll call “objective”; by that I mean a discourse that does not involve an easily located subject of enunciation, that speaks at that particular moment not just in the name of but as universal knowledge itself.

The law does not exist.

In the little chapter “The Dawn of Phallogocentrism,” I took, on the one hand, a text by Freud on the origin of patriarchy, and I compared it with a Kafka text called *Before the Law*. It is a story that is both extraordinarily clear and as unclear as the question that is its crux: “What is the law?” There is a peasant who was an honest man: he was the only one who could have gone to the other side and seen the law—seen, therefore, that it doesn't exist. Because the door could be opened only for him. He didn't go in there. How could he have gone “there” since the law that doesn't exist was himself? All that was needed was a door and a doorkeeper: he was the one who constantly fabricated the law, and he never saw that the law did not exist.

C: Do you know what that story makes me think of? The mirror stage—the fact that the chimpanzee looks behind the mirror to see who is there, another chimpanzee, itself, or nobody—whereas man identifies and constitutes himself with the mirror. It reflects his image to him, *fixes* it as a subject and subjects it to the law, to the symbolic order, to language, and does it in a way that is both inalienable and alienating. The law exists.

H: Except that the chimpanzee actually is the chimpanzee and we are the result

of our relationship to the door. What is the discourse of mastery? There is one. It is what calls itself "the law" but is presented as "the open door" in precisely such a way that you never go to the other side of the door, that you never go to see "what is mastery?" So you never will know that there is no law and no mastery. That there is no master. The paradox of mastery is that it is made up of a sort of complex ideological secretion produced by an infinite quantity of doorkeepers.

Mastery ensures the transmission of knowledge.

C: I wouldn't say that in the same terms. It has to be said straight out: for me mastery is fundamental and necessary. I don't particularly think one can transmit certain knowledges—*the* knowledges—except through mastery. That involves everything having to do with democratic transmission. Paradoxically, information contained in a system of knowledge cannot be transmitted outside of mastery. It is dependent on the "law" of the Symbolic, like the doorkeeper, like the honest man. Subjectivity can be taken in, deluded, by it, of course, but it can also find there an explicit coherence, a certain number of connections shared by all, so that when the statement is transmitted, the receiver has access to it either immediately or through mediation.

Transmitting.

What is at stake is connection and consistency. I know perfectly well you are not about to tell me that truth sticks to what is consistent and that you are going to call into question the existence of other consistencies. As for me, the discourse of mastery exists; of course, it is ambivalent and full of traps as far sub-

Culture, which is superstructure, must not be considered as a thing, a good, the result of an evolution, a stock converted into intellectual luxury, but rather as a factor in evolution (which cannot be solely a factor of income) and especially as a process. (Brecht, *Writings on Politics and Society*)

jectivity is concerned: subjectivity finds the positions of psychoanalyst and professor to be almost equally untenable. But despite that, it is through the discourse of mastery that knowledge of the analytic act *is transmitted*. I am not talking about the rest of it.

H: I can't go along with you there. Your position, which I understand, disposes of a problem that is fundamental and primary for me: how is one to think and struggle against what mastery inevitably entails as a form of repression? A mastery's contradiction, if it isn't thought differently, is that, far from transmitting knowledge, it makes it still more inaccessible, makes it sacred. That is Law's dirty trick. Only those people who already have a relationship of mastery, who already have dealings with culture, who are saturated with culture, have ever dared have access to the discourse that the master gives.

C: Now, in this social and cultural system. But certainly you can conceive of societies structured differently, in which the conditions of access to knowledge would be profoundly different.

H: That's why I believe one has to take a thousand precautions. At the present time, it is impossible for me to use the term "mastery" as it is currently used

One can say that general culture is what permits the individual to fully feel his solidarity with other men, in space and in time, with the men of his generation as well as with the generations which have preceded him and those yet to follow. To be cultivated, then, is to have received and constantly developed an initiation to different forms of human activity independently of those which correspond to a profession, so as to be able to enter into contact and communion with other men. (Paul Langevin)

because of the repression it implies. Does someone already allied with a certain knowledge want to communicate it to others? Why does one want to communicate it to others? It's the usual question—"what's the use?" Does it serve any purpose? I would say yes, obviously, it has to serve—not serve itself and not serve a superior cause, et cetera. There is a drawback we all know as teachers, which is the almost insurmountable difficulty of occupying a position of mastery.

Giving.

The one who is in the master's place, even if not the master of a knowledge, is in a position of power. The only way to bar that is to execute the master, kill him, eliminate him, so that what he has to say can get through, so that he himself is not the obstacle, so it will be *given*. Something on the order of a personal gift, a subjective one.

C: I don't like that term—personal gift, it tends toward oblation and sacrifice. . . .

What one knows. . . .

What one doesn't know.

H: Giving isn't sacrificing. The person who transmits has to be able to function on the level of knowledge without knowing. I'm not at all referring to Socrates now. Just that one should be in a state of weakness, as we all are, and that *it be evident*. That one have the guts to occupy the position one has no right to occupy and that one show precisely how and why one occupies it. I set my sights high: I demand that love struggle within the master against the will for power.

Mistress woman or woman master?

C: Just the same it will be mastery. When I hear *mastery*, I think of the present meaning of the word, which must come more or less from Hegel. Mastery, in Lacan, is inseparable from something fundamentally bound up with woman, with the hysteric, her referential figure. The hysteric puts the master and the academic, both power and knowledge, in check. What's more, this conjunction "power-knowledge" and this division between the two seem to me to be on the order of myth, with its mythic power and arbitrary nature. Admitting these terms for what they are, would that mean that the hysteric and, hence, somehow, the woman does not have the right to move in the direction of mastery or academics or perhaps even toward the position of analyst? She has only one position, she "puts in check." That is inadmissible—grotesque. But the way you have defined a knowledge expounded with limits and holes is no longer, in effect, entirely mastery. It does correspond just the same to what I meant just now, that is to say, a discourse that—for its own subject, for what concerns knowledge—offers some connections, punctuations, scansions, demonstrations—through which the data of knowledge are transmitted. I see no way to conceive of a cul-

tural system in which there would be no transmission of knowledge in the form of a coherent statement. Right now, for social and ideological reasons, this coincides with a position of mastery.

H: I don't know what you call "right now"; it has always been like that in our western societies. In our own history, the one we are still reacting to, that is what has happened and keeps on happening.

C: That's not entirely true. There is a history of mastery, for us among others, that runs through the history of national education, via the major schools of teacher instruction, via Jules Ferry, via the struggles for a state school, et cetera. And I really think that, from women's point of view, there have been some rays of light in that history and some moments when women had mastery. Not that they have had economic mastery, of course, but it has come about that they had symbolic management of an intellectual activity. An example would be the time of the *trouvères* and *troubadours* . . . at the same time, what's more, as a mythology of the "inspiring woman" opposing this mastery.

I believe that *cultural* oppression of women coincides with economic evolution and is accentuated by the development of capitalism. Think of the "précieuses," who are not at all well known or well liked. There have sometimes been women in possession of knowledge.

H: There has always been a split between those who are in possession of knowledge and culture and who occupy a position of mastery and the others. I don't rule out women's having been on that side, but even then they are not in the masters' position. I am not saying that knowledge is always associated with power, or that it must be: but that is its danger. And I am not saying women are never on the side of knowledge-power. But in the majority of cases in their history, one finds them aligned with no-knowledge or knowledge-without-power.

C: By *power* you don't mean political power, you mean that scrap, that reflection

Common public instruction for all citizens is to be created and organized and to be free with regard to those fields of instruction which are indispensable to all men. ([French] Constitution of 1791)

The institutions of instruction in their entirety were opened up to the people free of charge, and, at the same time they were cleared of any interference by the Church and the State. Thus, not only was instruction made accessible for everyone, but knowledge itself was set free of the chains which class prejudices and governmental power had laid on it. (Karl Marx, *On the Commune*)

of political power that the teacher exercises metaphorically and imaginarily. What exactly is the teacher's "power"?

H: Where is the division between "powers"? It's impossible to separate them. I believe teaching goes hand in hand with ideology.

C: I don't think so. If that was true, there would be no reason at all to struggle for a truly democratic transmission of knowledge—on the contrary! It is true that whole segments of knowledge are "trapped" in the dominant ideology, but still they are conveyed. There are, for example, Marxist historians; they teach history in a "history" program. It is not because they are in a position of mastery within the teaching structure as it is now that the *content* of their knowledge goes hand in hand with ideology. The division is more complex: it is between the subject's position in relation to knowledge and *the specific effects of the knowledge itself*. The transmission is effective in any kind of structure; even if it is attenuated by the instructional system, it is not *wiped out*.

H: It is almost wiped out. Thank god there is always a tremendous resistance— young people's flexibility, for instance. Take people when they get out of high school, private schools, no matter what school, and see what you get. Zero.

C: But they are receivers and under difficult conditions. . . .

The peoples whose women must work much more than is proper according to our ideas often have much more real consideration for women than our European populations. Civilization's "lady," who is surrounded by feigned respect and who has become a stranger to any real work, has a far lower social position than the woman who is a barbarian, who worked hard, who counted as a real lady (*dame, froxa, Frau: domina*) and who, moreover, was one because of her character. . . .

H: Receivers are what they have received. Certainly there are always tightly held lines, like a certain type of philosophical instruction. But that never has more than a limited and postponed effectiveness. Despite absolutely incredible setbacks, it does keep alive a certain kind of spirit of change. But that's not what has taken power. Power lies always in the same direction. It always has.

We are confronted with this new form of family in all its severity among the Greeks. As Marx noted the position of the goddesses in mythology represents an earlier period, when women still occupied a freer and more respected place, in the Heroic Age, we already find women degraded owing to the predominance of the man and the competition of female slaves. . . . The modern conjugal family is based on . . . admitted or masked domestic slavery of woman, and modern society is a mass made up exclusively of conjugal families, like so many molecules. In this day and age, man in the great majority of cases, must support and nourish the family, at least in the propertied classes; and this gives him a sovereign authority which does not need legal privilege to back it up. Within the family man is the bourgeois; woman plays the part of proletariat. But in the industrial sphere, the specific character of economic oppression that weighs on the proletariat is only manifested in all its severity after all the legal privileges of the capitalist class have been suppressed and complete legal equality of the two classes has been established; the democratic republic does not suppress the antagonism between the two classes, the contrary is true: that is what, first of all, provides the ground where the struggle is going to be resolved. (F. Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*)

C: In the same direction because the bourgeoisie, the dominant class, is in power. But you can't say that on one side there is the dominant class with its power, its system of transmission and the content of that system—and that is ideology, and on the other side is everything else. I don't think that is an actual split.

H: That there could be a culture without culture or a world, a society without education is something I never thought.

C: At the moment, it seems to me, you are making mastery absolutely coincide with knowledge, except in a few exceptional cases.

H: Sure. But rather than mastery coinciding with knowledge, I would say that, with few exceptions, knowledge is constantly caught up in, is entrapped by a will for power. I know which people conveying knowledge don't seem to be dealing with the exercise of power. There are very few. In reality, most of the people I know make use of knowledge, consciously or unconsciously, and use it for something else or for themselves.

C: It is inevitable on a certain level that they make it serve themselves; nothing can ever be done about that. Satisfaction is essential to avoid falling into what I've called "oblativity." The desire to teach has to find some satisfaction! ^r

The non-master must be imagined.

H: It's a question of quantity. I'm saying that people for whom the process of return is a normal process of revenue are rare. They get a certain satisfaction, of course, that's normal, but that satisfaction can take any form. You can be gratified by the feeling of drawing others to your high level or, on the contrary, of going down to their level, et cetera. The most usual satisfaction is not generous. "Masters," in general, try to really obtain an increase in value from mastery, a feeling of accrued superiority, an inflated narcissism. . . .

C: Partly that's true. But all the more so when the knowledge has less support. It is particularly true, therefore, of the literary person—for example, where a personal gloss has considerable importance just now, where the discourse has progressed so slightly into theory that it is upheld only by a huge amount of inspiration, whose coherence is literally neurotic and which has no other way to defend itself. It is not knowledge that is being conveyed there but something on the order of the poetic. Perhaps the misunderstanding is about the idea of knowledge. When it is a question of knowledge, I am talking about a body of coherent statements that is not a neurotic coherence, hence one that isn't held together by the *singular* phantasmic specialty of the one who does the conveying.

Cultural prohibition.

H: Mastery is at play in the Imaginary as well, where interpretation plays a part and is always cropping up. When one talks about mastery, it is a mastery that

can very easily become permeated with something going beyond the object, something that is a mythical power, an Imaginary power that is held sacred and that adjoins a scene of a different sort from knowledge. Everything on the order of culture and cultural objects has a prohibition placed on it, which causes class positions in relation to culture. Likewise, woman is uneasy in relation to a certain sort of production—the production of signs. . . . We don't go straight for it. We even wonder if we *can* go there. We say to ourselves: that possession is not for me. All that has been internalized for ever so long. What would this kind of power, belonging to the mastery of knowledge and, moreover, concealed, be in a field that doesn't pass through discourse? If, instead, it went through concrete practices, like manual work or even in the business world where there are mechanisms you can really dominate, where things probably don't escape you. Always for us, working in humanities and literature, there is a part that is uncontrollable. Mastery goes through real concrete power, in that case, political power, money, all the possible forms of power that are the equivalents of the sacred power of the master's word.

C: What bothers me is this collusion between power/knowledge, invested with an effectiveness that I don't believe it has. The power to change—or to inhibit—knowledge comes through mediations that are too complex for us to judge what they might be. The power of power is first of all economic. What you describe is true on the level of a sort of huge, imaginary, mythical, ideological space. It is not true for things that are part of the real functioning of those structures.

What remains of me at the university, within the university?

H: For me ideology is a kind of vast membrane enveloping everything. We have to know that this skin exists even if it encloses us like a net or like closed eyelids. We have to know that, to change the world, we must constantly try to scratch and tear it. We can never rip the whole thing off, but we must never let it stick or stop being suspicious of it. It grows back and you start again.

C: Let's go back to the discourse of knowledge, the discourse of the university; as for myself I'm hanging on to it, I accept the dunce cap so readily put on the academic's head at the moment, but can I say that it is as a woman that I hold on to it, or not? I don't think the question is at all pertinent.

H: You're right that it has no pertinence in that instance. As a subject, I always suffered from being made inferior or was crushed by what comes through the surrounding knowledge, even if, to defend myself and out of curiosity, I said to myself: "I'm going to go see what it is." I didn't do as Kafka's peasant did; I went to see, but that comes from the fact that when I was in ignorance—which I was for a very long time—when I was "theoretically naive," as they say, I felt myself constantly under attack, aggressed, because it is very hard for people with a knowledge at their disposal not to be aggressive sometimes, even the best of masters. I'm thinking of B. . . . , who is a very intelligent woman with

extraordinary talent. Recently I saw she was deeply troubled; a few people whom she had just seen had told her, “You know, women don’t have to enter the Symbolic anyhow.” It’s ridiculous. For her it didn’t mean anything, and for good reason—how could one expect her to know what “enter into the Symbolic” meant? The people she was talking to didn’t even bother to say to themselves: she doesn’t know what the Lacanian concept of the Symbolic is. It’s not exactly your everyday word after all. From the moment one begins to *use* what can be called a concept, when it is mastered and enters your discourse and gets lost, it becomes an ordinary word; but that isn’t true at all for everybody else. That is mastery’s trap. Being so much a master that you forget you are one.

Give me the password.

C: What you said was “the best of masters,” but then you described a mockery of a master. In other respects, however, I gladly invest a positive value in aggressivity, even that of the master, even that of the best of masters. Being aggressive is also allowing the other self-definition, it is *showing* oneself as a subject.

H: Being able to organize or give order to a discourse and being able to make progress are absolutely indispensable, but there are opposite, negative effects as well. For example—controlling and censoring imagination, free production, other forms, et cetera. As a writer, even though I don’t know very much, I’m already saying to myself, “That’s enough. I know almost too much about it. Let’s not slow down.”

C: With that, let’s get back to writing, words, thought, feminine thought processes, whether there is coherence or not. You and I immediately agreed that when one made use of this discourse for transmitting, it didn’t matter whether one was a man or a woman. Why did we agree so easily about that? Why is that so obvious?

H: Because, precisely, I think it is a discourse that annihilates sexual difference—where there is no question of it.

C: So—in other discourses it could be a question?

H: It is a discourse agreeing more with masculinity than with femininity.

C: We don’t have any way to know that.

H: Yes, I have ideas about it. There is something in woman’s libidinal organization that doesn’t enjoy this kind of discourse. . . .

C: When you say that, you are moving in the direction of the women who say that feminine discourse can come only from splitting?

H: No. I was very exact. I said, “Woman doesn’t enjoy herself in it.” I never said she was incapable of it. And I am sure of it—femininity doesn’t enjoy itself there. I keep coming back to this: we are all bisexual. The problem is, what have we done with our bisexuality? What is becoming of it?