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BOOK REVIEW

Pleasure Erased: The Clitoris Unthought

Catherine Malabou. Translated by Carolyn Shread. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022 (ISBN 978-1-50954-993-1)

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Catherine Malabou introduces *Pleasure Erased* as an investigation of the clitoris, understood both as a sensible organ and a cultural symbol of feminist liberation. The book is short, just over 120 pages; yet, in its 15 chapters Malabou addresses the labyrinthine implications of the medical, aesthetic, psychoanalytic, and philosophical marginalizations of the clitoris.

The three chapters following the introduction (chapters two, three, and four) tackle the aesthetic representation of nymphs as an iteration of the masculine artist-feminine muse dynamic. In chapter five, Malabou considers the implications of the relatively newly established scientific interest in the clitoris. From the sixth chapter to the ninth, *Pleasure Erased* begins conversations with thinkers who have contemplated the status and function of the clitoris; in order: Simone de Beauvoir, Jacques Lacan, Françoise Dolto, Carla Lonzi, and Luce Irigaray. Malabou then offers considerations concerning the practice of female genital mutilation in chapters ten and eleven. In chapter 12, she moves onto addressing the controversies within feminist circles around the technological manipulation of the body and gender transition, and in chapter 13 she offers an analysis of the film *Nymphomaniac*. The final two chapters of the book are dedicated to a more independent and speculative exploration of what rethinking and unthinking the clitoris entails.

The introduction and these final chapters suggest the exigency of a scope larger than considerations revolving around the female sexual organ *stricto sensu*. First, Malabou queries if the clitoris can "exist in our minds, bodies and unconscious in any other mode than the negative" (Malabou 2022, 4). Second, she asks if "shedding light" on something as erased and misrecognized as the clitoris does not ultimately represent "an act of violence" (6). These questions summon the more general association of the feminine, as a category of sexual differentiation, to negativity.

The enmeshing of the feminine and negativity is subtended by metaphor. Fittingly, their association can be explicated by referring to the symbolic relation between the clitoris and the phallus. Where the phallus erects itself as a signifier of positivity, as traditional evidence of sovereignty, the clitoris represents only a void, illustrated by its absences in medical history, in certain psychoanalytic schools, and in the philosophical canon. Perhaps more concerning, however, is the possibility that the clitoris may function, discursively, as a diminutive phallus: as a distinctively feminine and feminized

representation of lack, the empty place where the phallus should be, therefore serving to reinforce the metaphor of phallic mastery.

Against this background, the emphasis Malabou places on both the erasure and possible reappropriation of the clitoris, which she requalifies as an "organ of thought" (13), warrants considering broader questions concerning negativity, relationality, and power. We raise two related questions, which we further explore at the end of this review. First, what does Malabou's analysis of the negative and its relationship to thought and femininity imply about the ontological category of relationality *in toto*? If the relation between negativity and the feminine is central to thought, as Malabou seems to suggest, then this implies that negativity also has a prominent role in structuring relations in general. Second, how can the clitoris be disassociated from the negative without being turned into a new "positive," or into a symbol grounded on a too familiar logic of othering? Arguably, this is *the most pressing* question for feminist philosophy in an age when gender and sexuality are under constant scrutiny inside and outside of the academe.

Overall, Malabou's sketches of various discourses and problematics around the clitoris present ample opportunity for further and urgent scholarship on these two interlinked questions. However, as it introduces an ample register of thinkers in a small number of pages, *Pleasure Erased* would benefit from dwelling more carefully on certain questions and problems. While Malabou anticipates charges of superficiality by framing her work as a "series of brush-strokes" (Malabou 2022, 12), some analyses appear reductive and risk foreclosing dialogue with certain thinkers and fields.

For example, though Malabou considers what a Lacanian approach to the problematic of feminine pleasure might be, in her dismissal of Lacan she elides not only canonical texts, debates, and authors but also awkwardly frames the problem around the personal relationship between the famous child analyst Dolto and Lacan. We would have welcomed a more thorough and receptive stance toward the multifaceted Lacanian positions on femininity, gender, and pleasure. Specifically, we identify a fruitful elaboration of imagined and actual clitoridian pleasure qua the logic of fantasy, meaning that perhaps Malabou and Lacan are not so far from one another, as we show below.

Despite the cursory character of some of Malabou's engagements with other thinkers, and at times precisely thanks to it, *Pleasure Erased* manages to raise questions of significant depth and complexity for a work this short and so conversational. For instance, Malabou considers the accusation that Irigaray's work occasionally hardens, in a counter-productive way, the dichotomy between masculinity and femininity (Malabou 2022, 71) by equating the "feminine" to "femaleness." In response, she suggests that "to think and write female pleasure" (72) might be a necessary step, if taken carefully. This claim alone warrants interrogating, in the vein of investigations begun by Malabou in *Changing Difference* (2011): does thinking and writing female pleasure entail the *revival* of a culturally suppressed sexuality or does it promise to craft new forms of sexual and gender expressions precisely because a properly universal female sexuality has never existed? Thus, despite her warranted trepidations about Irigaray's discourse, Malabou takes its implications seriously, pointing to intriguing insights an investigation of this question may lead to.

Relatedly, Malabou advances, in a more critical tone, that the relation between the clitoris and the vagina is not a fundamental one for Lacan, because female sexuality is assumed to be derivative with respect to the phallus (Malabou 2022, 50). Glossing over matters of exegetical accuracy, this diagnosis spurs the reader to ask: can the

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question concerning a feminine sexuality be addressed at all without, at the same time, analyzing the insignificance attributed to this very question?

Perhaps most successful and thought-provoking in this respect is Malabou's dialogue with Italian feminist thinker Lonzi. For Malabou, the central question Lonzi raises is: "how do women themselves avoid the reconstitution of phallic power?" (Malabou 2022, 65). This question not only reveals a complex understanding of power but also stages one of the crucial challenges for feminist philosophy at a time when the status of gender, sexuality, and anti-patriarchal discourse are evermore visible.

If, as Malabou contends, sexual difference feminism, of which Lonzi is notoriously an exponent, challenges "the notion that power exists *a priori*" (60), Lonzi's interrogation points to the already phallic nature of power. Both this equation and the relevance of Lonzi's initial question are explained by Malabou's analysis of a quote she extracts from Lonzi's *Diaries*. Talking about her partner, Ester, Lonzi writes:

> Now she says […] that in my relationship to her I was the man and she was the woman. This is how the accusation of the vaginal to the clitoridian returns, and not even feminism will put an end to it. (Lonzi translated by Dalla Torre 2014, 227, as quoted in Malabou 2022, 65)

For Lonzi, the vaginal woman is a masculine invention, the fabrication of feminine passivity, while the clitoridian woman represents feminine and feminist autonomy. Under this light, the accusation mentioned by Lonzi points to the potential resurgence of heteronormative dynamics within lesbian and other queer relationships; more significantly, however, it also underscores the risk that affirming the clitoris and the feminine might give rise to, or fail to move beyond, binary distinctions rooted in exclusions. Put differently, the effort to articulate a feminine, clitoridian sexuality might inadvertently fuel hierarchical relations of power; these relations would mirror phallic tendencies, or be phallic in nature, insofar as they are marked by the exclusion and negation of an "other" which typify sexual relations. Overall, this interrogation indicates therefore that a central question a feminist challenge to power must address is: how do we think of the feminine without crystallizing it into a concept reminiscent of the phallus and the patriarchal?

On this question, we can draw on the paths opened by Lacan. Lacan suggests that the incongruence between physiology and fantasmatic identification bears witness to the underlying structures that ossify our necessarily fragmented images of our bodies into signifiers. The "empty place" is a term used to illustrate the psychical, fantasmatic space of unconscious identifications (Lacan 2014, 73). It is structurally empty because it is only ever retroactively "filled" with content in the form of specific signifiers and specularizable images standing in for subjective identifications, i.e., man, woman, "just like mommy," "a gift for daddy," "object for exchange," and so on. Here, certain objects, like the phallus as a signifier of paternal sovereignty or impotency, are loci of power relations that exist only *a posteriori*, and psychoanalytic theory, in part, seeks to detail the prior logic that lends itself to particular identifications and relations.

From the Lacanian perspective, at issue in Lonzi's exchange with Ester is this process of identification mediated by sexed, and fundamentally patriarchal, heteronormative identifications. When Ester accuses Lonzi of occupying a masculine role and identifies herself with a feminine role, she does not make this claim on the basis of physiology. Rather, it is a fantasmatic identification with little to no basis in either partner's naive bodily reality. That the clitoris is somehow equated with a masculine position

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betrays the discursive reality and particular relations at play in Ester's identifications. Likewise, Lonzi's own gloss, that this is always the accusation of the vaginal to the clitoridian woman, is determined by a reinforcement of certain fantasmastic identifications with *a posteriori* significations of those two organs. Somehow, the liberated woman, the clitoridian woman, enters a masculine position in the context of twentieth and twenty-first century feminist discourses and communities.

Our suggestion, here, is that Lacanian theory can explicate the genesis, logic, and economy of these relations. Insofar as we define fantasy as the relation between an object and a subject barred from itself (i.e., of having an unconscious structured like a language), Lacan argues that we can identify laws of transformation that guarantee that any particular fantasy can occupy the place of an axiom for any particular subject (Lacan 2023, 421). In acting as an axiom, fantasy determines what is *negated* and what is *affirmed*, what is *indispensably excluded* and what is seen as *indispensable to* the subject. The pressing questions surrounding sexual difference and gender as well as the material and ethical questions that arise from social attitudes towards physiology—sets of questions which Malabou's book opens up—arguably hinge on questions about unconscious identifications resulting from fantasmatic relations among subjects and objects. Thus, one can see how a re-thinking of the clitoris, as proposed by Malabou, could benefit from a psychoanalytically informed theory of unconscious identification and the logic of fantasy.

Despite our complications and elaborations, Malabou's work introduces, on its own, a fresh dimension to the ongoing inquiry into the dissociation of negativity and the feminine. While this line of feminist investigation is not novel, *Pleasure Erased* avoids arresting itself at a simple valorization of the feminine as a positive category and instead opens up further questions for research. At this juncture, we depart on two interlinked questions. First, what does Malabou's analysis imply about relationality and its logic in general? Second, how can an investigation of the association of negativity and the feminine foster a form of feminine thinking that avoids producing negations and erasures?

First, Malabou's analysis spurs us not only to consider the relationships among femininity, anatomy, thought, and the clitoris as symbol and organ but also implies provocative and rich accounts of relationality as an ontological category in general. In the emphasis on the political, aesthetic, and philosophical relationships between negativity and femininity, there seems to be an exigency for an account of relationality, its structure, and its logic. While Malabou sure-footedly critiques and analyzes the processes and effects of the heteronormative and patriarchal orderings of reality *vis-à-vis* the clitoris, the general problematic she presents is an underexplored thesis that the negative is the ground of thought, and thus structures the determination of relations prior to the political and aesthetic representations of femaleness, femininity, and the clitoris. There is a concurrent problematization of the transcendental function of negativity *and* an acknowledgment of its fundamental operations within thought itself. This implies the existence of a logic of relationality and one that would benefit from dialogue with Lacanian research.

Second, if connected to Malabou's dialogue with Lonzi, the investigation of negativity is requalified—as we have seen—by the worry concerning the re-emergence of negation. Malabou's reflections point, here, to a certain continuity between issues surrounding negativity and the risk of ossifying the clitoris into a phallic signifier: the endeavor to finally spotlight and render the clitoris culturally and philosophically representable might foster forms of subjective identification necessitating new—but still phallic—processes of othering and negation.

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On this, Malabou offers some illuminating insights. Particularly, in the final paragraph of the book, she associates the feminine with a "reminder" (Malabou 2022, 123) of patriarchal violence; she suggests, accordingly, that a future devoid of mastery is supported by the memory of the violence exercised upon the feminine. Recognizing that this violence is both discursive and material, *Pleasure Erased* urges us not to dismiss or reject the connection between the feminine and negativity—even, or precisely, in thinking of the clitoris in a mode that is not the one of the negative (4). Speculatively, this might point to the exigency of preserving a space for negativity within feminist thought in order to foreclose recasting the feminine as that which negates rather than simply countering its history as that which is negated.

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