When Is a Man Not a Man?

or,

The Male Feminist Approaches “Nausicaa”

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The choice of the “Nausicaa” episode as the focus of a discussion of male feminism seems to me both appropriate and bizarre. Appropriate because this episode is about the social construction of sexual identity; bizarre because it is difficult to imagine an approach to this episode by someone constructed as a male that would be truly feminist. Perhaps we can say that a male feminist is a biological male who engages in a feminist discourse or activity. I am not altogether happy with this formulation, however. What happens to the cultural determinations that we call “male” when the biological male decides to be a feminist? The answer to this question is commonplace. There is often a contradiction or at least a conflict between the “feminist” part and the “male” part of the male feminist. Ironically, it could be very “male” to produce a feminist accent in one’s work in order to incorporate the authority of an established feminism. But before we condemn men for their opportunism we have to admit that women can also be opportunists: not to recognize this would be to accept the old gender essentialism that feminism has taught us to question. One is not born a feminist, and the decision to be a feminist, even for a biological woman, is not reducible to natural interests.

Briefly, I have another question relevant to the present context. What kind of a man has the choice to call himself a “male feminist”? Certainly, if one goes by the men who are writing for this volume, one would have to admit that male feminists are usually privileged males; I mean that they wouldn’t be
writing on this topic if they were not empowered by an education that is not accessible to everyone. They are more privileged than other males in a system that privileges males over females.

In the “Nausicaa” episode, while Bloom may be more privileged than Gerty MacDowell, I agree with Kimberly Devlin (136–40) and others that Gerty gets her own back from Bloom. She has her own gaze and takes her own pleasure from the exchange of looks and of objects to be looked at. Gerty’s being has not only been invaded by the commodity culture of patriarchal capitalism, she embraces that culture and turns it into the instrument of her own pleasure in the other. She transforms herself into a commodity in order to manipulate the gaze of another. As she looks at Bloom, we read; “Whitehot passion was in that face, passion silent as the grave, and it made her his” (13:691–92/365). But, let’s face it, in another way, it makes him hers. Gerty has the power to control Bloom’s body through his gaze, to make it do what she wants it to do so that she can see what she wants to see. Gerty knows what she wants from a man—that he be “a man among men” and “a manly man” (13:207, 210/351), “a real man” (13:439/358). Gerty knows what she wants to be for a man: “a womanly woman” and “his ownest girlie” (13:435, 440/358). Gerty is able to raise the devil in Bloom, not by showing him what she is but by showing him what covers what she is, making her sexual identity ambivalent. Bloom’s body is also covered, which enables him, whether he knows it or not, to be what Gerty wants him to be: “a man of inflexible honour to his fingertips” (13:694/365). What those fingertips are doing is no secret to Gerty; but when she finally comes, she forgets about Bloom’s body in the thought of what she must look like to him and what it cost her to look that way.

I agree with Philip Weinstein that Bloom is just as programmed by the ideology of gender as Gerty is. Bloom subscribes to Gerty’s interpellation by commodity culture: “Fashion part of their charm” (13:804/368), he says, and later adds, “Must have the stage setting, the rouge, costume, position, music” (13:855–56/370). On the other hand, Bloom probably does not recognize to what extent he has been interpellated by Gerty’s gaze as “her beau ideal” (13:209/351), though he does say to himself, “She must have been thinking of someone else all the time” (13:884–85/371). In Ulysses Joyce implies that, when it comes to sex, one is always thinking of someone else, as Bloom thinks of Molly by looking at other women. Penelope herself is not the unmediated object of desire since she is veiled by the commodified image of Calypso.

There is a curious moment in Bloom’s section of “Nausicaa” that links this episode back to several others. Bloom gazes upon some “nightclouds” that “look like a phantom ship.” Then he thinks, “Trees are they? An optical illusion. Mirage. Land of the setting sun this. Homerule sun setting in the southeast. My native land, goodnight” (13:1077–80/376). The phantom ship and the trees echo the last sentence of “Proteus”: “Moving through the air high spars of a threemaster, her sails brailed up on the crosstrees, homing, upstream,
silently moving, a silent ship" (3:503–5/51). Stephen sees this ship, just as he turns to see if there is anyone looking at him, on the same Sandymount Strand where Bloom later looks at Gerty. As in “Circe,” Bloom and Stephen seem to be united by an imaginary gaze that makes it difficult to distinguish the real from the unreal. In “Calypso,” the episode after Stephen’s walk on the beach, Bloom first recalls Arthur Griffith’s joke about the *Freeman’s Journal* after he daydreams about the Orient, which has to be associated with Molly and Calypso. Arthur Griffith made fun of the sunburst over the Bank of Ireland in the headpiece of the *Freeman* because it put the sunrise in the northwest and thus reduced the *Freeman’s* moderate-conservative support of Home Rule to the status of a mirage. The motto of the journal, “Ireland a Nation,” recalls the subject of the “Cyclops” episode, in which Bloom’s own national identity as an Irishman is called into question. When John Wyse Nolan asks him to say what a nation means, Bloom responds, “The same people living in the same place.” Ned Lambert responds that he must be a nation since he has been “living in the same place for the past five years.” So Bloom adds to his definition, “Or also living in different places.” “That covers my case,” says Joe Hynes. The Citizen finally puts it to Bloom to say what his nation is, and Bloom answers, “Ireland. . . . I was born here” (12:1431/331).

My point is that the mirage effects that derive from sexual identity in “Nausicaa” have to be situated in the series of imaginary identifications that dominate the political representations in *Ulysses*. Gerty’s femininity is inseparable from the commodity culture that constructs her identity as the phantasm of masculine desire. In “Cyclops” Bloom’s masculinity is as easily called into question as his nationality; and so in the next episode, “Nausicaa,” he tries to regain what he has lost by becoming the “manly man” Gerty dreams of, thus reminding us that Gerty does not dream alone but participates in the collective symbolizations of the cultural hegemony. Perhaps Bloom has the edge over Gerty, in that he knows that his masculinity, like his nationality, is a mirage. During the course of his day, the real continually disrupts Bloom’s daydreaming with the reminders of what he has lost and what he may yet lose. This gives him the power to project his own fear of symbolic castration onto Gerty and to take pleasure from the sexual ambivalence that makes the exchange of fantasies possible. For Gerty also projects onto Bloom the very identity he lacks: “She could see at once by his dark eyes and his pale intellectual face that he was a foreigner, the image of the photo she had of Martin Harvey, the matinee idol” (13:417/357). Sir John Martin-Harvey, a British actor/producer, helped to occasion a riot in 1910 when he staged *Richard III* in Dublin and offended the aesthetic sensibilities of certain Irish Nationalists (Gifford 390).

In other words, Gerty associates masculine sexuality with British cultural power and projects both onto Bloom. (Of course, as Jennifer Levine notes in detail, one should not read cultural signifiers like the name “Martin Harvey” as transparent with respect to the historical context. As an actor, Martin-
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Harvey may well have been an emblem of the exotic in the same tradition that would later produce Rudolph Valentino and Errol Flynn in America. Nevertheless, he represents a popular and romantic construction of masculinity that is inseparable from the hegemonic constructions of British imperialism. The important point is not that Martin-Harvey was English but that he is able to embody a normative masculine principle even when he signifies cultural difference itself by playing the exotic. After all, the exotic is the imperialist representation of cultural difference par excellence.) In Gerty’s discourse, Bloom is made to anticipate the patriarch of *Finnegans Wake*, H.C.E., who is also a foreign imperialist and whose sexual passion is indistinguishable from his passion for conquest. As the washerwomen on the Liffey recount the story of Anna Livia’s courtship, it sounds like the invasion of Ireland: “I heard he dug good tin with his doll, delvan first and duvlin after, when he raped her home, Sabrine asthore, in a parakeet’s cage, by dredgerous lands and devious delts, playing catched and mythed with the gleam of her shadda” (*Finnegans Wake* 197). Bloom makes reasonably good money or “tin” himself, and this is one advantage he has over the historical Gerty MacDowell, who would have limited economic opportunities. Bloom may not rape Gerty, but his passion is grave and loveless as he plays catch with her gaze and creates a myth for himself in the fetishistic gleam of her shadowy undergarments. Still, Gerty is no more innocent than the young women ALP sends in to please her husband after teaching them how “to shake their benders and the dainty how to bring to mind the gladdest undergarments out of sight and all the way of a maid with a man” (*Finnegans Wake* 200).

I am trying to suggest that in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* it is impossible to separate the question of gender politics from the question of imperialism. This does not mean that gender relations can be reduced to and dismissed as a subcategory of imperialist social relations, but rather that sexual, national, and class identity all operate within a system of hegemonic representations that reproduce the same inequitable distribution of power and autonomy. I use Gramsci’s concept of hegemony to emphasize the fact that what we are talking about here is not the direct and unmediated domination of one subject by another but a system of values that must take into account, as Gramsci put it, “the interests and the tendencies of the groups over which hegemony is to be exercised” (216). Gerty MacDowell is not the innocent victim; for she is able to manipulate the system of sexual values, to employ its symbols and discursive practices, to achieve her own pleasure. Bloom is not the master of the situation, since his construction as a male is not reducible to a simple choice; like Gerty, he gives his consent quite unconsciously to those values that seem matters of common sense. Of course, one cannot ignore the fact that Bloom’s masturbating in front of a young woman on a public beach is a transgression; but it is one of those social transgressions that proves the rule and establishes the boundaries that are not to be crossed.
In "Nausicaa" Bloom wants to be a man just as in "Cyclops" he wanted to be an Irishman. There is no question that Bloom, in comparison with Gerty, possesses more social autonomy, in part because of the cultural and economic privileges that accrue to him as a white European male. There is also no question that the Citizen and his Nationalist compatriots in "Cyclops," however victimized they may be by British imperialism, have the power to exclude Bloom from the homosocial bond of Irish Nationalism that to some extent, as David Lloyd has argued, mirrors the imperialism it opposes. Everyone in "Cyclops" is the butt of a joke, but Bloom becomes the scapegoat of the group and undergoes the most severe ridicule. In "Nausicaa" Gerty as the subject of a discourse determined by romance conventions is more imaginary than Bloom, because Bloom has more irony in his voice. By irony I mean those self-conscious verbal abruptions in Bloom's discourse in which he seems to recognize the limits of his own language and thus registers the real as that which resists symbolization. There is a kind of irony in Gerty's voice, but it is a dramatic irony that registers the author function more than Gerty's self-conscious relation to the language she speaks; whereas Bloom is identified with those doubling effects in his discourse that keep him at a distance from the imaginary constructions occasioned by his desire. Not to recognize this difference between them—a difference of degree—is to remain blind to the social determinations of patriarchy and capitalism that result in the inequitable distribution of both symbolic and economic capital according to gender and class.

Male feminism must be subjected to the same scrutiny we would apply to Bloom's gaze in "Nausicaa." I don't mean that men who become feminists are automatically voyeurs or cross-dressers, but I am suggesting that becoming a feminist is more than a matter of choice. There is no reason why a biological male cannot be a feminist, but feminism as a critical discourse must call into question the social construction of the male as it exists in the present social system. Before Bloom can look at Gerty and see more than the fetishistic representation of his desire, he must change the symbolic structure of his eye/I (in both senses and spellings), that is, his visual apparatus as governed by his subjectivity. In my opinion, for a man to become a feminist, he must critically subvert his own construction as a man. Such a subversion cannot restrict itself to the question of gender only. It should entail a critique of the social and economic system within which gender relations are constructed. Masculinity is not only a sexual identity but a position of political and economic power. A critique of what it means to be male should not fail to investigate the ways in which gender interacts with class and race in the overall system of hegemony. Of course, women who choose to be feminists should not avoid these questions either. If gender is understood not as a natural but as a social construction, then the difference between men and women is not a matter of essence but of context.

In Finnegans Wake, Shem dictates to his brothers and sisters "the first riddle
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of the universe”: “when is a man not a man?” The answer is, when he’s a “Sham” (170). It seems to me that this is the risk that “male” or any other feminism necessarily takes: it is possible that the difference we propose for ourselves is only a sham. But then it is also possible to rephrase the question to say, when is a sham not a sham? My answer would be, when it is no longer necessary or profitable for a man to be a man.

NOTES

1. References to Ulysses are to the 1986 Gabler (U-GP) and the 1961 (U) editions, in that order.
2. Chap. 2 of Lloyd’s Nationalism and Minor Literature, especially his conclusions on pp. 76–77, is relevant to this discussion.

WORKS CITED


