

Doing Gender in Media, Art and Culture

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Dympna and the figuration of the woman warrior

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Rosi Braidotti



16.1 Statuette of Dympna.

Here were the young women of the highest intelligence, and the most daring and ingenious of them, coming out of the chiaroscuro of a thousand years, blinking at the sun and wild with desire to try their wings. I believe that some of them put on the armour and the halo of St Joan of Arc, who was herself an emancipated virgin, and became like white-hot angels.

(Karen Blixen, 2002)

For many years I have kept on my writing desk the statuette of a holy woman warrior. Clad in a wrap-around cloak, looking intently into infinity through slightly downcast eyes, she cuts a rather sad but awe-inspiring figure. She is resting her left hand on a mighty down-turned sword, while holding up a book in her right. I choose to believe it is just any book, though it shows clear signs of being the book of books – the holy scripture of the Christian faith. This statuette is very special as it was given to me by someone I love and lost. We bought it during a day trip to Antwerp and when I first got it, I did not know who she was. Not many people know about Dympna.

Dympna, or Dymphna, was the daughter of a pagan Irish chieftain and a beautiful devoted Christian woman who died when Dympna was still very young. Her father searched the world for a suitable substitute for his lovely wife, but failed to find one. As his daughter grew up into a charming young woman, her striking resemblance to her dead mother aroused an incestuous passion in her father. Dympna resisted his advances and fled with her confessor, Saint Gerebernus, on a ship heading for Antwerp. They settled in the wilds of present-day Gheel, in what was then a small oratory dedicated to Saint Martin, where they lived as hermits and ascetics. However, Dympna's father pursued her to Belgium, found her and her companions and killed them all. He struck off her head with his own sword and left her maimed body to rot in the forest. Such were the ways of incestuous passions in the year AD 650.

This chain of events struck the popular imagination and the local people started the cult of the virgin martyr. Lunatics and epileptics reported being cured at her grave and the crowds of pilgrims were such that, by the thirteenth century, a shrine was erected to her memory. Her body was, and still is, preserved in a silver reliquary in the church. Ever since then, she has been regarded as the patroness of the mentally ill and of those – mostly women – who are driven insane by male violence, rape, and violation. According to the official register of saints by the Catholic Church, Dympna is the patroness of many other causes as well: incest victims; orphans; rape victims; sleepwalkers; epileptics; and the mentally ill as well as mental healthcarers. She protects the weak and the insane with her mighty courage and enormous wisdom, respectively symbolized by her sword and the book.

Even today, Gheel, a town near Antwerp, less than one hour south of the Dutch border, is famous for its thirteenth-century hospital and colony of lunatics, which pioneered the method of organizing mental healthcare on a family and community base. Neighbours, citizens, and, in the olden days, peasants would care for the harmless insane, who in turn undertook unpaid employment in the families and communities. It was a humane and compassionate way of dealing with what were vulgarly known as mad people, so many of them women, at a time when they were treated with contempt and hostility. This is also known as the 'Gheel method' of community care. Dympna's life casts a century-old shadow over them.

Marina Warner refers to Dympna as an example of a folktale adopted as the life of a saint in her classical study of fairytales (1995). Most people would know about Dympna through another version of her story and by a different name. 'Donkeyskin' (*'peau d'âne'*), a fairytale by Charles Perrault, is the most popular transposition of the key elements of my favourite warrior's story. Donkeyskin is the story of the lovely

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young princess who flees the dangerous family home and her widowed father's incestuous passion. She disguises herself with an ugly donkey skin to hide her astonishing beauty and survives through hard labour, charity, and obscurity. Then she is discovered by her prince, restored to beauty and honour, and rescued from social marginality, anonymity, and paternal rape. Such has been the way of fairytales since the age of the Enlightenment, when faith in the Christian God was replaced by faith in reasonable human behaviour.

Now what does this heroine's tale tell us about gender issues and what critical questions does it raise?

Analyzing the storyline

Dympna is not just a metaphor for the ills and the oppressive aspects of the condition of women, but a real-life character crossed over into myth and legend. Such characters have an important function in cultural and political theories. I refer to this function as 'figurations' and the method of analysis as 'the politics of location'.

The politics of location is a way of accounting for diversity among women, so as not to restrict gender within the category of 'sexual difference', understood as the binary opposite of the feminine to the masculine subject. As a method, it consists of unveiling the power locations which one inevitably inhabits as the site of one's identity. The practice of accountability for one's embodied and embedded locations is a relational, collective activity of undoing power differentials. A 'location' is not a self-appointed and self-designed subject-position. It is a collectively shared and constructed, jointly occupied social space. A great deal of our locations escape self-scrutiny in that they are so familiar, that one is not even aware of them. The 'politics of location' consequently refers to a process of consciousness-raising that requires a political awakening (Grewal and Kaplan, 1994) and hence the intervention of others. 'Politics of locations' are cartographies of power, which rest on a form of self-scrutiny, a critical and genealogical self-narrative. They are relational and outside directed. This means that 'embodied' accounts illuminate and transform our knowledge of ourselves and of the world. Thus, black women's texts and experiences make white women see the limitations of their locations, truths, and discourses.

The method of a politics of location is expressed through alternative and often colourful figurations. Figurations of alternative feminist subjectivity, such as the woman warrior/the womanist/the lesbian/the cyborg/the inappropriate(d) other/the nomadic feminist, etc. differ from classical 'metaphors' in calling into play a sense of accountability for one's locations. They express materially embedded cartographies and as such are self-reflexive and materially grounded. Figurations, for instance, the cyborg, are both analytical tools and creative devices. They act as the spotlight for aspects of one's practice which were blind spots before. By extension, figurations generate and express knowledge claims. In relation to our theories of the subject, figurations such as the nomadic, the cyborg, the Black subject, etc., function as conceptual *personae*. This means that they are not mere metaphors, but rather materially embedded and

embodied accounts of one's power relations. On the creative level, figurations express also the desire for change, transformation, or alternative relations to the power one inhabits: they are affirmative as well as critical tools.

Accounting for one's location is also a way to conceptualize differences: not in a dialectical framework of mutual opposition of self and other, but rather in quite a different logic of multiple, complex, and nomadic or multi-layered inter-relations. As with all figurations, Dympna is not just one, but rather a compound of many complex and internally contradictory aspects. Not one single 'meaning' can therefore be extracted from her. The field of signification inaugurated by this character is multiple or polysemic and complex in a productive sense. Let us see how many layers of meaning we can detect.

1 *The undutiful daughter syndrome*

Dympna is a rebel who dares to stand up against the will and the law of the father and pays for it with her own life. Considering the incestuous violence of the father's will, Dympna's disobedience takes the form of a fight against injustice and abuse. In this case, disobedience is a virtue, both morally and socially, which needs to be re-appraised and upheld. Like Antigone's resistance in the Sophocles play *Antigone* (and later in Hegel and many other philosophers); or Cordelia's in Shakespeare's *Lear* (Shakespeare, 1990), Nora's in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (Ibsen, 1992), and the rebellion of many million others, Dympna's rejection of the will of the father – her resounding 'no! to masculine authoritarianism' echoes across time as a cry of pain, certainly, but also an encouragement for women to act, to resist, and to take their lives in their hands. This is the advice Virginia Woolf gives to women who aspire to become writers or creators (Woolf, 1978 [1936, 1938]). Woolf recommends that they kill the dutiful daughter within them, that 'angel in the house' of perfectly docile femininity that is a creative woman's worst enemy. Another eminent British writer, Rebecca West (1913), wittily stated that she was unsure of what a feminist was exactly, but had noticed that she was being called that name every time she refused to be treated like a doormat. In a patriarchal culture that rewards submission, disloyalty and disobedience can be positive and empowering practices for women. Feminism is in some ways the movement of undutiful daughters.

2 *'She asked for it!'*

Dympna is a stunningly beautiful woman. She is young, but old enough to sexually arouse men, her own abusive father to start with, and to be held responsible for the effect she has upon them. A woman's sexuality is perceived, experienced, and represented as a form of provocation in a male-dominated culture that assumes male desire to be the rule and the norm and female passivity the desired effect. Even today, in many cultures, rape victims are accused of having provoked male lust and hence male violence by being 'too sexual'. However, what that margin of excess is all about is never rationally explained. Some legal and religious codes and traditions, both in Western societies and elsewhere, blindly rest on the assumption of the intrinsic guilt of women's sexuality.

Radical feminists, such as Brownmiller (1976) and Dworkin (1976), have challenged this assumption and the way it covers up for masculine violence and privileges. These radical feminists have stressed the structural links between male-dominated institutions and sexual violence against women and other minorities. The legal and political battle to stop violence against women is one of the priorities of the International Women's Movement. It involves global human rights campaigns, monitored by the United Nations system, but also cultural movements such as Eve Ensler's *Vagina Monologues* (2003) and the V-Day Foundation (www.vday.org).

3 *Just a girl*

Dympna is a young virgin, barely out of adolescence, innocent but firm in her principles. She clearly would prefer to stay that way for the time being: she wants to live as a hermit in an ascetic community and explore her spirituality in her own terms and time. Sexual activity is not her priority. Her youth may make her inexperienced, but she is neither a fool nor self-ignorant. This degree of lucidity in a young woman may have been unusual back in AD 650, but is commonplace today. The status of young women and girls, of youth and girlhood, has evolved and changed dramatically in our culture. The principle of women's self-determination, which both the first and the second feminist waves fought so hard for, has granted women the right to time and structure their own life choices at all levels, including that of sexual activity. This is nothing short of a revolutionary change in the decision-making mechanisms of traditional societies, which used to be ruled by the will of the father, that is, of older men.

Age has emerged as a major factor in structuring women's access to social and cultural power. The rule by the elders, the authority of the fathers, of senior citizens – also known as 'gerontocracy' – has come under attack since the 1960s explosion of youth and popular culture. The average age of world leaders – once firmly ensconced in the sixty-plus category – has been brought down considerably. Is there a correlation to be drawn between the advanced status of women and minorities and the loss of power and prestige of the traditional gerontocracies, or rule by the elders?

However, it is also the case that in the third millennium sexual liberation – once the golden rule in feminism – has run its course. Virginity and sexual inactivity, once despised by Western feminists as symbols of the traditional oppression of women, are currently being re-appraised as a possible choice on the part of younger women who can see the limitations of contemporary sexual politics. A clear example of this trend is the French movement *Ni putes, ni soumises* (neither whores nor submitted), where the awareness of generational differences is combined with the insight into ethnicity and race relations (Amara, 2003). A re-appraisal of the second wave's sexual politics is also crucial to third-wave feminism (Henry, 2004), which is also deeply affected by the contemporary digital cultural revolution. Moreover, contemporary media culture is completely in love with youth and it markets inter-generational conflicts among feminists in classical oedipal terms: daughters against mothers, or sexually unattractive older women versus sexually irresistible younger ones. This classical topos is very divisive and requires serious critical analysis.

4 *Not of this place*

Dympna is a foreigner, a refugee, a political exile who cannot safely return to her homeland and has to rely on the kindness of strangers. She is a victim of a hostile patriarchal state authority: a lust-crazed king who happens to be her own unworthy father. She is persecuted, tortured, and ultimately killed by a political leader whose arbitrary will she resists. Unwilling and unable to go safely amid the citizens of a foreign town, Dympna builds her own camp and community near a church oratory in a forest.

How many illegal immigrants in the EU today are still fleeing from hostile political and national powers and end up finding shelter in church buildings and grounds? Is it not striking to see that ancient feudal privileges – such as the relative independence of church from state or local authorities or, for that matter, the equally powerful medieval charter that grants universities their ‘academic freedom’ – provide useful sites of resistance against the political power of nation-states and governments for unwanted, illegal, or persecuted migrants? In France, the movement of the *sans papiers* (without [identity] papers) regularly squats and occupies churches and chapels, in a time-honoured tradition.

And yet, precisely because of her foreign status, her deep sense of non-belonging, Dympna brings and holds together different communities of the suffering and the oppressed, her own travelling companions, and the local community to begin with. She connects to the compassionate citizens of the city of Gheel and, through them, to the whole country. Dympna’s life story shows that you do not need to belong officially to a country in order to contribute to the well-being and social cohesion of a community. Refugees, migrants, colonial and other subjects, are vital elements of our social nexus and should be seen as a resource, not as a problem. Citizenship is not just a bureaucratic measure.

5 *A fighter but not a killer*

Dympna is a warrior and a fighter, but in a paradoxical sense. Because she could not save herself from persecution, rape, and murder, she ended up fighting for and protecting others. She expresses a relationship to fighting akin to that of the martial arts: she uses self-defence as a weapon against brutal violence. Her strategic use of force clashes with the militaristic relationship to violence exemplified by her unfortunate father-king. Even today, self-defence is taught to women as a way of preventing rape, physical assault, and abuse.

Dympna’s down-turned sword is a symbol of stillness, as well as of mighty force. It represents a sustainable alternative to the over-enthusiastic way in which women, emerging from centuries of obscurity, embrace a Joan of Arc-like form of militant emancipation. As Karen Blixen pointed out in the excerpt quoted above, militarism and militantism are very close to each other, but they need to be kept distinct and apart in order to avoid excesses of violence. Feminism, especially its radical wing, is not immune from its own forms of revolutionary violence, though as a movement it stands firmly on the side of peaceful resistance and non-violence.

The warning against militarism is of the greatest relevance today, because since the publication of the Abu Ghraib photographs showing women who abuse their Iraqi prisoners in a US military prison, the issue of women in the army has become very problematic in our societies. The trademark of a genuine warrior, in the martial arts tradition, is to be able *not* to strike back, but to fight the opponent by other means. How does this non-violent use of force by a woman fighter fit into our contemporary media culture, which is fascinated by images of killers of all kinds and genders, from Angelina Jolie as Lara Croft to Uma Thurman in *Kill Bill*? Can we differentiate between a violent and non-violent use of force? What balance can a feminist theorist hope to strike? Is non-violence negotiable?

6 *Before secularism: The spiritual quest*

Dympna is a holy figure, a guardian, and caretaker, a symbol of religious faith who is officially listed in the register of the Christian church. She is a brand name for Christian pastoral care, the original Florence Nightingale. Studying the official church register of saints and holy martyrs and looking at what areas of human endeavour and suffering Dympna has been put in charge of – namely: incest victims; loss of parents; rape victims; sleepwalkers; epileptics; and both the mentally ill and mental healthcarers – is in itself an agenda-setting exercise. It allows us to make a deeper analysis of church thinking and institutional practices and also to further our understanding of the secular structures of our societies.

Note that, back in AD 650, when paganism was the dominant ethos, converting to Christianity was a radical gesture that led to persecution. One of the radical aspects of Christianity then was precisely its emphasis on loving and on the principle of 'turning the other cheek', or rejecting the tribal law of 'a tooth for a tooth, an eye for an eye'. Christianity supports a more humane definition and practice of the Law, based on principles of justice and individual rights. Still, feminists in the European tradition have an uneasy relationship to organized Christian religion, which has evolved considerably through time. The bulk of European feminism is justified in claiming to be secular in the structural sense of the term: to be agnostic if not atheist and to descend from the Enlightenment critique of religious dogma and clerical authority. As the secular daughters of the Enlightenment and raised in rational argumentation and detached self-irony, our belief-system is civic, not theistic. In other words, we have only paradoxes to offer, as Joan Scott (1996) so eloquently put it.

However, feminists cannot be simply secular, or be secular in a simple or self-evident sense, because global politics today contains an explicit message about the status of women and gays and about the project of emancipation. It involves moreover an alleged clash of civilizations that is Islam-phobic in character. An automatic and unreflective brand of normative secularism runs the risk of complicity with racism and xenophobia.

7 *A myth and character in folklore and fairytales*

As the inter-textual variations on the theme of 'Donkeyskin' suggest, the tale of Dympna pertains to a centuries-old stock of representations in popular folklore and

fairytale. The continuity among the different variations, as well as the evident gender aspects, has been the object of intense feminist scholarship. Feminist scholarship on issues of representation is extensive, so I shall be brief here. Two points are worth stressing. The first is about the practice of critique of representation: this concerns on the one hand analytical tools of criticism, but on the other it also relies on productive and creative forces. One example of the affirmative value of images and representation is the part played by myth making, the creative imagination, and alternative figurations in political and social movements. Counter-cultures create new myths almost by necessity: Che Guevara is a modern example, as well as cultural icons such as Marilyn Monroe. The second point is related to the current digital revolution: media culture has a tendency to mystify all it touches and thus it engenders a proliferation of images. Visual representation is the key to contemporary power. All-pervasive visual representation in a technologically linked world makes myths out of even utterly meaningless figures such as Paris Hilton, the completely ordinary folks of television reality shows such as *Big Brother*, or the characters in TV series such as *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives*. Because media culture is a myth-making machinery, it shares with classical disciplines the tools of the analysis of representation in textual and literary terms.

8 *What does she know?*

Dympna is not a learned woman herself, but she produces and generates knowledge in others who learn from her life history. They identify with her sad story and love her for the courage of her convictions. What does she know, after all? In religious terms, she conveys some of the main precepts and central messages of Christianity – a saint is a high priestess, even though she was not allowed to be officially ordained. That prohibition has not changed: even today the Catholic Church forbids the ordainment of women and gay people. Feminist theologians are critical of Church orthodoxy and argue for powerful spiritual alternatives, both within Christianity and in other religious denominations (Daly, 1978).

In moral terms, she knows about values and rigour, and in legal terms, Dympna knows about human rights, mental health, and well-being. More importantly, she is the patroness of institutions of scientific and psychiatric research. In the course of time, Dympna ended up as a logo, a patent for the specific 'Gheel method' of dealing with and taking care of the insane, especially of women who are driven mad by male violence. She generates institutional know-how and practice. In Foucauldian terms (Foucault, 1965), she is integrated in a set of institutional practices and regulations that aim at the management of the subject's physical and mental health by discipline and pastoral care. She is no revolutionary in this respect, but is, as a generator of alternative knowledge production, instrumental to the system of mental healthcare. This aspect of her story is in open contradiction with the radicalism of her position in other areas – in relation to paternal authority, for instance, or to the age variable. These contradictions are structural and internal to the characters and social actors involved; thus, they must be endured and analyzed, not hastily or forcefully resolved.

9 *An icon, image, or visual representation*

As a historical character, a myth, a saint, a brand name, a logo, and a patroness, Dymrna enjoys a long and rich history of visual representation. The different mutations of her iconographic status or visual history can be studied and compared not only in history, but also across different genres and different branches of the visual arts: painting, etchings, book illustrations, sculptures, engravings, photos, films, etc. Women artists' practice has also reflected seriously on the analytical tools and frames of visual representation and art criticism (Krueger, 1983).

The very image of warriors wielding both the sword and the Bible has become a classic of colonial history and culture which was criticized by post-colonial thinkers. This returns us again to the problematic issue of women and violence and the pacifist tradition of feminism which I discussed above. In the age of 'Guerrilla Girls', 'Buffy the Vampire Slayers', and other fighting heroines, the visual topos of a woman wielding a sword has acquired dramatically different visual, cultural, and moral connotations. These can be studied historically, textually, and iconographically and analyzed in terms of changing gender roles and gender relations.

Psychoanalytic theory may read the sword as a 'phallic symbol', that is to say a substitute and signifier for masculine authority, which is not reputed to be suitable for women. In some ways, the emancipation of women takes the form of repeating certain aspects of male behaviour insofar as the masculine represents power, visibility, and authority. Unless one is prepared to argue that anything phallic is a dirty word, some amounts of mimesis, or strategic repetition, can be empowering (Braidotti, 1994).

10 *A death mask*

Dymrna is a funeral sculpture, a name on a silver reliquary in the Gheel cathedral, and a death mask that expresses the perennial relationship between female suffering at the hand of male abusers and death. There is a deep and culturally consolidated link between women and death. The ritual and practice of mourning is reserved for women in most societies. The most recent example of this was the vast public mourning of Princess Diana after her tragic car accident, with crowds of mostly women, youth, gays, and people of colour gathering all over the world in public rituals of loss and remembrance, and with leaders of the calibre of Nelson Mandela officiating and bearing witness (Kear and Steinberg, 1999; Braidotti, 2002). Also significant here is the story of Sarah Bartmann, known as 'the Hottentot Venus' in colonial terminology, whose body was finally returned from the museum where it was preserved and given a decent burial in her home grounds in South Africa. Both the terms and the conditions of this symbolic burial stressed the complexities of the issue of death and death rituals and their link to reparation and healing.

Because Dymrna is immortal as a mythical figure, however, this bond to death is also connected to the persistence of cultural memory. Honouring the dead and the victims who never had a voice, the nameless multitudes who went down violently and silently, is one of the functions of feminist scholarly research. This research carries out a witness function in speaking up on behalf of others while respecting their specificity and individuality. Writing about the missing is a form of mourning.

Theoretical tools and frameworks of analysis

Now that I have identified a considerable, though not exhaustive, list of research questions and areas of analysis of my leading woman warrior, I can move on to the next stage. This concerns the possible theoretical frames of reference and the methodological tools available for us to do justice to such a complex figuration. It is clear that gender does not refer to one single concept, but rather, as Scott (1986) argued, to a set of relations among a number of coordinates such as ethnicity, race, age, sexuality, and, in our case, disciplinary orientations.

In order to proceed, I first need to extract the key theoretical lines out of this much longer list of topics. What are, then, the main theoretical lines that are invoked by the story of Dympna? What is the state of feminist scholarship in these areas? What theoretical frameworks and schemes of analysis are available to us? What have previous generations of thinkers written about this and are these ideas still relevant today?

1 *The ethical line*

The main ethical question raised by this case study is: How does one process the pain and injustice of oppression, exclusion, and even persecution, without actually perpetuating the same kind of violence? The opposition I drew before, between a militaristic use of violence and a martial but not violent relationship to self-defence, is of great relevance. It also entails a distinction between the individual quest for revenge or compensation on the one hand, and the collective involvement of a community in the pursuit of justice on the other. This collective or group-based resistance to state or government abuse is central to the theory and the practice of Human Rights and the respect of humanistic principles in general.

Feminist theory bears a close connection to this tradition, as is evidenced by a large corpus of scholarship in this area (Jaggar 1983; Nussbaum, 1999). Given the pervasive nature of violence against women and the persistence of marginalization of ethnic and sexual minorities, however, feminists have questioned the meaning and value of the notion of 'Human' implicit in the practice of Human Rights. This approach is anti-humanist (Braidotti, 1991, 2006; Eagleton, 2003) and bears a close link to post-modernist critiques and deconstructions of master codes and discourses in our culture, by paying closer attention to power relations and structural forms of domination (Butler and Scott, 1992).

The opposition between compassion or understanding and revenge or hatred of the other is also important for feminist theory and practice. Peaceful resistance in a Gandhian tradition stands against the model of the guerrilla movement or armed violence. The latter was popular in the political history of revolutionary movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and continues to exercise a degree of intellectual fascination even today. A touch of fanaticism in the Joan of Arc model of women's emancipation ends up defeating its own purpose because it perpetuates and thus imitates the very violence it is attempting to beat. Examples of this over-revolutionary zeal are to be found in some of the great texts of the second feminist wave, such as the *SCUM Manifesto* (1983) drafted by Valerie Solanas. This hard-line feminist group

(whose initials stand for: Society for Cutting Up Men) was militantly anti-men. Another radical feminist classic is Ti-Grace Atkinson's *Amazon Odyssey* (1974). Kate Millett strikes a more cautious note (1973) and writes a very critical account of how political movements are destroyed by the use of violence in her autobiographical book *Flying* (1976).

The issue of women's relationship to organized violence, be it military, revolutionary, insurrectional, or instrumental, is of topical interest today, now we live in a state of perpetual warfare. The issue of terrorism and women terrorists needs to be looked at again, in the light of the pacifist ethics of feminism. Case studies are the women terrorists of the 1970s, such as Ulrike Meinhof and the Italian Red Brigades described by Mori (1978) and Farranda (2006), but include contemporary examples of women soldiers in various movements in the world today too: Chechenian war widows, Palestinian freedom fighters, indigenous land rights movements, and, of course, women in the regular armies of the Western world. Feminism and pacifism go hand in hand.

This deep commitment to non-violence has also procured the feminist claim that women generate a special moral dimension as life-bearers and caretakers. This school of thought is already present in some strands of early second-wave radical feminism and is voiced strongly by Adrienne Rich in her classic *Of Woman Born* (1976). It becomes more fully articulated in the 1980s. Known as the ethics of care (Gilligan, 1988), it provides the foundation for strong claims to female subjectivity not only in the moral field, but also in politics (Tronto, 1993), as an antidote to purely legalistic theories of political agency. I shall return to this point in the next section.

The claim of a specific moral dimension to women's experience, which is taken as the result of socialization and not as an innate quality, has also been made by feminist psychoanalysts. In the French post-structuralist or Lacanian tradition, for instance, Julia Kristeva (1980) and Luce Irigaray (1985) argue – each in their own way – for the specificity of feminine approaches to caring for and containing the 'other'. Although the basis for such a claim remains the maternal function, psychoanalytic feminists are not biological or psychic determinists and thus take into account the role that culture and society play in constructing women's relationship to others. The school of psychoanalysis, known as 'object relation theory' (Wright, 1992), is especially keen on stressing the role of material social conditions in shaping the moral consciousness and political agency of women. Nancy Chodorow (1978), for instance, argues forcefully that only an equitable sharing of parental duties between men and women can contribute, not only to genuine emancipation, but also to an increase in moral behaviour in our culture. Feminist ethics is the key to a fairer notion of citizenship and in this sense it is a very transformative practice.

2 *Citizenship, migration, and ethnicity*

As a foreigner without nationality or fixed abode, Dympna illustrates the problematic relationship of women and migrants to the rights and practices of citizenship in the fullest sense of the term: both as a legal and political practice and in the sense of cultural participation. This has been a central concern of feminist researchers ever since Marie Wollstonecraft challenged Rousseau's Romantic marginalization of women in the

eighteenth century (Wollstonecraft, 1982 [1792]). Feminist political theory has travelled the reformist road, rather than the revolutionary one. It produces a reasoned critique of the extent to which male desire shapes the social sphere (Pateman, 1988), causing a structural and systematic exclusion of women (Okin, 1979) from the exercise of public functions and political power. These discussions are still going on today and are centred on powerful female political figures such as Hilary Clinton, Benazir Bhutto, Sonia Ghandi, and others contending for top positions in the political sphere.

However, equally strong is the gender research on the productive and necessary forms of civil disobedience that ranges from the already quoted Woolf who defended feminists as 'the society of outsiders' with their own social system (Woolf, 1978 [1936: 1938]) to the seminal work of Rich on the necessity of being 'disloyal to civilization' (Rich, 1979b; 1985a). Another important thinker here is Audre Lorde, who in the model of Martin Luther King and Ghandi defends non-violence as the highest way of fighting structural injustices (Lorde, 1984). This critical distance from nationalism and cultural determinism is of the greatest relevance today, given that we are caught in a global state of clashing civilizations (Huntington, 1996). Far too many women in today's world have enlisted to the cause of defending their own culture against presumed, real or imaginary enemies, mostly Islamic or non-Western ones. Ethnicity and race trace civilization fault-lines in the world and make it difficult to uphold any critical distance, let alone civil disobedience. The tragic case of the Italian Fallaci (2002) comes to mind, as do many other leading European feminists, from Badinter in France (2003) to Dresselhuys in the Netherlands. These women used to be feminists but have turned hyper-nationalistic and conservative, taking it upon themselves to defend their own civilization, come what may.

The inter-connection between gender analysis and ethnicity, race, and immigration issues has generated a large body of scholarship. In the 1960s and 1970s, radical feminists in the United States started addressing this issue (Millett, 1973; Davis, 1981), by running an analogy between sexism and racism. The terms of this debate shifted in the 1980s, when ethnic and racialized differences became more central to gender research (Hull, *et al.*, 1982). Women of colour develop a critical approach to the white bias of feminist theory (Mohanty, 1988) and feminist orientalism is criticized (Spivak, 1987). A more transnational approach to gender issues is emerging (Mohanty, *et al.*, 1991; Grewal and Kaplan, 1994), while strong theoretical claims are made about Black and racialized feminist perspectives (Anzaldúa, 1987; Minh-Ha, 1989; Hill Collins, 1990; hooks, 1990).

In a European perspective, the early analyses of intrinsic racist structures in Western societies (Essed, 1991) have expanded into a full-fledged critique of white domination (Gilroy, 1987; Ware, 1992). The long history of European nationalism comes under scrutiny (Yuval-Davis and Anthias, 1989) while the fast-moving EU project provides a new frame of reference for the analysis of social and political subjects (Brah, 1993; Griffin and Braidotti, 2002).

Another line of enquiry is a socio-political interrogation of the access of migrants, refugees, and alien subjects to citizenship and participation in active social and cultural

life. As said, the key point here concerns the extent to which non-citizens, or alien and foreign 'others', can contribute to social cohesion and the well-being of a society. I have strongly defended the relevance of hybrid identities in terms of a complex and multi-layered or 'nomadic' subjectivity and complex allegiances (Braidotti, 1994; 2006). This flexible approach to citizenship allows for multiple modes of participation, also known as alternative ecologies of belonging, as opposed to nationalism and cultural determinism.

A recent visit I paid to the city of Gheel – in Dymphna's footsteps – not only confirmed these insights, but also added a new dimension to my understanding of the Dymphna phenomenon.¹ The canonization process was finally and reluctantly undertaken by the Catholic church in the thirteenth century, after almost seven hundred years of popular worship of the holy woman had transformed Gheel into a pilgrimage site. Because of the huge number of foreign pilgrims that poured into the town, Gheel had to provide extra facilities and accommodation. Lots of these foreigners were sick, especially mentally ill people, and many of them were placed in foster families for the duration of their stay for the cure in Gheel. This is how the system of foster care of the mentally ill was started and Gheel earned its title as 'Merciful Town': a haven of tolerance and compassion.

The spirit of *caritas* that prompted the care system was violently disrupted by the French occupation of 1797, when the psychiatric hospital was established and the mentally ill were interned. Economic considerations, including the closing down of the mental asylum in Brussels, led to a concentration of patients in Gheel. This resulted in the formation of the 'colony' of the mentally ill which combined scientific methods with family care. A law in 1850 officialized this system, which survives today.

However, there is a perverse twist to this otherwise edifying tale. The Gasthuis Museum in Gheel devotes one of its display rooms to Dymphna and shows a sixteenth-century wooden sculpture of the saint being decapitated. The father – an Irish king – is depicted wearing a turban, sporting a flowing beard, and his sword is an unmistakable Arabic scimitar. The same transformation of the Irish father into a Muslim occurs in the gorgeous stained-glass windows of the Dymphna church. This has to be one of the few Catholic churches devoted to the issue of sexual violence and incest. The father, however, has become ethnically marked as other, and hence distanced from our sense of collective responsibility and memory. There was no other way for early modern Christianity to visually represent a hostile, homicidal rapist then through the image of the Muslim enemy. *Plus ça change...*

3 *Political theory and the role of emotions*

The case study of Dymphna highlights the part played by emotions, passion, pathos, and affectivity in the constitution of social and political subjectivity. Several important distinctions need to be made here, the first one being that between identity-based private emotions and public or collectively shared forms of affective subjectivity. The public-private distinction has played a major part in structuring gender roles and fixing them into social relations. They have defined and confined the position of women inside the

private sphere, within the home and family, leaving the government of the commonwealth, the *res publica*, to males of the same ethnicity and culture. Foreign men, immigrants, and refugees are marginalized through other mechanisms of exclusion.

This constitutive distinction between the public and the private naturally leaves many grey areas where power relations are exercised, such as domestic violence, rape by incest, and many other abuses which often are ignored by the law. It also qualifies certain modes of emotional behaviour. For instance, emotions are tolerated and even encouraged in the private sphere, but need to be controlled in public. Objectivity in the form of emotional detachment is the public composure that Western culture approves of and actively enforces. The art of government or institutional politics is defined according to this standard. Explosive displays of emotions, rage, wrath, and anger are condemned and instead rational debate, objective exchange of arguments, and consensus-seeking negotiations are preferred. Historically, women – like children, foreigners, non-nationals, and migrants – are deemed unfit for the exercise of political rationality. A great deal of the feminist struggle for the empowerment of women and minorities, therefore, has taken the form of a strong defence of women's ability to exercise the use of reason in all of its ramifications, including political agency (Lloyd, 1985).

Another feminist strategy has been the re-appraisal of grass-roots transformative political activism in opposition to institutional representative parliamentary politics. This militant approach has been the message of radical feminism, which opposes joyful acts of insurrection and selective civil disobedience to the dead seriousness of organized politics. However, throughout its long history, feminist activism has not been spared the criticism of Left wing revolutionary movements (Keohane, *et al.*, 1988). The dialogue between feminism and Marxism, on what exactly constitutes a revolutionary movement, has been of the highest historical significance, as is testified by the very early texts of Marxist-inspired radical feminist politics (Firestone, 1971; Mitchell, 1971; Rowbotham, 1972; de Beauvoir, 1990 [1949]). While the conceptual difference between the two regards the fact that feminism insisted on politicizing the private sphere, following the slogan 'the personal is the political', another crucial difference was caused precisely by the part that positive emotions were allowed to play. As the anarchist feminist Emma Goldman put it wittily: 'if I can't dance I don't want to be part of your revolution!' (Drinnon and Drinnon, 1975). Feminism stresses an embodied and embedded approach to political subjectivity and avoids both abstract perspectives and universalistic generalizations. I shall return to this in the section on epistemology below.

The second methodological remark about the emotions concerns the necessity to distinguish between an empowering or positive use of the emotions and a negative use. The earlier mentioned public rituals of mourning are an example of a productive display of emotions. However, there are other examples that can be considered as less positive, such as rage or excessive anger, up to the murderous violence of Dymrna's father. How to disengage political subjectivity from the more destructive elements of intense passions or emotions is the challenge that feminist ethics addresses (see point 1 above).

4 *Women, madness, and psychoanalysis*

The notion that women are mentally unstable and prone to mental disorders is deeply engrained in a patriarchal society that protects the interests and desires of men and is blind to the reality of sexual and other differences. Feminist literary critics pointed out the extent to which nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century literature is rife with examples of female lunatics. This prompted the popular image of 'the madwoman in the attic' (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979). The second feminist wave was vocal in denouncing the social construction of female insanity as the effect of structural social oppression and sustained discrimination (Chessler, 1972; Millett, 1973). A younger generation of artists and writers, who were affected by feminism, addressed explicitly the theme of mental pathology, depression, self-destruction, and even suicide (Plath, 1965; Arbus, 1972; Millett, 1976).

The bulk of feminist critics concentrated their attacks on the medical institutions of psychiatry and mental health. In a classical text called *For Her Own Good*, Ehrenreich and English (1979) analyze the part played by clinical psychiatry in literally driving women crazy. Foucault's work on the parallel histories of madness and scientific rationality (1965) confirms and supports feminist scholarship. This is where feminist critics develop an interesting but also controversial relationship to the movement of thought that is most openly critical of clinical psychiatry, that is to say, psychoanalysis.

In the third millennium, surrounded as we are by a popular culture that trivializes Freud's explorations of the unconscious through television series such as *The Sopranos* and films such as *Analyze This*, it may be difficult to remember just how radical and woman-friendly Freud's intervention in clinical practice was at the turn of the last century. Psychoanalysis effectuates a fundamental denaturalization of both madness and human sexuality, by introducing a subtler understanding of the cause of neurotic behaviour – constituted by the standard result of successful socialization processes. Femininity and masculinity are the pillars of one's social identity (Freud, 1933b), but femininity bears the brunt of cultural norms and values. Literally, culture is negotiated on the bodies of women. As a result, psychoanalysis argues that all sexed and gendered identities, but the female in particular, are fraught with tensions and contradictions. Freud introduces an ethics of respect for the complexity of mental life and defends the notion that the subject is split by his/her unconscious structures. This means that an individual does not coincide with his/her rational consciousness, but rather is driven by unconscious drives and desires. Psychoanalysis singles out desire as the fundamental human passion and emotion and develops special techniques to decode and interpret it.

Marxists and radical feminists of the second wave took objection to some of Freud's more traditional statements on penis-envy and castration. Simone de Beauvoir (1990 [1949]) famously dismissed psychoanalytic discourse as being too sexist. The debate shifted in the 1980s, as the works of Jacques Lacan were translated into English (Mitchell and Rose, 1984), updating Freud's psychoanalytic legacy and making it relevant to the twentieth century (Coward and Ellis, 1977; Turkle, 1978). In her agenda-setting intervention, Juliet Mitchell (1974) argues for a strong alliance between

feminism and psychoanalysis, in that both support transgressive desires and transformative practices. The generation of 1980s 'difference-minded' feminists (Eisenstein and Jardine, 1984) focuses on the issue of women's desire, on its embodied nature (Gallop, 1984; Grosz, 1989), and on its vulnerability (Brennan, 1989). The French school known as *écriture féminine* argues for radical sexual difference and the specificity of women's desire (Cixous, 1980; Kristeva, 1980; Irigaray, 1985). Object-relation psychoanalysis, as mentioned above, grounds its theory in social and political analysis of gender relations (Benjamin, 1990). By the end of the twentieth century, the long debate between feminism and psychoanalysis has become so intense and rich, as to fill a thick critical dictionary (Wright, 1992).

Because of the changing historical and social contexts, and in spite of the trivialization of psychoanalysis that I already commented on, psychoanalytic theory remains of the greatest relevance for our times. Mental distress, depression, stress, and pathological behaviour have not at all disappeared; it is just the symptoms that shifted. What sex-driven hysteria was in the nineteenth century, today is an epidemic of anorexia, bulimia, and eating disorders mediated by visual culture (Orbach, 1986, 1987). Neo-liberal societies have reverted to a callous and instrumental relationship to madness and mental instability. The use of officially prescribed psycho-pharmaceutical drugs such as Prozac and Ritalin has become standard medical practice, turning millions of women into official addicts. Instead of dismissing them in this way, they should be offered the therapies and frames of reference of psychoanalysis, now more than ever.

5 *Epistemology, or feminist knowledge claims*

Gender research is a way of producing alternative knowledge, both by bringing in a different agenda and by challenging the rules of knowledge production. The most basic feminist epistemological strategy consists in a double move. First, visibility and recognition is granted to the women of ideas whose contribution is usually neglected (Spender, 1983). Second, the accepted standards of scientific rationality are challenged (Harding and Hintikka, 1983; Lloyd, 1985), as well as mainstream scientific culture and the official administration of knowledge. This takes many forms: claims to specific women's ways of knowing (Irigaray, 1985; Hill Collins, 1990; Code, 1991) are matched by forceful defences of feminist theory's relevance for mainstream philosophy (Benhabib and Cornell, 1987; Braidotti, 1991; Nussbaum, 1999) and also epistemology (Fox-Keller, 1983; Harding, 1986;). From the mid-1980s, feminism intersects with postmodernism (Nicholson, 1990) and debates are focused on the politics of epistemological practice, in other words, on power and knowledge (Foucault, 1977; Haraway, 1988).

To continue the discussion about the emotions as a case in point, feminist theory argues that the emotional or affective elements can create structures of knowledge, political action, and subjectivity. This is because lived experience and the empirical evidence of women's and other marginals' lives are re-appraised, not only as evidence of a state of injustice or exclusion (negative moment), but also as untapped sources of knowledge claims by the excluded others (positive moment). As is argued by Harding

(1987), the claim about the epistemological value of the view from below or the margins is crucial to the main school of feminist epistemology, namely standpoint theory. The point of stressing the positive and empowering value of the views from the margins is twofold: first it deconstructs the vision of groups that are socially marginal as mere victims. By stressing the constructive contribution that the marginal subjects make to society, standpoint feminist theory also redresses the structural injustice of so much unpaid labour and unrecognized work. Women of colour had denounced this in early feminist classics such as *This Bridge Called My Back* (Moraga and Anzaldúa, 1981).

A crucial element of feminist knowledge claims is the positive role it attributes to creativity, the emotions, and especially the imagination. This faith in the creative power of critical thought forms an overt contrast to the standards of scientific reason, which banks on objectivity, rationality, and protocols of logical thinking. Another related opposition is that which is between myth making and the imaginative thinking that goes with figuration, in opposition to rationality as sterile objectivity. What counts as objectivity becomes the bone of contention in feminist theories of knowledge since the 1980s. A related aspect of this feminist style of knowledge production is an unusual degree of interest in alternative cosmologies and worldviews, as an alternative to teleological thinking in the theological tradition (Bryld and Lykke, 2000). Joan Kelly (1979) refers to this aspect of gender research in terms of the double-edge vision of feminist theory, which combines critique and creation with equal ease. De Lauretis (1990) picks up this point in defining feminist theory as ex-centric, that is, off-centre in relation to mainstream scientific thought; she also expands feminist theory in a Foucauldian direction (de Lauretis, 1986a).

The methodological implications of this approach are rich and important and concern the practice of interdisciplinarity. To make sense of the interdisciplinary character of gender research, it is important to keep in mind my opening remarks about the method of the politics of locations in relation to the use of figurations. A scholar's primary location is her/his discipline. Disciplines are also the organizing units of scientific research: they structure academic life in that they design the shape of university departments and examination boards, scholarly journals, and peer-review committees. It is consequently important for gender researchers to develop a genealogical perspective on their own discipline by studying its historical developments and epistemological assumptions, so as to be able to understand their own location.

The same issue of belonging and of civil disobedience applies to a feminist scholar's relationship to her/his discipline, as they do to women's access to citizenship. Flexible approaches should be encouraged, ranging from nomadic transitions to flows of exile, bitter divorces, and lingering attraction. Gender research entertains a dynamic, ongoing, and hence unresolved relationship to mainstream academic disciplines. Feminist scholars have to be undutiful daughters.

The situation looks different, however, if a scholar has from the start been trained in new, inter-disciplinary areas of study. Probably the most relevant of these, at least in the humanities, is the field of cultural studies. This field stems from classical feminist literary theory (Miller, 1985; Showalter, 1986) and has evolved into a wide-ranging

tool for the analysis of cultural practice, combining sociological methods (Franklin, *et al.*, 1991) with cutting-edge post-structuralist theory (de Lauretis, 1986b). More recently, cultural studies has developed stronger ties to feminist science studies (Franklin, *et al.*, 2000).

The location in disciplines is different for gender scholars who emerge from such an interdisciplinary background. In these cases, doing gender is likely to provide a sharper navigational tool and may act as a zoom lens that focuses the researcher more precisely onto her/his research project. In this respect, interdisciplinary gender research provides its own foundation and mutates into a trans-disciplinary practice that relies on feminist epistemologies for its own justification. A question about style is formulated in this process, not as a rhetorical device, but rather as a rigorous interrogation of the practice of locations, the specific modes of expression that are suitable for them, and the forms of accountability they require. Integrating form and content, while avoiding jargon, are key elements in experimenting with an adequate feminist epistemological style.

Conclusion

The rich and thought-inspiring analysis of an archetypical warrior such as Dympna brings into clear focus what I consider the key features of feminist theory and gender analysis. The first one is the commitment to strike a productive balance between the necessary and often painful recognition of a negative situation – pain, violence, marginality, exclusion, and injustice – on the one hand, and the joyful creation of empowering alternatives on the other. Being a philosopher by training, I translate this into the balance between negativity and affirmation, with a strong preference for the latter.

The quest for affirmative empowerment requires the transcendence of the negative, that is to say the rejection of revengeful violence and the interruption of the chain of repetition of negative experiences and emotions. This is the transformative edge of the feminist knowledge project, of its politics, and its ethical passions. Although it is grounded in the historical position of women, lunatics, marginal, natives, refugees, immigrants, and excluded others, it has a much broader appeal and reach. I have argued that the transformation of the negative into life-affirming alternatives, which not only empower the marginal but also change the structures of the social order, is the key to the politics of Human Rights in the third millennium. As such, it is instrumental to the creation of sustainable futures (Braidotti, 2006).

The second and last but not least feature is the simple fact that Dympna is *my* figuration. The personal autobiographical aspect is very important to the theoretical analysis I am offering here. That statuette, after all, does stand on my writing desk and fulfils an important purpose in the general economy of my writing. In some ways it structures my writing environment by playing a productive function in my imaginary, much as it structures the lines of arguments in this essay. Dympna is associated with events in my private life – a relationship and a personal loss, as I stated at the start of this chapter – thus, she is emotionally very laden and dear to me. The choice of this

figuration expresses my preference for the imagination, for the power of thinking in images and figurations, which allow for personal feelings but also produce rigorous knowledge because and not in spite of the affective elements. Dympna also symbolizes the technique I cherish – of thinking back through the women in history and the women in our lives (Woolf, 1978 [1936; 1938]; Walker, 1984). I am not sure I believe that Dympna actually watches over me, but she does intrigue me. The day I was honoured with the royal award of a knighthood I had to think back to Dympna. Specifically, I thought of the way her hand rests on that down-turned sword, with a touch of nonchalance, the suggestion of fatigue, but also the unmistakable message that *this* woman may be hurt, but she is not alone, nor is she desperate, although she is desperately seeking justice.

Notes

- 1 With thanks to Jef Bal, historian and Gheel city guide.

Questions for further research

- 1 Simone de Beauvoir and Kate Millet can be seen to represent equality feminism. Explain what thinking equality involves by means of at least two examples from contemporary (popular) culture and society.
- 2 Patricia Hill Collins and Luce Irigaray can be seen to represent difference feminism. Explain what thinking difference involves by means of at least two examples from contemporary (popular) culture and society.
- 3 What scholarly and intellectual criteria can be deployed in demonstrating and evaluating the relevance of research by previous generation feminists? Illustrate your answer with examples from this book.
- 4 Use the approach of thinking equality as a method for analyzing a myth, text, or cultural representation relevant in your particular study programme. Refer as best as you can to the chapters in this book and include a copy of the image or material you are analyzing in your paper.
- 5 Thinking difference can be used to argue for the need for creating alternative myth formations and alternative representations. Try and do this and illustrate your argument with examples retrieved from the net.
- 6 A contemporary social or cultural phenomenon can be understood in light of the psycho-analytical approach – think of artefacts such as films or social problems such as eating disorders. Try and achieve such an understanding in making use of Chapters 11 and 12 and Part II of this book.