

Mimicking Subjection to *the Name- of- the -Father* in Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming*

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Abstract

This paper embraces the postulation that feminine sexuality and physicality displays its movement in its own distinct space of manifestation. Female corporality lives outside the predominant ideological representations of patriarchy which can no longer impose their structures or prove their efficiency. In Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming* femininity involves in mimicry. Imitation of the conventional roles women occupy in the politics of masculinity implies mimicking subordination to *the Name-of-the-Father*. Paradoxically, this type of imitation allows women to disrupt and display the fabricated nature of the ideological apparatus in which they operate.

Keywords: *femininity, masculinity, patriarchy, sexuality, the Name-of-the-Father*

The acceptance and recognition of *the Name-of-the-Father*, as the master signifier of the phallic order, leads to the internalization of the patriarchal Law and of its performative force. Its system of representations and conventions prescribes and prohibits to the point of modulating desires and of enabling access to and agency in the social world of communication and of interpersonal relationships. Operating according to clear-cut oppositions, this normative body of social laws and cultural directives legalizes subject positions of presence and absence, of authority and submission, activity and passivity, of masculinity and femininity.

Women's anatomical deprivation or fault causes their subjection to men's desires and discourse:

While her body finds itself thus eroticized, and called to a double movement of exhibition and of chaste retreat in order to stimulate the drives of the "subject," her sexual organ represents *the horror of nothing to see*. A defect in this of systematics representation and desire. [...] And if woman is asked to sustain, to revive, man's desire, the request neglects to spell out what it implies as to the value of her own desire. A desire of which she is not aware, moreover, at least not explicitly. But one whose force and continuity are capable of nurturing repeatedly and at length all the masquerades of "femininity" that are expected of her (Irigaray, 1985 b, 26-27).

This state of dependency establishes man's words as the absolute prerogative, what Lacan coined *the Law*, and reduces women to the mere status of objects of male contemplation and pleasure. Thus, women's desire of the phallus, as a mirage of the impossible perfection and wholeness of which they are frustrated, guarantees their place and position in the symbolic phallogocentric order where they act as the opposite or supplement of men, as objects to be used and consumed:

For woman is traditionally a use-value for man, an exchange value among men; in other words, a commodity. As such, she remains the guardian of material substance, whose price will be established, in terms of the standard of their work and of their need/desire, by "subjects": workers, merchants, consumers. Women are marked phallicly by their fathers, husbands, procurers. And this branding determines their value in sexual commerce. Woman is never anything but the locus of a more or less competitive exchange between two men, including the competition or the possession of mother earth (Irigaray, 1985 b, 31-32).

Because women lack the physical organ which confers phallic power upon men, their expectations and desires gain significance only as far as they validate men's master postulations and support them in satisfying their drives and fantasies. Luce Irigaray fully embraces the perspective according to which women can turn this lack, absence into an advantage.

The closed and limited *phallogocentric* sphere of signification excludes the feminine from representation, as femininity embodies the impossibility of being marked or denoted. Women are not an *Other* whose antagonisms delineate a subject in its masculinity, but an absence, something which is not marked within the hegemonic discourse. Neither the negation, nor the *Other* of the masculine subject, women are situated outside the male matrix of constructions and references, a difference which cannot be named or categorised. As the uncategorisable and the unnameable, women are silenced, they are denied access to discourse and action.

In its unmarked absence, feminine sexuality situates itself outside men's system of representations. Due to its resistance to any adequate, regulatory definitions, due to its existence outside the substantive economy of the masculine, femininity becomes a threat to the mastery of the phallus. The phallogocentric economy of sexuality encourages women's subjugation and negative categorization as the object of men's desires:

If commodities could speak, they might possibly give an opinion about their price, about whether they consider their status just, or about the dealings of their owners. [...]The "value" of the commodities in these more or less legal transactions is certainly crucial, but the commodities themselves have nothing to ask or say, no desire or need to express, no sale or purchase to make on their own account (Irigaray, 1985 a, 118).

Thus, the female body is frequently marked as a site of disease, of abnormal eroticism and uncontrolled desires, a place where the failure to conform the norms can generate disorder.

Men fear that masculinity can be defeated by the unsettling pleasures of the female body. It is common practice among men to devalue women as morally corrupt and lascivious, as whores, as bearers of disruptive bodily desires threatening the stability of the masculine system of beliefs. When feminine pleasure or desire is strongly and independently voiced or articulated, claiming its own space of manifestation, women situate themselves beyond the regulation of the paternal Law, beyond speech or ideology.

In *The Homecoming* Ruth, the only female figure present in the play, openly explores her sexuality and physicality in order to perform a paradoxical and all the more challenging movement: she operates both in and out of the symbolic order of *the Name-of-the-Father*. She deliberately mimics and accepts the role patriarchy assigns to women, that of mother/whore, while simultaneously adopting the attributes of *the symbolic Father*. Appropriating the masculine position and discourse, she exercises

phallic power, only to show that feminine body operates outside the representational codes of patriarchy and that *the Name- of- the- Father* is just a fabrication, a construct.

The master codes of patriarchal representations are questioned and subverted through a woman who easily and readily accepts to become the maternal and sexual provider of the needs of a group of aggressive and misogynist men. Taking into account her seemingly passive recognition of and submission to the patriarchal fantasies and wishes, Ruth confirms the mother/whore stereotype and the classification of women as commodities to be exploited by men. She acts as all women are expected to do, legitimising the masculine structures and narratives.

On the other hand, by agreeing to satisfy men's desires and to alleviate their frustrations, Ruth surprisingly proclaims her self-determination and men's own vulnerability. She proves that the predominant values and postures reproduced by the patriarchal economy are empty ideological formations, since the representational codings through their illusory and dream-like, mythical structures remain distinct from an individual's actual and substantial existence. Rather than attacking or contesting patriarchy, Ruth chooses to dismantle this myth in a more intelligent and secure way. She confirms men's manufactured, illusory dominance, opposing no resistance to the stereotypical role they build for her, only to bring to the fore women's operational independence and agency. Femininity comes to occupy the medium of solid action and factual operation, while men remain caught in a fictional web of ineffectual passivity, waiting for their desires to be confirmed and satisfied by women.

By acting at the ritualistic level of *the Name- of- the- Father*, Ruth subordinates herself to male contemplation and perversion, only to crush the mythical image constructed around her and thus to call attention to women's vitalistic existence, beyond and above conventions and rituals. Ruth manages to establish herself as a real woman and to articulate her independent physical, concrete existence outside any abstraction propagated by men:

Her [Ruth's] placement in the middle of the primitive male menage of *The Homecoming* is anachronistic. Indeed, the world of these men regresses to obsolete, even primitive ideas, which determine the spatio-temporal setting and the mood of the play. In this world Ruth is simply a misfit. Yet, she is there, an immovable rock, asserting her own existence and challenging the prevailing male ideology in words and in deeds (Sakellaridou, 1988, 115).

Brought by her husband, Teddy, to his parental home in London, Ruth faces a strongly patriarchal medium of male abuse and sexual demands. Although apparently validating male centrality and empowerment, Ruth skillfully manages to extricate herself from the grip of the various forms of masculine power, by acting both at the level of speech and of physical action. Consequently, she refuses to submit to the male characters' discursive manipulation and control of female mobility. As if, trying to mask his insecurity, Teddy, constantly attempts to place restrictions on Ruth's physical, concrete movement, to fix her within spatial boundaries, where he can dictate her moves and thus manipulate her subject position or identity. His failure in preventing Ruth from leaving the house clearly reveals that his own sense of being is dependent upon her presence, that he needs femininity to legitimise his power. Men can perform their mastery only when women willfully and unquestionably let their presence or absence, appearance or nonappearance be staged by their husbands/fathers. Ruth migrates, moves out of the strict regulation of patriarchy:

Ruth: I think I'll have a breath of air.
Teddy: Air? (*Pause*) What do you mean?
Ruth (standing): Just a stroll.
Teddy: At this time of night? But we've ... only just got here. We've got to go to bed.
Ruth: I just feel like some air.
Teddy: But I'm going to bed.
Ruth: That's all right.
Teddy: But what am I going to do? (*Pause*) The last thing I want is a breath of air. Why do you want a breath of air?
Ruth: I just do.
Teddy: But it's late. ... I'm not going to bed without you
Ruth: I won't be long. (*She goes out of the front door. Teddy goes to the window, peers out after her, half turns from the window, stands, suddenly chews his knuckles.*) (*The Homecoming*, 31-32).

Women hold a very important role within patriarchy, as they are the ones who, in their acceptance and subjection, ensure the continuity and the orderly transmission of the ideology, of the precepts and laws systematised as *the Name- of- the- Father*. It is the mother/wife who, by admitting the validity of the patriarchal culture, invests the figure of the father/husband with the necessary discursive and performative authority and ensures the recognition of his status as such. The existence and reproduction of the patriarchal attitudes and structures depend on the mother/wife performing her expected role, acknowledging her submission. She is the one that gives value, the value of the supreme Law, to man's discourse and acts. "The father is present only through his law, which is speech, and only in so far as his speech is recognized by the mother does it take on the value of law" (Lacan, 83).

The Homecoming's system of patriarchy has been disturbed in its stability and universality by the maternal figure's act of adultery. This act meant a refusal on the mother's part to take up the assigned subject position, that of a guarantor, agent of ideological transmission, and a threat to the passing on of the codes of the dominant cultural order. Women can resist internalising the codes defining their position within patriarchy and, thus, they can deny their husbands/fathers the possibility to exercise cultural and social mastery and to act as representatives of the culturally privileged attributes. Recognising man's word as law, offering it legitimacy, associating his figure with the power of the phallus, the woman proclaims her subjection and the subordination of her own desires to *the Name- of- the- Father*, the paternal deprivations and restrictions.

The Name- of- the- Father becomes a cultural myth, a contingently fabricated texture, furthermore transforming female and masculine conventional roles into abstract generalizations liable to shatter into pieces when confronted with the existing reality. Women's refusal to play their part, to satisfy and propel men's desires reveals that lack, deficiency is no longer an inherent feature of femininity, of female body, but rather of the patriarchal ideological structure that has failed to transform women into a receptacle for its values. Ruth chooses to act men's fantasies and thus to demolish the premises of patriarchy from within patriarchy itself, showing that women themselves can appropriate phallic power. She manages to subjugate men by exploring their desires and by drawing attention to her sexually charged nature.

Denied legitimacy by his adulterous wife, Max, the paternal figure, is able to exercise the power of the masculine gaze only on fillies and not on real women, which actually reduces him to an ineffectual, parodic representative of the masculine power:

I had an instinctive understanding of animalsAnd not only the colts but the fillies. Because the fillies are more highly strung than the colts, they're more unreliable....But I was always able to tell a good filly by one particular trick. I'd look her in the eye...I'd stand in front of her and look her straight in the eye, it was a kind of hypnotism, and by the look deep down in her eye I could tell whether she was a stayer or not (*The Homecoming*, 18).

Finally, Max's pretensions to mastery are undermined by rendering it in clichéistic feminine terms, until he comes to identify himself, through a process of role reversal, with the female role and the reproductive attributes assigned to it by patriarchy: "Don't talk to me about the pain of childbirth- I suffered the pain, I've still got the pangs- when I give a little cough my back collapses." (*The Homecoming*, 24) Moreover men fear that the boundaries articulated by the masculine system, delimiting and instituting patriarchal authority, may be transgressed and demolished by women, through their totally wrong and abnormal gestures. Men fear feminine contamination and pollution, are alarmed at the prospect that their inflexible and rigid parameters may be invaded and polluted by a defiling female nature, disruptive and offensive in its deviations from the right path of action. They are so terrified by this perspective and in their excessive representations of women they play out all conventions from the repertory of patriarchy. Patriarchy cannot control or subdue women, particularly those women displaying their unruly sexuality:

Who asked you to bring dirty tarts into this house?...We've had a smelly scrubber in my house all night. We've had a stinking-pox ridden slut in my house all night. I haven't seen the bitch for six years, he comes home without a word, he brings a filthy scrubber off the street, he shacks up in my house! ... I've never had a whore under this roof before. Ever since your mother died. My word of honour. ... They come back from America, they bring the slopbucket with them. They bring the bedpan with them....Take that disease away from me. Get her away from me (*The Homecoming*, 49-50).

One of Max's sons, Lenny, declares his mastery over women, but his self-assumed authoritative image, just like the entire code of masculinity, is nothing but a linguistic construction, unparalleled by any concrete manifestation of power, as he actually proves incapable of dominating Ruth. In order to reposition women on the marginal space patriarchy assigns them, Lenny's narratives relate different acts of violence and brutality directed against *diseased* women whose demands are not given credit. Women are silenced and reduced to unthreatening, negative representations that are not allowed to contaminate the masculine world with their unreasonable proposals. But Lenny's self-acclaimed mechanisms of control are valid only at the discursive level, without becoming functional in reality. His power is only a form of narrative enactment and performance, built out of the pre-established and pre-existing representations:

Lenny: One night, not too long ago, one night down by the docks, I was standing alone under an arch....when a certain lady came up to me and made me a certain proposal. This lady had been searching for me for days.Well, this proposal wasn't entirely out of order and normally I would have subscribed to it. ...The only trouble was she was falling apart with the pox...Well, this lady was very insistent and started taking liberties with me down under this arch, liberties which by any criterion I couldn't be expected to tolerate...so I clumped her one. It was on my mind at the time to do away with her, you know, to kill her, and the fact is, that as killings go, it would have been a simple matter, nothing to it...But ...in the end I thought...Aaah, why go to all the bother...you know, getting rid of the corpse and all that, getting yourself into a state of tension. So I just gave her another belt in the nose and a couple of turns of the boot and sort of left it at that.

Ruth: How did you know she was diseased?

Lenny: How did I know? (Pause) I decided she was. (Silence) (The Homecoming, 38-39).

Ruth mimics the patriarchal representations of women just to disparage them as misconstructions and to outline that masculine power is nothing but a product, an effect of representational practices and conventional interpretations. Drawing attention to her sexuality which becomes menacing and disconcerting, Ruth challenges and voids Lenny's professed posture of domination. Why does Ruth mimic the female image men themselves produce in their own narratives? Why does she enact the masculine constructions of female sexuality? Why does she confront men with their own representations? Rather than being an act of validation, this is clearly a gesture of exposing men's incapacity of exerting power beyond the narrative. Men cannot cope with femininity acclaiming aloud its sexual desires:

Lenny: Just give me the glass.

Ruth: No. (Pause)

Lenny: I'll take it, then.

Ruth: If you take the glass....I'll take you. (Pause)

Lenny: How about me taking the glass without you taking me?

Ruth: Why don't I just take you? (Pause)

Lenny: You're joking. (Pause)

She picks up the glass and lifts it towards him.

Ruth: Have a sip. Go on. Have a sip from my glass. He is still. Sit on my lap. Take a long cool sip. She pats her lap. Pause. She stands, moves to him with the glass. Put your head back and open your mouth. ... Lie on the floor. Go on. I'll pour it down your throat. (The Homecoming, 41-42).

In becoming body-centered and in constantly drawing attention to her bodily motions, to the unlimited pleasure she gains from her physical independence and wholeness, Ruth escapes the traditional responses to women, the limited constructions of feminine identity, those rigid attitudes of either worshipping submissive women or denigrating the uncooperative ones. Ruth breaks into men's conversations and senses the inutility of their plunging either in abstract issues or in self-devised brutality. As these are men's predominant strategies of achieving and glorifying their power, Ruth calls men back to the palpable and corporeal reality. She invites men, caught in their fanciful speculations, to take into consideration her physical existence as a manifestation of vitality and concreteness. She articulates life, they articulate myth:

Look at me. I move my leg. That's all it is.... But I wear..underwear...which moves with me...it captures your attention. Perhaps you misinterpret. The action is simple. It's a leg ...moving. My lips move. Why don't you restrict...your observations to that? Perhaps the fact that they move is more significant ...than the words which come through them (The Homecoming, 60-61).

Ruth highlights the capacity of the female body to run away from the confinements of the masculine attempts to produce an adequate and passive image of femininity, one that will conceal its intimidating avowals. Men project ideal subject positions which, in their regulatory practices, suppress and coerce femininity. Masculinity depends on codes and symbols, on their reification, whereas femininity asserts its self-sufficiency and self-materialisation. In the end, Ruth takes centre-stage in Max's chair, the seat of domestic power, while the male figures of the play kneel at her feet. Stability gives way to multiplicity, to the inappropriate and estranged effusions of female eroticism and carnality. Ideology proves to be inefficient when faced with unclassifiable and unpredictable sexuality. Ruth is the nucleus around which men move

and the embodiment of men's erotic fantasies. She imitates appropriate behaviour and in her apparently unthreatening and marginalised position she shows that the world of men stages its own authorisation, without being able to transfer its power into practice, into the extra-narrative dimension:

Ruth mimics and inverts patriarchal systems so as to create a space for her feminine difference and desire.... The play does not create a pristine feminist space above and beyond the patriarchal fray, nor does it objectify a woman within such a system. (...)With the arrival of Ruth, the play relentlessly exposes the illusions the men foster in this male wasteland. Ruth does not simply take control, but she shatters the glass of female objectification She functions as "a tick in the night", causing trouble in the commonplace phallic economy (Hall, 1993, 62-66).

Ruth articulates a different kind of female ideology, one that remains indifferent to the patriarchal gestures of configuring tolerable and acceptable images of female sexuality. She constantly draws attention to each crossing and uncrossing of her legs, to her moving lips, to all her sexually charged body parts and having accomplished her maternal and sexual role, she takes command of the male characters, annihilating their power positions.

During the final contractual scene of the play Ruth accepts to become the prostitute of the family and thus to secure men's needs. She seemingly approves and gives legitimacy to men's economy of signification. But in this scene, although Ruth consents to and engages in her role as commodity, she adopts the authoritative posture of patriarchal enunciation. Mimicry functions at two ideological levels. Imposing her own terms of the exchange, foregrounding her own wishes, Ruth manipulates the legal and economic terms of discourse which are presumed to be the property of masculinity. She is aware of her status as an object to be circulated, valorised and exchanged by men, but at the same time through her direct participation in the elaboration of the exchange, she disrupts the process of patriarchal power, showing that women themselves can seize and exercise it. Categorisations and representations are suspended. They are merely instrumental in ensuring the ideological persistence of the order of *the Name-of-the-Father*. The commodity is no longer voiceless and as agent of exchange, prescribing and dictating the conditions of her exploitation, Ruth determines an inversion and redistribution of power structures and values. Men are economically dependent upon her, men are subject to her own desires and proclamations:

Ruth: I would want at least three rooms and a bathroom. ... I'd want a dressing-room, a rest-room, and a bedroom. ... A personal maid You'd supply my wardrobe, of course? ... I'd need an awful lot. Otherwise I wouldn't be content. ... I would naturally want to draw up an inventory of everything I would need, which would require your signatures in the presence of witnesses.

Lenny: Naturally.

Ruth: All aspects of the agreement and conditions of employment would have to be clarified to our mutual satisfaction before we finalise the contract.

Lenny: Of course. (*The Homecoming*, 84-85).

Mimicking desirable and acceptable femininity, women contest that in which they stage their roles, pleading from an inner and outer position for absence of objectification and identification.

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Mimarea supunerii față de *Numele Tatălui* în piesa *Întoarcerea acasă* de Harold Pinter

Rezumat

Articol îmbrățișează teoria potrivit căreia sexualitatea feminină acționează într-un spațiu distinct de manifestare. Corporalitatea feminină există în afara reprezentărilor predominante ale unei societăți de tip patriarhat, care nu își mai pot impune structurile și nu își mai pot dovedi eficiența. În piesa *Întoarcerea acasă*, feminitatea se angajează în mimetism: se produce o imitare a rolurilor convenționale pe care femeile le dețin în politica masculinității, imitarea subordonării față de sistemul legitim al *Numelui Tatălui*. Paradoxal, acest tip de imitare le permite femeilor să perturbe și să expună natura artificială a aparatului ideologic în care acționează.