



# The seduction of feminist theory

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## Abstract

The death of Jean Baudrillard in 2007 brought about a resurgence of feminist scholarship on his work. But in all recent feminist scholarship on Baudrillard, save for Victoria Grace's *Baudrillard's Challenge: A Feminist Reading* (2000), feminists focus on Baudrillard's later theory of simulation, forestalling any reconsideration of his earlier text *Seduction* (1979). In this article I argue that a theory of seduction facilitates the unveiling of a hitherto unnoticed strain of feminist writing that proposes an ongoing challenge to masculine power and politics. This strategy of seduction is one that can be traced through a history of modern feminism, from Joan Rivière's concept of 'womanliness' in 'Womanliness as Masquerade' to Hélène Cixous's *écriture féminine* in 'The Laugh of the Medusa' to Virginia Woolf's 'mulberry tree' in *Three Guineas*.

## Keywords

Hélène Cixous, Jean Baudrillard, Joan Rivière, seduction, Victoria Grace, Virginia Woolf

Jean Baudrillard has long been dismissed by feminists, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, not only as anti-feminist but also, by implication as sexist, racist, and misogynist. Many feminists accuse Baudrillard of denying women access to the masculine realm of production by arguing that the feminine power of seduction can trump masculine ideology. Rebecca Schneider, for example argues that the timing of Baudrillard's theory of seduction is significant because it occurred just as women and people of colour were beginning to gain access to the spheres of production: 'Baudrillard might be read as representative of an anxiety born of women's entry into the realms of production' (1997: 191). This suspicion might be turned around to ask why feminists reject new theories that challenge them to rethink assumptions about 'the realms of production'. The production model as the sole means of empowerment is at the heart of Baudrillard's critique, not women per se.<sup>1</sup>

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And while the twenty-first century ushered in a feminist revaluation of Baudrillard's work, many still argue that the work of feminism and Baudrillard's theory of seduction are incompatible. The claim of incongruity between feminist theory and a theory of seduction stems from a belief that feminists must rely on productive strategies, using terms such as equality and difference, to empower women. To conceptualise all feminist theory in this way misses the fact that many canonical feminist texts challenge the use of productive terminologies in discussions of their work.

In her analysis of contemporary feminist theory and Baudrillard, *Baudrillard's Challenge: A Feminist Reading* (2000), Victoria Grace challenges the feminist use of terms such as desire, power, identity, equality, and difference arguing that these terms perpetuate structures used to oppress and exclude women. For Grace, as for Baudrillard, feminists should not jockey for inclusion in an inherently unjust system, but rather challenge and work to subvert its foundations. Both Grace and Baudrillard maintain that arguing for a feminine difference, as Luce Irigaray does, perpetuates a notion calculated to keep women in a subservient position. Grace claims that:

These concerns and foci of analysis and deconstruction are undeniably driven by an assumption of the inevitability of the economic (needs, production, value), the inevitability of the law (the bar that structures identity/difference, subject/object), even taking into account the attempts at deconstruction and re-writing from a position of a different 'difference,' and of the inevitability of power. There is no seduction here. (2000: 188)

According to Grace, many feminists, including Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway, and Judith Butler, do not theorise the political foundations for productive ideologies thereby perpetuating their inherent binaries. For Grace, Baudrillard becomes critical for feminism to the extent that his theory of seduction provides tools to challenge and overturn the logic and supremacy of productive ideology. While feminists see a positive focus for their work in the logic of the production model, in Baudrillard's estimation all ideology is Eurocentric and thus contains hidden colonialist imperatives.<sup>2</sup> Grace agrees with Baudrillard that unless feminists challenge productive ideology, we risk preserving its hierarchical foundations.

While Grace presents an important and timely analysis of Baudrillard and contemporary feminism, I challenge her claim that 'there is no seduction here'. I agree that Baudrillard's theory of seduction is crucial for feminism in that it presents a challenge to the value-laden productivist discourse that Grace finds perpetuated in contemporary feminist theory. However, I argue that the next step in assessing the possibilities of Baudrillard's work for feminist theory is to recognise those feminists who do employ a strategy of seduction in Baudrillard's sense of the term. Where Grace (2000: 5) finds no feminist whose standpoint comes close to that of Baudrillard, I highlight several feminists who can be read as taking precisely the position called for by both Grace and Baudrillard. By limiting her analysis to contemporary feminists, Grace obscures Baudrillard's mention of British feminist

Joan Rivière's essay, 'Womanliness as Masquerade' (1929). Taking Baudrillard's reference to Rivière into account allows for the elucidation of an historical strain of seduction in feminism that I argue can be traced from early feminists, such as Virginia Woolf, to more contemporary feminists, such as Hélène Cixous. Explicit references to Baudrillard's theory are unnecessary to the recognition of seduction in feminist writing – what is required is a close attention to language. Naming Baudrillard's theory of seduction as a new concept for feminism allows us to see its contours in feminist writing, and to reveal it as a strategy used to overturn the logic of production. Grace suggests that most feminists reject Baudrillard's theory on the basis of the traditional definition of seduction: 'The word "seduction" in the Anglo-American context, is resolutely associated with a kind of predatory male behavior bent on conquest [...] or alternatively a female sexual behavior designed to turn the male on his path toward evil and his downfall' (2000: 140).<sup>3</sup> However, it seems precipitous to assume with Grace that Baudrillard's use of the term is 'precisely in opposition to, and a process of critique of, these accepted readings' (2000: 142). Although I agree that Baudrillard critiques its traditional literary definition, the fact that he chooses to use the term *seduction* situates him in the context of both literary and psychoanalytic discourses on 'seduction'.

Placing Baudrillard in conversation with Shoshana Felman can show that contemporary feminist readings of, for example, *Don Juan* are not so different from Baudrillard's theory. Felman divorces seduction from terms like 'sexual manipulation' and 'predatory male behavior', situating it within a performative theory of language. For Felman, 'Don Juan is a myth of scandal precisely to the extent that it is the myth of violation; the violation not of women but of promises to them' (1983: 11). Locating *Don Juan*'s transgression not in his behaviour but in the structure of language, Felman argues that the words 'I promise' serve to violate the meaning attached to language. Baudrillard and Felman both argue that a cognitive (Baudrillard uses 'productive') view defines language as 'an instrument of knowledge, a means of knowing reality' (Felman, 1983: 27). But *Don Juan*'s seduction, says Felman, depends on the point that 'saying for him, is in no case tantamount to knowing, but rather doing' (1983: 27). That is, the words 'I promise' constitute a certain truth for the person who hears them, and also function as a performative act. When women seduced by *Don Juan* attribute meaning to his performative act, they err. By dismissing Baudrillard as merely critical of literary notions of seduction, Grace misses the opportunity to read Baudrillard's definition of seduction *in relation* to contemporaneous feminists like Felman. Baudrillard writes, 'To be seduced is to be turned from one's truth. To seduce is to lead the other from his/her truth' (1990: 81), precisely what *Don Juan* does.

Significantly for my argument, Grace concedes that literary engagement is in some ways necessary for understanding seduction, but acknowledges that, as a sociologist, she is limited in that regard. In her notes from the chapter subheading 'The Enjoyment of Poetics', she writes, 'I do not claim expertise in analyzing poetry [...] My intention is to present Baudrillard's reflections [...] to show how language might be traversed by seduction, by the symbolic' (2000: 200). This is a significant

concession given that seduction travels over and through language. She can, however, easily identify a productive reading:

A psychoanalytic 'reading' will lend itself [...] to the articulation or manifestation of the hidden meaning, silenced through each utterance. The assertion of meaning also has the function of silencing, within this framework, of repressing the unsaid, establishing a disjuncture through what is said and what is meant. (Grace, 2000: 179)

Grace's assertion that 'there is no seduction here' is, I argue, the result of a productive, analytic, and interpretive reading for meaning that functions (unintentionally) to repress feminism's seductive potential. Thus both Grace and Baudrillard employ the *same* practice of productive reading, with regard to feminist writing, that they accuse feminism of perpetuating. Reading feminist writing as literary writing, and thereby paying close attention to language, enables us to better understand the seductive potential of feminism. In order to recognise feminist writing as seductive, we must emphasise where and when seduction occurs in feminist discourse. I do not aspire to set up a hierarchy in which seductive discourse is good and productive discourse bad; rather, I want to show the ways in which seduction appears in and through productive discourse so that feminists can understand seduction as a tool used to challenge the truth claims of productive discourse. While we cannot codify seduction as a practice – to do so would be to relegate it to the productive realm – we can expose the ways in which systems of production contain their own foil in and through seduction. Awareness of how productive ideologies structure social systems and recycle oppressive value systems can decrease blind advocacy of productive language.

Although Baudrillard does not describe what a seductive reading practice would look like, in his analysis language is seductive (and revolutionary) to the extent that it employs 'reversible speech' (speech without the proclamation of truth), is not annexed by linguistic structures (language distributed as value through meaning and signification), and cannot be reduced to a unified argument. Seductive discourse is aware of the ideological laws regarding the signification of language, how words come to have meaning, and works to expose the artifice behind such signification, by using non-sense signifiers – words, images, and concepts emptied of significance and value. When describing the ways in which seduction functions in culture, Baudrillard turns to literary texts: in one example, he provides a reading of a fairy tale in which a boy finds a fairy and asks her to grant him wishes. The fairy agrees on the condition that the boy 'must never think of the color red in the fox's tail' (Baudrillard, 1990: 74). The boy replies, 'is that all?' (Baudrillard, 1990: 74). What happens next is what is, perhaps, most expected. The boy begins to see the colour red in the fox's tail everywhere he goes. Baudrillard writes that '[h]e becomes obsessed with this absurd, insignificant, but tenacious image, augmented by the spite that comes from not being able to rid himself of it. Not only do the fairy's promises not come true, but he loses his taste for life' (1990: 74). For Baudrillard, this story demonstrates the power of any signifier that is insignificant. The fairy is

aware of the fact that the boy's mind will be attracted to a place devoid of significant meaning. But, being unaware of the insignificance of the colour red in the fox's tail, the child is not on his guard. Had the fairy asked the boy not to engage in something serious or of significance, the boy would be more likely to succeed. According to the theory of seduction, it is meaningless signs that consume us much like the door marked 'this door leads to nowhere' (Baudrillard, 1990: 74). You feel compelled to open it just to see. What is crucial here is Baudrillard's analysis. For one could argue that the colour red in the fox's tail does have meaning in that the colour red contains both a signifier, red, and a signified, the colour that comes to mind. The colour red becomes emptied of meaning only in relation to the way Baudrillard reads the story. He urges the reader to recognise that absurd and artificial signs rule the world to a greater degree than logical ones because of social and political imperatives to create significant meaning.

To understand feminist writing as seductive would involve a reading strategy in which feminist theory is recognised as breaking down the coded system of production through the dissemination of meaning and value. A seductive reading practice highlights the presence of signs without referents, eclipsed signs, absurd and nonsensical signs in feminist writing, not to provide meaning for these signs but to explore the ways in which empty signs function in the text to reverse 'irreversible', or fixed, ideologies. I argue that where feminism empties words and gestures of meaning, as I show Woolf does with the mulberry tree in *Three Guineas* (1938), the reader is seduced. I further argue that when feminism employs neither productive value nor opposition to that value, as Rivière does with the masquerade, seduction comes into play. Seduction is not an either/or proposition but spaces in-between. For Baudrillard, seduction 'takes from discourse its sense and turns it from its truth' (1990: 55). I would argue that much feminist thought is dedicated to this very task and here I expose the textual politics whereby feminism works as seduction, what Grace defines as 'that movement that removes from the realm of the visible, that vaporizes identity, and is marked by ambivalence' (2000: 141). I believe that feminists have posed a radical challenge to productive ideology. Baudrillard provides a discourse that helps recognise seduction in feminist writing. I argue that, in order to discover similarities between Baudrillard's theory of seduction and the work of feminism, productive reading practices must be abandoned.

## The feminine: Joan Rivière and psychoanalysis

'Seduction' as a strategy did not originate with Baudrillard. Though he is, perhaps, the first to name it. A mythical origin story for the theory of seduction would begin with Rivière. Rivière's essay on womanliness is lacking from Grace's text, which is curious because, in defining seduction, Baudrillard specifically draws upon Rivière's work:

Joan Rivière in 'Feminité Sans Mascarade' makes a fundamental claim – one that contains within it all seduction: 'Whether femininity be authentic or superficial, it is

fundamentally the same thing.’ This can be said only of the feminine. The masculine, by contrast, possesses unfailing powers of discrimination and absolute criteria for pronouncing the truth. (1990: 10–11)

Baudrillard’s theory both draws on and is influenced by the work of Rivière, a feminist who gave unfailing proof of the subversive power of seduction in her own writing. Her thesis in ‘Womanliness as Masquerade’ is that ‘women who wish for masculinity’, which she defines as authority, independence, and power, ‘put on a mask of womanliness to avert anxiety and the retribution feared from men’ (Rivière, 1929: 303). Rivière describes a new kind of woman, one who successfully enters the professions while maintaining the feminine roles expected of her (in terms of dress, domesticity, and maternity). Many feminist scholars read Rivière literally and conclude that the female *masquerade* is meant to deflect male anxiety.<sup>4</sup> Hillary Robinson assumes that Rivière is expressing anxiety over her own precarious position as a female psychoanalyst in a male-dominated field, such that ‘woman has no choice but to respond to [phallogentric] structures by enacting the masquerade’ (2006: 33). Judith Butler defensively argues that Rivière uses psychoanalytic tools to mask female homosexuality: ‘Clearly, Riviere begins with set notions about what it is to display characteristics of one’s sex, and how it is that those plain characteristics are understood to express or reflect an ostensible sexual orientation’ (1990: 64, emphasis mine). Butler suggests that Rivière is *using* the tools of masculine thought as a means to enact and mask her own power to define. To read Rivière ‘seductively’, as Baudrillard’s comment invites us to do, would be to see ‘Womanliness as Masquerade’ not as an affirmation of masculine analytic thought, but as a radical challenge to productive thought.

What first has to be acknowledged is that masculinity and femininity are, in Rivière’s discourse, not simply the expression of sexuality but a ‘mode of life’ (1929: 304). ‘Sex’ is a means, a method, and an approach. When she argues that this ‘type’ of woman ‘appears to fulfill every requirement of complete feminine development’, in that she is an excellent housewife and mother, enjoys fashion, ‘maintains social life’, and also fulfils her professional duty as well as the ‘average man’, Rivière is not necessarily suggesting a sexual goal or finality in development (1929: 304). Rather, because ‘sex’ is understood as a mode or a means, ‘a complete feminine development’ suggests that this kind of woman has found an approach to life that allows her to be successful, a means to mobility. This approach is ‘feminine’ or what Rivière terms ‘womanly’, and, as we know from the title, the approach is defined as a ‘performance’, a practice of ‘masquerade’. Indispensable to Rivière’s analysis, and to my reading, is her assertion that this kind of woman defies classification. She is at once a type, and cannot be relegated to a type – a contradictory tension that remains unresolved throughout Rivière’s essay, as Rivière notes: ‘It is really a puzzle to know how to classify this type psychologically’ (1929: 304). This type of woman resists both meaning and definition. In order for productive discourses, like psychoanalysis, to maintain cultural, social, and medical authority, classification and meaning making are indispensable. Why, then, this hesitation?

I posit that Rivière is posing a challenge to fellow psychoanalyst Ernest Jones. In the introduction to 'Womanliness as Masquerade', she eulogises Jones for 'one of the most important contributions' to the subject of the sexual life of women (Rivière, 1929: 303).<sup>5</sup> Specifically, she says, '[a]s always, he throws great *light* on his material, with his peculiar gift of both *clarifying* the knowledge we had already and also adding to it fresh *observations* of his own' (1929: 303, emphasis mine). Especially significant is the repetitious use of production metaphors to describe Jones's gift for psychology. In *Forget Foucault*, Baudrillard explains that 'the original sense of "production" is not in fact that of material manufacture; rather, it means to render visible, to cause to appear and to be made to appear' (2007: 37). Jones's writing is productive, for Rivière, to the extent that he throws great light, he clarifies knowledge. And yet, even with his indispensable observations, Rivière suggests the presence of a type of woman who resists all of Jones's classifications. In Rivière's introductory notes on Jones's work, her attention and praise is a conscious performance of the masquerade. It is not so much that Rivière's masquerade highlights the precarious nature of her position of power as she explicitly challenges the position of power, the ability to know and to classify based on observation. If Rivière assumed an antagonistic approach to Jones, or if she deliberately established opposition to him, her opposition would instantiate another truth, and thus she would perpetuate productive power.

Rivière argues that her 'type' of woman is successful, has wonderful personal relationships, great sex, 'a high degree of adaptation to reality', and is in good social standing (1929: 304). Rivière's woman is neither socially lacking, nor does she represent a social reality that is static or unchanging. That Rivière describes her new woman as able to change, to fit new circumstances, and to survive also suggests that the reality experienced by this woman is not of her own making. She does not 'accept' reality, she adapts to it. Yet, according to Rivière, this 'stability was not as flawless as it appeared' (1929: 304). For example, in one case a woman, whose job consisted of propaganda, writing, and speaking, felt extreme anxiety after public performances. After a difficult speech, the woman sought confirmation from men through what Rivière calls 'veiled' 'flirting or coqueting', seeking compliments while resisting the suggestion that she was unequal to men (1929: 305). Rivière explains her difficulty in using Jones's classification for this woman as such:

In this she corresponded clearly to one type Ernest Jones sketched: his first group of homosexual women who, while taking no interest in other women, wish for 'recognition' of their masculinity from men and claim to be the equals of men, or in other words, to be men themselves. Her resentment, however, was not openly expressed; publicly she recognized her condition of womanhood. (1929: 305)

According to the classifications established by Jones, this woman would be a 'homosexual' because she sees herself as having power equal to men and wants recognition of her masculine power from men. However, this woman disrupts his

classifications at precisely the point where she would also have to look, dress, and act masculine; she neither asserts nor espouses masculinity.

For Rivière, femininity is the site where analytical power breaks down. The power relations in this story lie not just between the analyst and her patient but also between two analysts: the one (Jones) who classifies, and the other (Rivière) who clouds that classification. As the introduction to the essay makes clear, what psychoanalysis values about Jones's work is his classification of female types: power here exists as the doctor's ability to look at the patient and to classify her based on auditory (what she says) and visual (what she does) assessment. But a scientific discourse that looks to 'femininity' for evidence regarding sexuality is going to raise questions about that discourse's status as scientific. As a performance, femininity functions outside productive discourse. Rivière uses femininity to challenge the authority of productive discourse, its ability to create sexual meaning based on the performance of femininity. Rivière's discourse is seductive in that it challenges and does not offer an alternative, so defying any structure that claims to contain it through classification. Unlike Jones, Rivière does not establish another discourse of power (classification) to 'clarify the knowledge that we [have] already' (Rivière, 1929: 303). In concluding her essay, Rivière returns to her early assertion about the 'womanly' woman who, according to Jones's classification, fulfilled the requirements for 'complete feminine development' (1929: 304). In developing her argument, Rivière changes the apparent 'given' into a question: 'What is the essential nature of fully developed femininity?' (1929: 313). The question posed incorporates two words, 'essential' and 'nature', that are conspicuously lacking from Rivière's initial assertion that the womanly professional woman partially succumbed to classification. The suggestion here is strong, that analytic discourse posits, identifies, and names what is natural, and thus establishes a discourse of essentialism that is taken to be 'natural'. Rivière's answer is ironic and surprising because it does not indicate a truth about fully developed femininity, nor does it suggest that the answer is yet to be found – rather her answer turns the question back to reflect the male psychoanalyst: 'The concept of woman as a mask, behind which man suspects some hidden danger, throws a little light on the enigma' (1929: 313). That 'man' who succumbs to womanliness, the one Rivière refers to throughout her essay, is clearly Jones, the great psychoanalyst who 'throws great light on his material', who makes sense of things (Rivière, 1929: 303).<sup>6</sup> What is even more compelling about Rivière's answer is the breakdown of effective communication in this instance. That is, Rivière does not explicitly name Jones but invokes him through the word 'light'. The wording is more poetically ambiguous than productive analytic prose.<sup>7</sup> I do not mean to suggest that Rivière's essay is autobiographical or that she is *only* addressing Jones. Rather, Rivière is addressing psychoanalysis as a productive discourse. Analytic power is disrupted at the site where knowledge cannot be ascertained.

What Rivière describes is an almost compulsory psychoanalytic need to revisit femininity as the site, or sight, of some classifiable, qualitative, quantitative value-laden measurement. Because the temptation to classify is so deeply embedded in



Western culture, the possibilities for the disruption of power seem infinite. She disrupts power through performing ‘womanliness’ (Baudrillard’s ‘seduction’). Understanding Rivière’s essay as a performance that simultaneously eulogises, employs, and undermines the work of psychoanalysis emphasises Rivière’s continued relevance. Reading her through the lens of Baudrillard’s theory of seduction reveals why feminism is by definition in perpetual motion, constantly relocating itself to escape the desire for finalities that tempt even the most astute feminists.

## Equality: A guinea for your thoughts

Most of those who claim to be feminists see equality as the principal goal of their work, so much so that the term ‘equality’ has become separated from its traditional meaning as the Enlightenment banner of the French and American revolutions. Early feminists, like Mary Wollstonecraft, used the rhetoric from these revolutions as a model for imagining women’s rights but did not challenge the value of perpetuating masculine ideologies of equality. In *Undoing Gender*, Butler argues too that ‘I think it is fair to say that feminists everywhere seek a more substantial *equality* for women, and that they seek a more just arrangement of social and political institutions’ (2004: 174, emphasis mine). Though Butler eventually critiques what Wollstonecraft takes at face value, few feminists theorise the double bind of the term ‘equality’ more thoroughly than Virginia Woolf. What concerns Woolf is that the term ‘equality’ contains hidden power relations. In *Three Guineas*, Woolf questions the value of social and political institutions, such as education and the professions, in order to explore the inherent discrimination built into their fabric. She concludes that hidden ideologies serve to strengthen a social system that reinforces the necessity for war. According to Woolf, women who join these institutions on a par with or equal to men will necessarily perpetuate discrimination and violence.<sup>8</sup> Recognising equality as a value-laden term that masks power relations may even make the concept of equality undesirable.

Pamela Caughie underscores the importance of performative writing in Woolf, arguing that ‘Woolf’s rhetoric [...] has allowed her not just to sound uncommitted but to remain uncommitted to any one position, thereby enabling her to investigate the complexities of tyranny’ (1991: 116). Teresa Winterhalter expands upon Caughie, noting that ‘by subverting expository tradition, [Woolf] hopes to perform a significant act of engaged rebellion against linguistic practices that align with totalitarianism’ (2003: 238). Readings like Caughie’s and Winterhalter’s that focus on the performative effects of Woolf’s writing in *Three Guineas* – the way it wastes time while continually reminding us we are pressed for time, for example – still suggest this kind of writing is done in the name of another set of values. I would argue, instead, that Woolf’s writing is even more radical in that it is seductive, ritual, *merely* throwing a cog in the wheel. *Three Guineas* is composed of three parodic, ironic, and overlapping letters in response to written requests for donations to three philanthropic societies working on behalf of women’s education, women in the professions, and national efforts to prevent

war. Woolf espouses a model of parody to discuss women's equal participation both in the professions and in education concluding that anyone who speaks from inside the system will necessarily strengthen and propagate the injustice of that system. Addressing women who enter the professions under the current structure for work and employment, Woolf writes,

You will have to wear certain uniforms and profess certain loyalties. If you succeed in your profession, the words 'for God and Empire' will very likely be written like the address of a dog collar around your neck. And if words have meaning, which perhaps they should have meaning, you will have to accept that meaning and do what you can to enforce it. (1977: 117)

In joining the professions, women have not, according to Woolf, gained 'freedom' or 'liberation'. They are newly bound to profess loyalty to their employer in order to succeed. They are not free to wear what they want, or to act in any way that is inconsistent with the company's goals and aims. The idea – going back at least to Charlotte Perkins Gilman, if not further – that men have historically been 'freer' than women because of their ability to produce is here exposed as a ruse. Because the professions, according to Woolf, are so heavily invested in the pursuit of economic capital, it follows that competition, hierarchy, and nationalism are inevitable.

Woolf's discussion of the meaning of words is crucial to her argument and continues to have political relevance to feminism. She is not fully convinced that words *should* have meaning, or should necessitate meaning. Woolf asserts that definitions of words often kill entire radical movements: 'The word "feminist" [...] according to the dictionary, means "one who champions the rights of women". Since the only right, the right to earn a living, has been won, the word no longer has a meaning' (1977: 117). If feminists accept that words have meaning, we will, following Woolf, 'have to accept that meaning and do what [we] can to enforce it' (1977: 117). For Woolf, defining words is complicit in the productive model as well as in the rational search for meaning. In using words, women must be aware that they are bound to an existing system of meaning and that their words will be used to propagate that system. In gaining access to the professions, women are subject to a host of meanings that are embedded within the concept of 'the profession'. These include but are not limited to the desire to protect property, to decry foreign invasion of that property, and to make men go to war to protect their assets. In order to be successful, to have value for society, women in the professions must in turn exert authority and power over others. Like women who enter the professions, women in universities will be expected to protect a system of value based on gain, fear of loss, and consequently, on subjugation and oppression of others. Indeed, the concept of value is an ideology of particular concern to Woolf in *Three Guineas*. In the section addressed to the 'treasurer asking for money with which to rebuild a women's college', Woolf notes that the *value* of education in England is a many-edged sword (1977: 27). She considers donating to

the women's university with the stipulation that the money be used to help women learn to prevent war. What gives her pause about the plausibility of such a request is always a question of value. She argues that, insofar as education takes a raw human being and turns him/her into a finished product, 'there can be no doubt of the value of an education' (1977: 28). Woolf's 'there is no doubt' inevitably raises doubt. Woolf discusses the ways biographical writing perpetuates the ideology that 'the value of education is among the greatest of all human values' (1977: 28). Insofar as men's education is established as 'the greatest of all human values', a woman's education must mirror those values to have cultural currency, in order that both educations should possess equal value.

Thus, it is impossible to suggest that women's universities should be structured according to different values (e.g. pacifist ones), when the value of education is structured according to the legitimacy of productive discourses that do 'not teach people to hate force but to use it' (Woolf, 1977: 35). Woolf exposes the ways in which women who come to the university and the professions under the myth of liberation and equality end up supporting efforts to strengthen British nationalism, which perpetuates war. The structures of education, the professions, and war heavily reinforce one another through systems of value and meaning making. In this way, Woolf undermines the value of arguing for the value of education. Education per se has no value; it is what we make of it. Woolf realises that a system of production cannot be changed from within. She does not argue for female equality within the current structure, nor does she believe that the system will change because a greater number of women are invested in its values. But Woolf acknowledges that there is a way to enter the professions 'and escape the risks that make them undesirable' (1977: 92). This process involves a systematic challenge to the factual knowledge associated with the value of professions. If knowledge is somehow ascertained through work, 'give the knowledge acquired professionally to those who need it for nothing' (1977: 92). In a reversal of rational logic, Woolf suggests that acquiring knowledge within a profession has no monetary value. Similarly, accepting awards and merits supports meaning associated with a given profession and should be rejected. Woolf writes, 'you must refuse all methods of advertising merit, and hold that ridicule, obscurity, and censure are preferable, for psychological reasons, to fame and praise' (1977: 93). 'Fame' and 'praise' bestowed by the current professional system will only serve to prove that 'you' support the meaning and values perpetuated by the profession and that you profess loyalty to that profession. Awards, merits, and even donations are put in place to structure conformity to value and production. Woolf warns her young female professional to be wary of the 'mulberry tree' that poses a continuous threat to the necessary challenge to meaning and knowledge. The mulberry tree has become a figure often cited by feminists as a 'metaphor for our devotion to property' (Caughie, 1991: 116). But I am leery of stopping here, to assume that the mulberry tree means anything when Woolf has expressed a call to challenge the authoritative meaning and value of words. In her suggestion that productive meaning should be avoided, Woolf *performs* the action she calls for by divesting this 'mulberry tree' of meaning.

I would argue that fixing the meaning of the mulberry tree as a metaphor for property, or any other term, is antithetical to the function of the mulberry tree as a seductive, artificial, and mythical device used to empty irreversible ideologies of their meaning. Likening the 'devotion to property' to an endless, frivolous children's game, serves to divest property of meaning, value, unity, and coherence.

However, analysis of the actual game 'mulberry bush', to which Woolf alludes in her mention of the 'mulberry tree', shows that the mulberry tree is not limited to representing devotion to property but is in fact a bigger and more far-reaching representation, extending to all productive systems, including that of gender performance and labour, and thus to nothing in particular. In his discussion of popular nursery rhymes in England, James Orchard Halliwell-Phillips provides two analyses of the performance and language involved in the popular nursery rhymes 'Mulberry Bush' and 'Bramble Bush'. Although both games employ the same melody and similar actions, Woolf chose to reference the mulberry over the bramble, not without significance. In contrast to the feminine bramble game, the mulberry game is much more difficult to define and code structurally. Halliwell-Phillips writes that 'it is not so easy to give a similar expression to the game of the mulberry-bush, conducted in the same manner' (1849: 127). The mulberry bush game, according to Halliwell-Phillips, cannot be analysed in terms of gender, class, domestic life, or economy. The verses of the mulberry bush differ in performative action to include not just domestic duties like washing clothes, but also the making and mending of shoes and identity performance, as in the verses 'this is the way the ladies walk' and 'this is the way the gentlemen walk'. The mulberry bush is a larger and more diverse game that involves a wider range of seemingly unrelated tasks that cannot be read as uniformly sex specific.

Furthermore, Halliwell-Phillips reads the verses of the bramble bush game as contributing to a rational goal, because the last line 'on a cold and frosty morning' implies functional warmth through the performance of exhilarating action. In contrast, the mulberry game ends 'on a shiney morning' (Halliwell-Phillips, 1849: 127). The game is not only rendered meaningless, but the reasons for playing it also escape logic. Halliwell-Phillips describes the fun of the mulberry game as limited and limiting, or threatening to children's health: 'this game, however, implies too much exercise to render it so appropriate to the season as the other' (1849: 128). In short, the mulberry game defies meaning. It seems to have no value (as in keeping warm), or intent (making domestic chores palatable). The adjectives used to describe the mulberry children's game can then be re-inscribed upon ideologies of sex, labour, knowledge, and property, which are all performed within the game through repetition and mimicry. Woolf's ironic assertion that in singing 'Here we go round the mulberry tree, the mulberry tree, the mulberry tree', and in adding the verse 'of property, of property, of property', she would 'fill in the rhyme without doing violence to the facts', exposes a linguistic violence that she would like not to be made obvious – or instantiated as a truth claim (1977: 76). Woolf's mention of the 'mulberry tree' is invoked not to subvert property per se, but rather to erase the value of entire systems of production. I would argue, then,

that the mulberry tree, like Baudrillard's fairy tale, functions in the text as an absurdity, a nonsensical distraction, a sleight of hand rendering the entire system of production valueless, powerless, and exposing its weakness as a structure reliant on the performance of bodies that constantly threaten to break away.

And yet the threat of the circle still looms, causing Woolf to issue another warning, 'But directly that the mulberry tree begins to make you circle, break off. Pelt the tree with laughter' (1977: 92).<sup>9</sup> Because we have by now acknowledged the non-sense and the meaninglessness of the mulberry tree, and because the system of production has been emptied of its context and value, to break off appears relatively easy. But it is, apparently, not enough to empty signs of their referents. The continued powerlessness of the productive system is reliant upon a continued and ruling absurdity of signs. Although the laughter proposed by Woolf could be read as another 'metaphor', I recognise laughter as a non-sense term similar to that of the mulberry tree, another sign without referent, instantiated as insurance that no productive system of power or truth will replace the one that has been linguistically devalued. Thus laughter uttered into the void of the mulberry tree similarly devoid of meaning insures that 'the mulberry tree' remains without meaning. The laughter is empty and carries no truth to replace what is destroyed. Laughter functions in the text to create a radical 'break' from the meaningless valueless circle of production without arguing for another value. Woolf, like Baudrillard, recognises an outside to the contemporary productive power structures, 'the facts of history, of law, of biography' (Woolf, 1977: 122). She refers to this position as 'the Outsiders Society'. Woolf writes that 'They would refuse in the event of war to make munitions or nurse the wounded [...] the next duty to which they would pledge themselves [...] is briefly, not to incite their brothers to fight or to dissuade them, but to maintain an attitude of indifference' (1977: 122–123). To work on the sidelines of war is to perpetuate war. Women are thus figured in Woolf's estimation as not victimised by but complicit with the production of the current power system. The outsider society, in contrast, remains indifferent. Indifference is a position, which challenges the structural law that only provides two positions: war is good and war is bad. Indifference is presented as a break in effective communication in a radical challenge to meaning. This does not mean that Woolf did not act. She donated all three of her guineas. It just means, I posit, that, as feminists, we should resist naïve positions or claims to victimisation that reinforce productive systems. Money, which can be given freely or in exchange for a service, is also structured in and through discourses of production and value. Woolf is most certainly aware of the fact that her money will be used to advance productive value systems. Her writing in *Three Guineas* is both an acknowledgement of and an attempt to reverse the effect of that fact.

## Difference and feminism

For some, women are socially and culturally subordinated through essentialising claims about their physical, biological, class, and cultural difference from men.

Theorising about difference varies along a pendulum of opposing extremes: from assertions that deny difference between men and women, asserting women's equality to men on masculine terms, to a rejection of masculine terms in an attempt to elevate the feminine as both different from and superior to the masculine, to a recognition of the differences between women which rejects essentialising about what constitutes both 'woman' and the 'feminine'. Cixous sought to create a female writing to celebrate and empower women based on their difference, and in an effort to privilege writing over the materialism of bourgeois egalitarian feminism. In the late 1970s French feminism brought about a change in language, from talking about 'the female' to talking about 'the feminine'. Initially this set up a divide between the French and the Anglo-American feminists who saw the focus on difference as supporting the male/female dichotomy. But I would argue that this divide results primarily from productive reading practices: feminists who search for a coherent ideology and a rational unifying argument, who accept the value of writing that remains rigorous in a linear quest for meaning. These are, of course, exactly the productive practices that Cixous struggles against with her experimental text regarding *écriture féminine*. Until feminism recognises the importance of the linguistic shift, we too will continue to perpetuate the writing and reading strategies of domination and hierarchy, as I will explain. While Grace makes no reference to Cixous in her work on feminism and Baudrillard, *Seduction* (1979) mentions Cixous's 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1976) by way of a cryptic nod: 'What does the women's movement oppose to the phallogocentric structure? Autonomy, difference, a specificity, a writing – but never seduction' (1990: 8). Baudrillard's dismissal of Cixous is unsettling given the fact that I read Cixous's discussion of *écriture féminine* as a veritable feminist manifesto of seduction.

Cixous describes *écriture féminine* as writing the female body, and argues that women should write their experiences of the body in order to counter masculine representation of the feminine. Feminine writing could be read as essentialist, an argument made not only by Baudrillard but also by Toril Moi in her assertion that 'within [Cixous's] poetic mythology, writing is posited as an absolute activity in which all women qua women automatically partake' (1985: 123). But the argument that *écriture féminine* is essentialist is an oversimplification, which short-circuits our reading of Cixous's work. Cixous does not argue that all women employ feminine writing any more than she seeks to establish a definition of feminine writing: 'It is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded – which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist' (1976: 883). Feminine writing is a practice, not an essence. Moreover, feminine writing is a practice that cannot be defined, and rejects binary structures, analysis for meaning, and interpretation. As such, Cixous's call for feminine writing is a call to writing that resists the coherence imposed by masculine modes of production such as publishing houses and universities. Moi's argument that, in creating a writing of the body, Cixous assumes a universal body for all women is caused by the slippage between 'woman' and 'the feminine'. For Cixous refuses to define what she means by the body: 'body (body?)

bodies?), no more describable than god, the soul, or the Other' (1976: 882). Feminine writing resists definition, signification, and meaning. More to the point, feminine writing exposes the fallacy that without an insistence on the production of meaning, nothing would exist. For Cixous's words are there on the written page. In addition she challenges the insinuation that she is some idealistic 'mystic', a charge to which she answers, 'and what about the libido?' (1976: 891). The implication here is strong: masculine theories of sex and sexuality are also discourses of idealistic mysticism, but the fact that they insist upon their own truth, their own reality, through a coded structure is what gives these theories their power, which is then used to discriminate against and subordinate those who do not conform to the law of the 'real'.

Understanding that women are bound to language which always privileges men and power, and similarly to Woolf, Cixous argues for writing, laughter, and disinterest as responses to phallogocentric structures: 'If she's a her-she, it's in order to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the "truth" with laughter' (1976: 888).<sup>10</sup> The notion of the 'her-she' resembles Woolf's 'outsider society' because it is a term that establishes an outside to the system of meaning, definition, hierarchy, and organisation whereby women play with the system rather than opposing or espousing it – they refuse to play its game. In a rare moment of instruction, Cixous advises the 'her-she' to 'take pleasure in jumbling the order of space, in disorienting it, in changing around the furniture, dislocating things and values, breaking them all up, emptying structures, and turning propriety upside down' (1976: 887). The outsider position breaks down the accepted beliefs of what constitutes writing, sex, and the body through laughter, the game, the challenge, and artifice. The rational search for order is the impetus behind ideologies that impose power structures upon the disempowered. Cixous's position makes no claims to truth and supports no existing truth. This is seduction – implemented before Baudrillard ever published his theory. This is feminine writing and as such non-productive.

I have structured each subsection of this article according to popular productive ideologies with which feminists must continually grapple – issues of equality, the feminine, and difference – I have done so precisely because these productive terms have structured feminism and not because these feminists can be relegated to such categories. Not only are these categories not easily distinguishable – rather they bleed into one another – but I would argue that these feminists are not even primarily concerned with the productive concepts in terms of which they are so often read. But can we even imagine a feminist discourse outside of productive discourse? What would it mean to structure feminist discourse around the terms that feminists have created – terms such as 'The Masquerade', 'Mulberry Tree', and 'Laughter'? This would seem to be the logical alternative. However, this would also be a mistake. A theory of seduction, I argue, provides a way of reading feminists that, while highlighting the importance of such terms for feminism, also undercuts our tendency to provide logical alternatives that fall prey to productivist logic. What a feminist reading practice of seduction allows us to do, then, is to remain

uncommitted to any one position. That is, seduction as a reading practice focusses on the breakdown of production and productive discourse. Seduction is a means with no end. It does not offer an alternative discourse to those of identity, of representation, of knowledge, nor of value. Seduction is a critical term for the current juncture in feminist theory. This article is meant to challenge feminists to return to and re-read the history of feminist thought, to tease out the radicality of these fragmented, polyvocal, and seductive feminist texts while resisting the productive desire to organise, order, and impose rational meaning where it does not exist. To value strength over weakness, to proclaim the truth over the artificial, to move textual politics away from the game and to steer it toward Truth, all of these things threaten to destroy the perpetual motion that *is* feminist theory.

### Notes

1. Baudrillard argues that society is structured through production: the various systems for meaning that rely heavily upon verifiable facts, truths, and reality in order to maintain the boundaries of class, race, and gender. The ideology of production includes Freudian psychoanalysis, Marxist economics, and Saussurian linguistics – discourses which reinforce the primacy of sex, work, and language as social values.
2. Ingrid Hoofd (2010) suggests that feminists, in accepting the language of emancipation as positive, perpetuate the colonialist project: ‘Baudrillard’s critique on the feminist compulsion to see (the subject of) empowerment, alliance and liberation as univocally positive is imperative for understanding how Western feminism can better address its complicity in exploitation.’
3. I would argue, however, that feminists’ dismissal of *Seduction* has more to do with Jane Gallop’s (1987) attack on Baudrillard. Gallop challenges Baudrillard for what she sees as his ‘rather rabid attack on feminism’ (1987: 113). He is the French theorist who outright establishes ‘an adversarial relation to feminism’ (1987: 113). Gallop is admittedly not upset with what Baudrillard says about the feminine or seduction but rather by his assertion that women should allow him to counsel them: ‘Baudrillard cannot seduce feminism with his truth, because he protects his truth from being seduced by feminism’ (1987: 114). Certainly Gallop’s early frustration with *Seduction* still lingers in more contemporary feminist work (for example, see Toffoletti, 2007).
4. See, for example, Joan W. Scott (2001) and Tobin Siebers (2004).
5. Rivière is responding to an essay Jones wrote entitled ‘The Early Development of Female Sexuality’ (1927) in which he provides an account of female homosexual ‘types’, distinguishing between women who ‘retain their interest in men’ and ‘ceaselessly complain of the unfairness of women’s lot’ as opposed to those who ‘have little or no interest in men’ and ‘whose libido centers on women’ (Jones, 1966: 30).
6. I understand Rivière’s early assertion that Jones ‘throws great light on his material’ to mean that he makes sense of things, as in he ‘sheds light’. However, in conjunction with the later morally ambiguous assertion of the man who ‘throws a little light on the enigma’, the words ‘throwing light’ could also suggest the forcing of meaning rather than the rendering of it visible.
7. In discussing the importance of poetic language to Baudrillard’s theory of both seduction and symbolic exchange, Grace writes that ‘poetic language can be understood as a site of extermination of the relentless positivity of value, its structural predicate, the Law’



- (2000: 174). That is, poetic language is not a structural representation but a symbolic operation that de-materialises the sign and representation. Poetics shatters the structural Law, which Baudrillard defines as discourses of psychoanalysis, signification, desire, production, and value.
8. Woolf's work continues to suffer at the hands of productive reading practices that perpetuate reductive and limiting views. Alice Staveley argues that *Three Guineas* posed such an affront to the social equality of professional women that it required a defensive marketing strategy employed by Norah Nicholls, and specifically designed to assuage the negative reaction from women's groups in the late 1930s. According to Staveley, Woolf's sins against professional women include her figuration of professional women as 'potential sell outs', and her 'reinforce[ment of] longstanding misogynist stereotypes that associated the professional woman with the prostitute' (2009: 305).
  9. Baudrillard argues that seduction as a single movement is 'a stroke of wit or a flash of inspiration: a "spiritual" economy. With the same duel complicity as a stroke of wit, where everything is exchanged allusively, without being spelled out, the equivalent of the allusive, ceremonial exchange of a secret' (1990: 112). Woolf's stroke of wit, her laughter in this passage levels all meaning and value as allusive rather than constitutive. Laughter then levels the playing field linguistically as the meaning of laughter is as allusive as the reasons for playing a game.
  10. I do not claim that Cixous is drawing from Woolf in her plea for laughter, merely that there is an epistemology of feminist laughter that bears attention. Consider the fact that Rivière also discusses a woman, a university professor, who is prone to laughter when addressing the all-male faculty members at her university: 'She becomes flippant and joking, so much so that it has caused comment and rebuke. She has to treat the situation of displaying her masculinity to men as a game, something *not real* [sic], as a "joke"' (Rivière, 1929: 308). This example has political implications: what frustrates masculine ideology is the refusal to take productive ideologies seriously.

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