

"Women, and so on": *Rogues* and the Autoimmunity of Feminism

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Some texts signed by women can be thematically anti-phallogocentric and powerfully logocentric.... Without a demanding reading of what articulates logocentrism and phallogocentrism, in other words without a consequential deconstruction, feminist discourse risks reproducing very crudely the very thing which it purports to be criticizing ("This Strange Institution Called Literature": An Interview with Jacques Derrida," 60).

Derrida's engagements with feminism intertwined with an imagery of risk: risks to be averted and risks to be welcomed. This led to an eventual articulation of feminism as the autoimmunity of rights, but one that precluded a concurrent reflection on the autoimmunity of feminism. His earliest comments about feminism were often taken to be his least sympathetic, especially when contrasted with works such as *The Politics of Friendship* which offered a reading of the exclusion of women from ideals of political association. While Derrida's consideration of the risks of feminism was a limited engagement, his later bypassing of a robust discussion of its risks seemed a repetition of the ongoing conditionality of his engagement with feminism.

In order for entities to be able to protect themselves, to survive or exist, they must be exposed to what could destroy them. Human bodies are dependent on their immune systems, but this exposes us to the risk that our immune systems can turn against our own biology, as when autoimmune disorders attack some component of their own organisms which have been misrecognized as foreign intruders. This same dependence also means that transplanted material that would ensure our survival risks rejection. Yet immunological tolerance to self-antigens can also arise from autoimmunity.

For his part, Derrida uses the idea of autoimmunity in several ways, arguing of bodies, lives, and nations that they cannot be "themselves" without being exposed to what could destroy them or what would in principle be their antithesis: auto-attack. The use of the term is somewhat fluid in his work, particularly in thinking about political, social, or national exposure. With respect to the political analogy, democratic processes are supposed to protect us from the specter of antidemocratic forces. Yet if these forces did not contain the possibility of auto-destruction (allowing a democratic vote capable of producing a result

that could set democracy aside, one of Derrida's examples being the Algerian elections of 1990–1991) they would not amount to democracy. This suggestion seems to come closest to Derrida's reflections on biological autoimmunity; perhaps the "protective" immune system is akin to the electoral system and system of government, which must contain the possibility (to "protect" us against the forces of the antidemocratic) of turning against themselves (and includes the structural possibility of electing leaders capable of and effectively authorized to set aside the democratic process).

Noting that to work and perform its function, an autoimmune defense must have the capacity both to protect us *and* to destroy us and itself, Derrida also asks what the autoimmune system might be supposed to protect "us" against. Here the threat and possibility of an exterior invasion will also prove to be necessary to the identity of the entity that might have hoped to protect itself against invasion. Thus discussing threats of terrorism, Derrida, among many others, points out that even if America could, impossibly, be thoroughly protected against the threat of terrorist attack it would no longer be the America the measures taken were intended to protect. For the entity to be defended, it must be exposed. The state must, to be "itself," have porous and partially open borders to the exterior, and vulnerability to the resources that could allow it to be brought down:

[I]t is perhaps because the United States lives in [*vivent dans*] a culture and according to [*selon*] a largely democratic system of law that they were able to open themselves up and expose their greatest vulnerability to immigrants, to, for example, pilots in training, experienced and suicidal 'terrorists' who ... were trained on the sovereign soil of the United States (Derrida 2005, 40, translation modified).

It must also contain the resources and possibilities that could allow it to be undermined from within. In these passages from *Rogues*, Derrida discusses in such terms the September 11 attacks on America:

The 'terrorists' are sometimes American citizens, and some of those of September 11 might have been; they received help in any case from American citizens; they took American airplanes, took over the controls, and took to the air in American airplanes, and took off from American airports (Derrida 2005, 40).

In 2005 a stark example was also provided by the July 7 suicide bomber attacks on London's public transport system. The point stressed by the

British media concerned the bombers' identification as young British citizens, so called "homegrown" terrorists from Leeds. These attacks were perceived as coming from "within." Again, even if such nations turned to the most extreme measures of exclusion, checking, and policing, in attempting to protect themselves from threats from either without or within, they would no longer be what they had meant to protect.

Early in *Rogues*, Derrida also discusses the connotations of democracy in book eight of Plato's *Republic*, which portrays democracy in terms of the freedom or liberty (*eleutheria*) it could possibly deliver, but also its risk of license (negatively depicted as *exousia*). In the context of this double meaning, Derrida more generally considers democracy in terms of its core exposure to unpredictability, which includes its fundamental capacity to be eroded or through its own legitimate processes to "set itself aside."

Women and sexual difference make an appearance in this material. When Derrida comes to discuss the history of the literal use of the term *voyous* to refer to young male rascals or louts, he asks why this particular figure of disrespect for law or principle is so rarely depicted as female. Derrida had already remarked in *The Politics of Friendship* on the relationship between the political bond and the metaphors of fraternity, the constitutive exclusion of the daughter and sister from the political. But in *Rogues* he notes that the risk of license taken by the *voyou*, rejecting rule and principle, against whose prospect the self-protective measures of a democratic order are supposed to defend, is typically attributed a masculine rather than a feminine connotation. Women are not classically included as belonging to the political bond, but nor are they associated with the force the political bond secures against. In this respect, women are doubly effaced: excluded from political communities, from the bonds between those who compact to respect the law, and from the *voyous*.

In raising this question, Derrida returned to a preoccupation with women and the feminine that had intermittently accompanied his career. ("Much of my work has dealt with the deconstruction of phallogentrism, and if I may say so myself, I'm one of the first to put this question at the center of the philosophical discourse" [Derrida with McKenna 2002, 121].) If there are few major philosophers, even late twentieth-century philosophers, about whom one may say that their relation to feminism was fascinating, Derrida's relationship to feminism proved to be just that, his early deconstructions of philosophy also amounting to exposures of how women, femininity, sexual difference, and familial genealogy figure, or fail to figure, in the history of philosophy. His late work as well reflected more than once on the relationship between women and the political, and between women's rights and autoimmunity.

According to Derrida, the phallogocentrism of male writers produces "deconstructive effects, and precisely against phallogocentrism, whose logic is always ready to reverse itself or subvert itself (Derrida with Attridge 1992, 59). These texts could be considered unpredictable resources—resources contributing not just to the reconsolidation but also to the undermining of phallogocentrism, and so resources for feminism. As this demonstration that phallogocentrism can be a resource against itself is a potential contribution by Derrida to a feminist practice, it would be ironic—and untrue to the complexity of women and feminist writers—if only male writers proved to be that kind of resource. This should not have been the case, given Derrida's point that "sometimes the texts which are most phallogocentric can be the most deconstructive," and thus that while such texts can be authored by "in statutory terms, men or women," the more uncanny effect is that "there are sometimes more deconstructive resources ... in some texts by Joyce or Ponge, who are often phallogocentric or phallogocentric in appearance, than in some texts which, thematically, are theatrically 'feminist'" (Derrida with Attridge 1992, 58). Moreover, Derrida need not have considered his stress on the possible logocentrism and phallogocentrism of many feminisms bad news for the latter,¹ because of the unpredictable reserves such centrism would indirectly offer against themselves, by his own argument. Thus, it need not be the feminism that would undermine itself; it could be the residual or constitutive phallogocentrism of a feminism. To be sure, one might be surprised to find more feminist promise attributed to a writer considered antifeminist than a figure considered feminist, and assuming one associates (as Derrida also does) feminism with an interest in the resistance to phallogocentrism, it is curious that one might identify feminism as at least possibly best served by its least feminist moments. But such a possibility is certainly consistent with Derrida's project, and as he also stresses, such promisingly "least feminist" moments lurk everywhere, in texts both feminist and non-feminist, and by male and female authors.

Auspiciously, Derrida proposes in his discussion with Derek Attridge a list of women writers whose texts one should not "calmly" suppose—this was his salutary reminder—were free of phallogocentrism. About George Eliot, George Sand, Hélène Cixous, and Virginia Woolf his oddly directive comment was "Here I demand that one look, and closely, each time" (Derrida with Attridge 1992, 58). Derrida had no lack of admiration for these writers: Woolf, Stein, and Cixous were mentioned together as "immensely great" (Derrida with Attridge 1992, 58). Even about what he described as his "apparently rather fierce deconstructive" [*les textes déconstructeurs apparemment acharnés*] readings of Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, Althusser, and Lacan, he had commented "I never speak of

what I do not admire," and "there is always a moment when, in all sincerity, I declare my admiration, my debt, my gratitude [*reconnaissance*]" (Derrida with Roudinesco 2004, 5). But admiration for the women writers he mentions did not provoke (except in the case of Cixous) extensive readings of them, nor deconstructive readings of them. Women philosophers mentioned in his late work include Hannah Arendt, and women writers include Madame de Maintenon, but although at one point *Of Grammatology* was described as a "still somewhat strangely 'feminist' voice" (Jardine 1985, 188), that voice did not engage with feminist philosophers. Some suspected that Derrida wanted to take the place of the women whose work he did not approach too closely,² but there were several ways of interpreting the imaginary heritage in question. Interviewed by Kirby Dick, Derrida comments:

the figure of the philosopher, for me, is always a masculine figure. This is one of the reasons I undertook the deconstruction of philosophy. All the deconstruction of phallogocentrism is the deconstruction of what one calls philosophy which since its inception, has always been linked to a paternal figure. So a philosopher is a Father, not a Mother (Derrida with Dick 2005, 97).

He goes on to distinguish the thinker from the philosopher, with an affirmative image of a woman philosopher who would actually be "woman who thinks. Not a philosopher. I always distinguish thinking from philosophy. A thinking mother—it's what I both love and try to give birth to" (Derrida with Dick 2005, 97). Elsewhere grouping Stein, Sand, and Woolf with Cixous, in *Fourmis* he stresses the latter's genius with the hidden reserves of language: "Hélène has a genius for making the language speak, down to the most familiar idiom, the place where it seems to be crawling with secrets which give way to thought. She knows how to make it say what it keeps in reserve" (Derrida 1994, vii).³ Cixous herself also makes a point of distinguishing her writing from philosophy in an author's introduction which follows Derrida's preface to her work: "the difference with philosophical discourse is that I never dream of mastering or ordering or inventing concepts. Moreover I am incapable of this. I am overtaken" (Cixous 1994, xxii).

Demanding but not undertaking a look at the possible phallogocentrism of the woman thinker, Derrida above all avoided a close look at the woman philosopher. Arguing that the "deconstruction of phallogocentrism is the deconstruction of what one calls philosophy" (Derrida with Dick 2005, 97) seems to have limited the extent and form of his engagement with women writers. If he took the deconstruction of phallogocentrism to be the deconstruction of philosophy then to engage

in the former with respect to the women writers he admired would have converted them into philosophers. He seems to have preferred aversion, in the sense of the averted look, thereby subtracting women from the form of his readings of figures from Plato to Levinas, and occluding attention to those particular "hidden reserves."

On the other hand, throughout his work Derrida persisted in engaging with feminism. Not the feminism of women writers, nor philosophical feminism; Derrida returned intermittently to reflections on feminism as a politics. While the women thinkers discussed in his work were never discussed as feminist philosophers, Derrida was hardly indifferent to feminism as seen in his tendency to make comments about feminism concerning risks run, or to be averted.

Presumably, Derrida should have been stressing that feminism cannot be free of risks, and according to a concern expressed in his early work, it could not hope to avoid the risks of institutionalization and authoritarianism. However, feminism and risk take on some special kind of association. In "Choreographies" Derrida was recorded as proposing that women had to "renounce a too easy progressivism" (Derrida with McDonald 1997, 25), and in "Women in the Beehive" that the risk of the failure of women's studies was "the risk of its very own success" (Derrida 1987, 191). He saw a concern in the possibility that feminism might legitimize itself through the power of the university, that women's studies might become guardian of the Law. He notoriously claimed, effectively *to* feminism: "as soon as you say 'well, the woman is a subject and this subject deserves equal rights' and so on—then you are caught in the logic of phallogocentrism and you have rebuilt the empire of the Law" (Derrida 1987, 193). In comments made two decades later, Derrida seems more conciliatory. He takes a moment in "Faith and Knowledge" to remember that in "the most lethal explosions of a violence that is inevitably ethno-religious ... women in particular [are] singled out as victims ... of murders, ... rapes and mutilations" (Derrida and Vattimo 1998, 85). The interviews of *For What Tomorrow* make mention of abortion rights, the parity movement, and even see Derrida explaining affirmative action to Elisabeth Roudinesco. As he has long taught in the American system, Roudinesco asks him to speak to the United States and to "political correctness":

JD: Certain works—I'm thinking particularly of Dinesh D'Souza—have presented the American university in general as a place entirely dominated by censors who want to dictate everything in the name of 'political correctness' and who frantically defend the dogmas of communitarianism, feminism, antiracism etc....

ER: Is this really exaggeration?

JD: Yes (Derrida with Roudinesco 2004, 27, translation modified).

Derrida parries Roudinesco's opposition to sexual harassment measures in America, measures she apparently considers interdictions on "sexuality," interdictions rejected by her in the name of her singular vision of "the free exercise [*libre exercise*] of sexuality and the passions of love between adults" (Derrida with Roudinesco 2004, 31). When he redefines the issue of sexual harassment as one of abuse of authority, Derrida comes to the defence of institutionalized, American university feminism: "This figure of American feminism ... is often wrongly and too hastily criticized in France (Derrida with Roudinesco 2004, 28). Yet in the same period Derrida again acknowledged his reservations about feminism:

Of course I'm in favor of ending the repression of women, particularly as it's perpetuated in the philosophical groundings of phallogocentrism, so in that regard I'm an ally of feminine culture. But that doesn't prevent me from having reservations about some manifestations of feminism. To simply invert the hierarchy, or for women to appropriate the most negative aspects of what's conventionally viewed as masculine behavior benefits no one (Derrida with McKenna 2002, 121).

In his moments of alliance, he almost always doubles back on himself, in a fashion making one think of the Jewish joke from Theodore Reik which Derrida narrated when he discussed his friendship with Sarah Kofman (a woman philosopher pursuing projects often considered akin to feminist philosophy). It is, he says, a joke he and Kofman loved. On the Day of Atonement, two longstanding enemies find that their best possible tacit and mutual pardon is to admit they must always be "starting up" with each other all over again (as the one says to the other, "tu recommences déjà!") (Derrida 2001a). Perhaps starting up again with feminism, having elsewhere cautioned that there is not just one narcissism, that narcissism needs to be complicated and that "the right to narcissism has to be rehabilitated" (Derrida 1995a, 199),⁴ in his interview with Roudinesco Derrida nonetheless associates feminism yet one more time with risk to be averted. Speaking of the tendency toward narcissism, Derrida comments: "Like you I resist this movement that tends towards a narcissism of minorities that is developing everywhere— including within feminist movements" (Derrida with Roudinesco 2004, 21). As Caputo comments on Derrida's view of narcissism, "we are all more or less narcissistic" (Derrida with Caputo 1997, 148). One might expect Derrida to stress that point in his remarks on the narcissism of minorities or

feminism. Instead, narcissism rebounds, inconsistently, as a Derridean jab.

While feminism might never have ceased being associated with risk in Derrida's work, on the other hand, a twist occurred, so that the risk was displaced. In his late work Derrida discussed not so much the risks of feminism—the risks that feminism was obliged to confront—but instead feminism as another party's risk. Feminism was associated with eighteenth-century declarations of rights and with their autoimmunity. This led to a return and a twist to the comments that had associated women's rights with the risk of institutionalization. Having named in his early, controversial, and much cited piece the woman about whom one would say that "'she deserves equal rights' and so on—then you are caught in the logic of phallogocentrism and you have rebuilt the empire of the Law" (Derrida 1987, 193), Derrida returns to women's rights in the context of his discussions of the autoimmunity of rights, and also of their perfectibility.

Associated with this last, they are associated with a progressive enlarging of the extent and application of human rights, and thus with progressive improvement:

On the one hand, you have the law which is deconstructible; that is, the set of legislations, the set of positive laws which are in constant transformation. They are deconstructible because we change them, we improve them, we want to improve them, we can improve them. For instance the Declaration of the Rights of Man has been improved for the last two centuries, there have been a series of declarations which have added new rights for the workers, for women and so on and so forth. So we can improve the law, the legal system, and to improve means to deconstruct. It is to criticize a previous state of the law and to change it into a better one (Derrida 2001b, 87).

But since the movement of progressive improvement is never definitively resolved, it is not reliably progressive. Perfectibility in Derrida's work blurs conceptually with perversity. While it is true that in *Rogues* women's rights are again associated with perfectibility and with "democracy to come," it is also because any declaration of rights is "interminable in its incompleteness" (Derrida 2005, 39). Incompletion does not mean that a declaration of rights is always inevitably expanding in the direction of progress. The language of rights can be expanded to disappointing purposes or worse, as when the right to equal treatment is redirected to the suppression of previously established affirmative action policies. Thus, when Derrida writes that it is necessary "to draw on the heritage and its

memory for the conceptual tools that allow one to challenge the limits that this heritage has imposed up until now," he also stresses that exceeding the limits of that heritage involves movement in many directions. The possibility of improvement is to be equated with the risk of and vulnerability to the changes one might not have hoped for, in addition to those for which one might hope. This language of the pass beyond, and the displacement of limits is associated with perfectibility:

At the heart of international law, there are sites where it is necessary to pass beyond or to displace the limit [*il existe des lieux où il faut passer et déplacer la limite*]. Human rights [*droits*] are perfectible; they are ceaselessly transformed [*ils se transforment sans cesse*]. So it is better to define these rights by pulling them out of their limits [*en les arrachant à leurs limites*]: to recognize the rights of women, the right to work, the rights of children, etc. But this gesture must be carried out in the name of an idea of right already present in the project of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, itself based on the declaration of 1789 (Derrida with Roudinesco 2004, 19).

But it is just as easily associated with perversity, and this blurring between perversity and perfectibility is seen in Derrida's own work, given his stress that autoimmunity makes for a paradoxically non-teleological sense of perfectibility (Derrida with Roudinesco 2004, 87), and that there is a constant process of and constant need for the process of revision, and a constant threat of self-damage. When in his interviews with Borradori, the foundations of international law are described as remaining "perfectible, revisable, in need of recasting, both conceptually and institutionally" (Derrida with Borradori 2003, 111), his account stresses the constant recasting, that nothing ultimately guarantees that progress is progress. Therein lies both the risk and chance, as he sees it, of rights.

While one answer proposed by Derrida for what might identify the process of progress is the passage beyond the internal limit, this is a discomforting model. On the one hand, the initial exclusion of women's rights from the French declaration of rights can be conceptualized in this form, the internal forces of that declaration and its exclusion pulling towards the eventual transformation of that exclusion. Certainly it was a limit beyond which the rights were eventually pulled, with the concurrent connotations of progress. Yet in Derrida's work autoimmunity is depicted as potentially leading to the worst, and the passage beyond the internal limit is as attributable to perversity as perfectibility. Discussing autoimmunity, he considers the failure to extend principles of equality, lib-

erty, and fraternity to all those living under the rule of French government: "We have here not one but a whole series of examples of [*une série d'exemples en chaîne de*] an autoimmune pervertibility of democracy." Of colonization and decolonization, he suggests that they were *both*

... autoimmune experiences wherein [*au cours desquelles*] the violent imposition of a culture and political language that were supposed to be in line with [*censées s'identifier avec*] a Greco-European ideal ... ended up producing exactly the opposite of democracy (French Algeria).

This was colonization by a democracy producing a colonized people with lesser rights who constitute a part of French democracy, "which then helped fuel [*puis a favorisé elle-même*] a so-called civil war." For a democracy to be a colonial power was to expose itself to this risk, that in the name of its own values decolonization would be sought. It was to admit into the French realm the possibility of what some would consider auto-attack, in the form of civil war, "one that was really a war for independence waged in the very name of the political ideals extolled by the colonial power." In fact, when the election of antidemocratic fundamentalists eventually loomed, "The new power *itself* then had to interrupt the democratization underway; it had to interrupt a normal electoral process in order to save a democracy threatened by the sworn enemies of democracy" (Derrida 2005, 34–5). Here, processes of autoimmunity are narrated that in some ways, or by some parties, might not be considered inconsistent with progress. Yet such processes can be integral to the worst. Some viewed in these terms the suspension of democratic elections in Algeria, and Derrida stresses that autoimmunity can lead to terrorism and led to the rise in Germany of national socialism and its suspension of the rule of law in the 1930s:

The suspension of the electoral process in Algeria would be, from almost every perspective, typical of all the assaults on democracy in the name of democracy.... They decided in a sovereign fashion to suspend, at least provisionally, democracy *for its own good*, so as to take care of it, so as to immunize it against a much worse and very likely assault.... Hence a certain suicide of democracy. Democracy has always been suicidal.... There is something paradigmatic [*un processus paradigmatique*] in this auto-immune suicide: fascist and Nazi totalitarianisms came into power or ascended to power through [*au cours de*] formally normal and formally democratic electoral processes (Derrida 2005, 33).

Evidently there is no comfort to be taken from autoimmunity. Perfectibility and pervertibility are both transformation without teleology; autoimmunity comprises them both, and such movements include, in Derrida's examples, the institution of women's rights, the rise of Nazi totalitarianism, the demise of colonial rule in Algeria, but also the suspension of democracy in Algeria.

By the logic of Derrida's argument, women's rights can be an example of a passage beyond an internal restrictive limit, and are associable with autoimmunity as both pervertible and perfectible. Thought of from the perspective of the passage beyond the limit, the logic of the 1789 French declaration—that men are born free and equal and remain so, that liberty and property are the natural rights of men, that the law expresses the general will—contained the fissuring forces provoking the eventual inclusion of women originally excluded. Thought of from the perspective of autoimmunity, the exclusion of women embodied in the declaration contained resources to be turned against itself, through an extension of its own terms to those on whose exclusion it was originally premised. The declaration could not be instituted without providing the self-undermining resources to pull it beyond its own limits. This reading provides a good instance of how autoimmunity, pervertibility, and perfectibility interlock. The pervertibility of the declaration's exclusion *is* the perfectibility of its rights.

But despite the necessary blurring between perfectibility and pervertibility it is noticeable that in his multiple discussions of them in his late work, women's rights are consistently slotted by Derrida on the side of progress. They echo in a sequence Derrida reiterates with the formulation "and so on" which reiterates this sense of the continual and implicitly progressive movement. His comment in *Deconstruction Engaged* refers to the adding over two centuries of "new rights for the workers, for women and so on and so forth." His reference to the pulling movement beyond their limits in *For What Tomorrow* repeats the formulation: "better to define these limits by pulling them out of their limits ... the rights of women, the right to work, the rights of children, etc." (Derrida with Roudinesco 2004, 19). His comments with Borradori repeat the formulation again, suggesting that an expanding set of rights can be associated with a perfectible direction of the declaration of rights.

We must [*il faut*] more than ever stand on the side of human rights. *We need [il faut] human rights.* We are in need of them and they are in need, for there is always a lack, a shortfall, a falling short, an insufficiency; human rights are never sufficient. Which alone suffices to remind us that they are not natural. They

have a history—one that is recent, complex, and unfinished. From the French Revolution and the first Declarations right up through the declaration following World War II, human rights have been continually enriched, refined, clarified, and defined (women's rights, children's rights, the right to work, rights to education, human rights beyond 'human rights and citizen's rights,' and so on).

But he also comments as follows:

[T]o take this historicity and this perfectibility into account in an affirmative way we must never prohibit the most radical questioning possible of all the concepts at work here: the humanity of man (the 'proper of man' or of the human ... the very concept of rights or of law [*droit*], and even the concept of history (Derrida with Borradori 2003, 132–3).

When Derrida comments in *Rogues* that democracy is thus "interminable in its incompleteness beyond all determinate forms of incompleteness, beyond all the limitations in areas as different as the right to vote (for example in its extension to women—but starting when?—to minors—but starting at what age?—or to foreigners—but which ones and on what lands [*sur quel territoire*]—to cite at random just a few exemplary problems [*pour accumuler en désordre quelques échantillons exemplaires*] from among so many other similar ones)" (Derrida 2005, 38–9), despite his comment that he chooses just a few from the thousands [*de milles et milles*] of examples of perfectibility, his reference to the trio of women, minors, and foreigners is evidently not made at random. This trio, sometimes with the inclusion of workers' rights, repeats through Derrida's discussions of feminism and of women's rights in association with autoimmunity.

The paradox of autoimmunity is not stressed in the evocations of the rights of immigrants, workers, children, and women despite the reminder made to Borradori that an affirmative interrogation of perfectibility must not prohibit an interrogation of all the concepts with which it is associated, including rights, and so evidently women's rights. When they are considered as an instance of perversity, this is only in relation to their own previous exclusion. But what about the autoimmunity of feminism itself? Despite his jabs at feminism's narcissism Derrida ducks the issue that feminism must be autoimmune, instead thematizing feminism as the autoimmunity of equal rights discourse, or of its previous exclusions. One should question the implication that women's rights can only be discussed in the context of progress and expansion, or one should stress the paradoxical status of that expansion. More

consistent with Derrida's work would be the stress that they could—at the limit, they must—be monstrous:

A future that would not be monstrous would not be a future; it would already be a predictable, calculable, and programmable tomorrow. All experience open to the future is prepared or prepares itself to welcome the monstrous arrivant, to welcome it, that is, to accord hospitality to that which is absolutely foreign or strange (Derrida with Weber 1995b, 387).

Women's rights, in their relation to an *à venir*, might well be a form of autoimmune suicide, particularly given Derrida's reminders that in affirming the *à venir* there must be a relation to and an affirmation of the unpredictability of what comes, and of our exposure to the possible worst as well as the best (Derrida 1999, 70–1).

Derrida makes similar comments in relation to the expectations we have of birth and immigration, both thematized in terms of the *arrivant* (Derrida 2002).⁵ Though he writes of the totally unexpected and unpredictable nature of this *arrivant*, and about its possibly terrible and destructive nature, he offers no more specific images of the "worst" or the "best" apart from the non-literal reference to the possibility of the destruction of one's home (Derrida 1999, 70–1).

Yet when we hear about autoimmune progress, we hear about an expansion of rights. When we hear about its perversity, we hear about the suspension of the democratic state. Literally, in Derrida's work, perversity and perfectibility are not distinguishable with reliable stability. But the examples he favors are not consistent with this ambiguity, locking in a more certain appeal to what will have been progress and what will have been poison. I think this is consistent with an occlusion of monstrous possibilities when it comes to Derrida's contemplation of the mother who would be a philosopher, if we return to Derrida's visions of philosophy, women, and inheritance:

Question: If you had a choice, what philosopher would you like to have been your mother?

Derrida: ... it's impossible for me to have any philosopher as a mother. My mother, my mother couldn't be a philosopher. A philosopher couldn't be my mother. That's a very important point.... So the philosopher that would be my mother would be a post-deconstructive philosopher, that is, myself or my son. My mother as a philosopher would be my granddaughter, for example. An inheritor. A woman philosopher who would reaffirm the deconstruction. And consequently, would be a woman who thinks. Not a

philosopher. I always distinguish thinking from philosophy (Derrida with Dick 2005, 97).⁶

Read in the context of Derrida's work on conditional and unconditional hospitality, these comments suggest a repeatedly occluded point within Derrida's work. We would expect Derrida to remind us about what is possibly terrible about the woman philosopher who would reaffirm the deconstruction. Derrida knew that the woman philosopher, the granddaughter, and even a mother of uncanny and retroactive lines of inheritance was no predictable affirmer of "Derrida." Figured as the *arrivant*, the granddaughter is figured as that which (if this figure is to be consistent with Derrida's other comments about the *arrivant*) one would need to be open—impossibly open—to the possible destruction of one's home. His comments about unconditional hospitality indicate an alternative way of formulating the *arrivant* to that suggested in his comments about the woman practicing deconstruction, as do his comments about birth and the unforeseeable child:

Birth, which is similar to the thing I am trying to describe, may in fact not even be adequate to this absolute arrival [*arrivance*]. In families, it is prepared, conditioned, named in advance, drawn into a symbolic space which amortizes the arrival [*arrivance*]. And yet, despite these anticipations and pre-nominations, the element of chance [*l'aléa*] remains irreducible, the child who comes remains unforeseeable, it speaks, all by itself, as at the *origin* of another world, or at an *other* origin of this one (Derrida with Stiegler, 12).

Derrida should have stressed this in his comments about the advent of the woman philosopher, but instead something is thrown by this uncanny figure, the post-deconstructive woman who affirms deconstruction and who is his granddaughter and so his mother. The impossibility of these paternities and maternities is stressed, but not the need to affirm the possible monstrosity. The image of the post-deconstructive thinking granddaughter is too hospitable to Derrida, let us say, and as such too conditionally hospitable.

That is what is wrong, despite the nodding gestures to feminism, with the way in which feminism and women's rights turned up as the phenomena of autoimmunity and progress in Derrida's work. It is necessary, he writes "to draw on the heritage and its memory for the conceptual tools that allow one to challenge the limits that this heritage has imposed up until now." In *Rogues* différance reappears to think democracy as always deferred and differing from itself, always inadequate and incomplete, "beyond all limitations" (Derrida 2005, 35). Democracy will

always be incomplete, always to come, with all the connotations attributed by Derrida to the *arrivant*, but the same must be said of feminism.

This means that the interested Derrida in whom a feminism might be most interested was not the Derrida making those apologies—though evidently some of Roudinesco's stranger formulations are well worth contesting, for America, sexual harassment rights, or nodding at feminism as progress—but the Derrida capable of thinking the autoimmunity of feminism itself. This is what we should be hearing about in this discussion of women's rights: not just that they were an instance of the autoimmunity of rights, that is to say, that which "gives itself weapons to use against itself and against its own limitations" (Derrida with Roudinesco 2004, 19), but also that they were an instance of their own autoimmunity. Women's rights also give themselves weapons to be used against themselves and their own limitations, and they are also profoundly unpredictable.

Commenting that "there have been no great women philosophers," though not denying that "there have been great women thinkers" (Derrida with McKenna 2002, 121), perhaps Derrida means no women have produced major philosophical systems on the scale of *The Critique of Pure Reason*. But the result of his commenting on the phenomenon which, he writes, it would be "foolish to deny," that "the philosophical discourse is organized in a manner that marginalizes, suppresses, and silences women, children, animals, and slaves" (Derrida with McKenna 2002, 121), is that the numerous women philosophers of history (one could consult Mary Ellen Waithe's four-volume set, see Waithe 1987–1994) are barely discussed, despite the remarkable range of figures considered by Derrida throughout his career. It is intriguing to think about those virtual texts by Derrida which might have engaged with that problem in which he indicated not just interest, but insistent interest ("I demand that one look,"): the possible phallocentrism of George Sand, Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein, or even, mentioned in the same interview but not included in this group of women thinkers, Simone de Beauvoir.

He could have mentioned Mary Wollstonecraft or those figures discussed by Joan Scott in *Only Paradoxes To Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man*, Olympe de Gouges, Jeanne Deroin, Hubertine Auclert, Madeline Pelletier (Scott 1996), or Harriet Taylor, in thinking the autoimmunity of political rights, and particularly in his discussions of the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. Of the efforts of feminists following the 1789 declaration Joan Scott has argued that rejecting "exclusion based on ascribed group difference" had a repeated tendency to make "that identity the grounds for inclusion." Feminism was therefore grounded in what Scott has argued is a constitutive paradox

(Scott 1996; also see Scott 2005, 36), such that a discourse that defended feminist interests also served to undermine them. In a quite different variation on what could be seen as autoimmunity, Harriet Taylor found herself articulating women's rights through a representation of ignorance from which women should elevate themselves, and of which both the poor and the lower classes become emblematic.⁷ Her appeal to equal rights was evidently intended as a protection of women's interests yet it admitted to the domain of those interests a commitment to forms of hierarchy that would also prove toxic to it.

What of Wollstonecraft's association of human preeminence over "brute creation" by virtue of reason, virtue, and knowledge? In returning to some of the women thinkers engaging with the history of rights mentioned by Derrida, one might turn one's attention to what it is that Wollstonecraft thought would ensue from the progress that she envisaged for women:

Would men but generously snap our chains, and be content with rational fellowship instead of slavish obedience, they would find us more observant daughters, more affectionate sisters, more faithful wives, more reasonable mothers—in a word, better citizens (Wollstonecraft 2004, 263).

Yet how reliable was that outcome? According to Wollstonecraft, rights could defend women, and the human race, against the worst version of themselves: unobservant, unaffectionate, unfaithful, unreasonable. Such rights include property rights, education, training, the means of income, worthwhile activity, political discourse and discourse about current affairs, the leveling of rank, and perhaps political representation. But as even she acknowledged, the whole system of representation was then, as she claimed, "only a convenient handle for despotism" (260). She therefore ironized that women, at least on that score, need not complain at their exclusion from the political system. The capacity for political discourse, representation, property, income, education, and activity could offer no guarantee that women would be good citizens, and evidently exposed women to the likelihood they would be as bad as the men of Wollstonecraft's depiction. The rights that could protect women also opened them to new poisons; that is the function of education, property, politics, political representation, "and so on." Wollstonecraft appeals to guarantees for feminism through the promise of education, morality, suffrage, guarantees that clearly could not be secured. As with Taylor, though for different reasons, one could ask, what if the conditions of Wollstonecraft's feminism also had the potential to undo its best hopes?

In sum, it was possible for Derrida to be persistently interested in

feminism, to stress the need to recognize and affirm the possibility, even the inevitability, of the *arrivant*'s monstrosity, but not to stress that feminism could be Derrida's autoimmunity, just as equal rights could quite possibly be feminism's autoimmunity. While these are not conversations to be found in Derrida's work, they are conversations opened up by his work—albeit through starting up again.

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Notes

1. His comment about the possible phallocentrism of the woman and the feminist seems in part presented as a rejoinder to feminism's possible illusions. See Derrida with Attridge, "This Strange Institution," 60.
2. A comment frequently cited to that end is Derrida's remark in a roundtable discussion in what would later be published as *Spurs*, that he wanted to write like a woman, and tried to. See Derrida, "La question du style," *Nietzsche aujourd'hui* (Paris, 1018, vol I. *Intensités*, 1973).
3. Derrida, Foreword, *Hélène Cixous Reader*, ed. and trans. Eric Prenowitz (New York: Routledge, 1994), vii–xiv, vii.
4. See Derrida. "Right of Inspection," *Art and Text* 32 (1989).
5. See Samir Haddad, *Legacies of Democracy: Derrida and Arendt*, Dissertation, Department of Philosophy, Northwestern University, 2006.
6. I discuss this passage also in "Derrida's Impossible Genealogies," *Theory and Event* 8, 1 (2005).
7. I discuss this further in "When Feminism is 'High' and Ignorance is 'Low': Harriet Taylor on the Progress of the Species," *Hypatia* 21, 3 (2006).