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Che Vuoi? (What Does a Woman Want?)

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Today, we encounter a question that has rarely been treated as a serious or provocative issue: women and sexuality as a philosophical problem. This theme now acts as a critical marker—an axis that divides entire fields of thought into a before and after. The beginning of this epistemic shift can be traced back to a Freudian question: What does a woman really want? In this article, we follow this question through the lens of Lacanian theory, in which he introduces the concept of sexuation and illuminates the foggy, ambiguous terrain of femininity through the formulation of the hysterical discourse. Moving beyond a purely hysterical approach to womanhood, the French psychoanalyst carved a path for the re-inscription of her historically ambivalent and fragmented image. For Lacan, woman is a symptom—an embodiment of the fundamental contradiction and rupture within the symbolic order. The Woman does not exist; rather, la femme is a rebel who struggles to exist.

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"You have been a poor observer of life if you have not also seen the hand that, ever so gently kills." (Nietzsche, 2002, 59)

Introduction

In the correspondence between Princess Marie Bonaparte and Freud, a radical notion emerged—one that sparked both theosophical and feminist discourses:

The great question that has never been answered, and which I have not yet been able to answer, despite my thirty years of research into the feminine soul, is: What does a woman want? (Jones, 1955, 421)

The question "What do you want?"¹ is a confused question from a woman which Freud, in opposition to the male answer called the Oedipus complex, failed to find a female alternative for it.

Freud, unlike Jung who views sexual duality as two autonomous and complementary principles², did not succeed in articulating a female equivalent. For Freud, sexual differentiation does not arise from clear, dualistic opposition. At the level of the id, which is energized by libido, there is no distinction between male and female. Although Libido is completely sexual in its nature, it is not an agent of sexual difference. Boys and girls share a chaotic heterogeneous blend of desires—a mixture later structured into two positions by the injections of culture and hormones.

From Freud's perspective, "anatomy is destiny"³; He implies that if pure masculinity and femininity—in Platonic terms, the Idea⁴ of masculinity and femininity—existed, then there would be only one sex, shared in different participations⁵ by individuals.

Therefore, sexual difference does not rise from the opposition and the difference of two sexes, but from the fact that there is no second sex (Zupančič, 2017, 46).

¹ Che Vuoi? Is an Italian phrase that contains this well-known hand gesture with punched fingers. Lacan utilized this phrase at the graph of desire to complete it.

² Jung introduced archetypes of Anima (feminine side of man) and Animus (masculine side of woman) but he said sex difference and the distinction between the roles of men and women are fundamental and unchangeable. Every human being has a primary and a secondary sexual identity, which unites with the growth of individuality and "self".

³ The phrase "History is destiny" is widely attributed to Napoleon Bonaparte, but there is no definitive, primary source—such as a speech, letter, or official document—where he is recorded as saying or writing this exact phrase.

Freud in *Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes* (1925) refers to it (The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIX, 241–258).

⁴ ἰδέα

⁵ μέθεξις

At this juncture, Lacan returns to Freud: the phallus is not the operant¹ that produces difference through a binary² of presence/absence, possession/lack, or fullness/emptiness. What is split in two is an empty **One**—the absence of One. The phallus is an empty signifier that neither sex ever fully possesses. Sexual duality, in Lacan's system, is the result of two distinct ways of inscribing this *constructive minus* (the absence of One) in the symbolic order.

This constructive minus is the Law of the Father—the prohibition of incest, and castration—what Lacan refers to as the phallic function³ (ΦX). As Zupančič notes, “the phallic function is the function of castration” (Zupančič, 2017, 49–50), which establishes the chain of signification and structures the symbolic field through a phallic way. Every sign becomes phallic once it enters this function. And since men and women have the same relationship with this function as two signs, they both struggle with the Oedipus complex equally. The female signifier has the potential to exceed the limits of the phallic function—the structure that produces and is produced by the male signifier. According to this investigation, Lacan formulates the second formula which contains at least one X out of this function: the opposite of the phallic function $\Phi \bar{X}$; There is something that does not belong to ΦX . This formula imposes an element outside the function, but its foundation is based on ΦX . This is the birthplace of femininity and the emergence of Lacan's revolutionary concept of sexualization⁴. Constructive minus, this minus one, —the structural lack—is not a dead end, but an open passageway into the very question Freud could not resolve: “what does a woman want?”.

What Is Called Woman?

Freud's explorations into the feminine world ultimately present the question: what is sex itself? “Sex itself,” in its Platonic sense—when Plato inquired into the essential nature of things—is the question of the idea of sex. In *Parmenides* (130a-e), Plato suggests that everything—even the lowest things, such as mud and dirt—has an Idea. But what about sex? Is there an Idea of sex? Is there an Idea of sex that feminine and masculine identities are the results of utilizing in different degrees of this single Idea? Or do femininity and masculinity each have their own separate Ideas, so that women have benefited from the idea of femininity to different degrees and men have benefited from the idea of masculinity in the same way? Plato gives no direct answer to these questions—and notably, he does not mention sex as a predicate. Yet the implication seems to be negative: not because sex is somehow beneath even dirt (though such a notion exists), but because we don't even know what sex is. In Platonic terms, the predicative status of sex is ambiguous. “In this light, sex

¹ A psychological term for an element that operates the behavior of the human being.

² According to Ferdinand de Saussure's structuralism, that Lacan has influenced of it, what make language meaningful are binary oppositions; the difference of signs creates meaning for both poles of opposition. For example, what is not man is called woman and what is not woman is called man.

³ Fonction Phallique

⁴ The process of sexual differentiation; the action of sexing.

stands in contrast to something like a unicorn: a unicorn is something we never encounter in experience, but we know exactly what it is. Sex, on the other hand, is everywhere, yet what is missing is precisely the knowledge of what it is. What do we actually recognize when we say, “this is sex”?” (Zupančič, 2016, 22)

Attempting to answer this foundational question reveals that all definitions of sex are ultimately reductionistic; Sometimes it is reduced to biological and anatomical factors, sometimes to historical and cultural constructs, and sometimes to psychological states. Yet each of these definitions is riddled with exceptions and counterexamples. The identification of a subject through anatomy becomes so tenuous and insignificant that the subject may become confused about their own sexuated entity. Transsexuality exemplifies this bodily indeterminacy—the subject’s experienced gender conflicts with the anatomical body. Thus, determination of sexual identity through anatomy alone becomes neither provable (since, for example, one may not feel like a man despite having a penis or a woman despite the existence of a vagina¹) nor deniable (since denying the organ does not resolve the matter).

Freud, in his famously reductionist assertion that “anatomy is destiny,” treated the body—including its sexual characteristics—as fate. In doing so, he slipped toward reductionism. Lacan, in contrast, challenges every norm considered “natural”. For him, \$, the subject—divided and de-centered by the phallic function, and split by the castration razor—still has a choice to be a man or a woman, though not a choice of free will. The way in which the subject is divided within language results in what is called “sex”. Every sexed identity is a linguistic performance, a position within the symbolic order. “I am a woman” means I present myself as a female signifier on the stage of language. There is no sex out to this symbolic scene.

Hence, “What Freud calls the sexual is not that which makes us human in any conventional sense; rather, it is what makes us subjects—or more precisely, it is coextensive with the emergence of the subject” (Zupančič, 2017, 7). This symbolic stage is the horizon of subjectivity², the space in which all identities are performed.

In contrast, the Freudian Oedipal subject constructs discourse based on the **Other**—the **Other** who attaches norms, ideals, and prohibitions to anatomical identity. This **Other** imposes castration as the rightful (heterosexual) solution and pathologizes any alternative.

As Lacan states, the **Other** dictates to the subject what it means to be a man or a woman by providing the semblants appropriate to regulate relations between the sexes (Zupančič, 2017, 81).

It is from this imposition that the subject’s hysterical core emerges. Hysteria³—etymologically rooted in the womb—was traditionally considered a feminine affliction and thus inherently sexual. Pre-Freudian medicine attributed the disorder to the uterus’s

¹ Vagina “is” an organ that its being is merely a whole hole and emptiness.

² Human being is going to be subject at this horizon through his/her presentation at language.

³ ὕστερα: a Greek word for uterus.

movement. Freud, however, through extensive analysis, reclassified hysteria as a psychosomatic condition—one that is not exclusive to women. Lacan, in turn, restructured hysteria into a discourse, making it a critical tool for analyzing psycho-social structures. Yet hysteria alone does not define either sex. So how does Lacan distinguish between men and women? He does so through the formulas of sexuation:

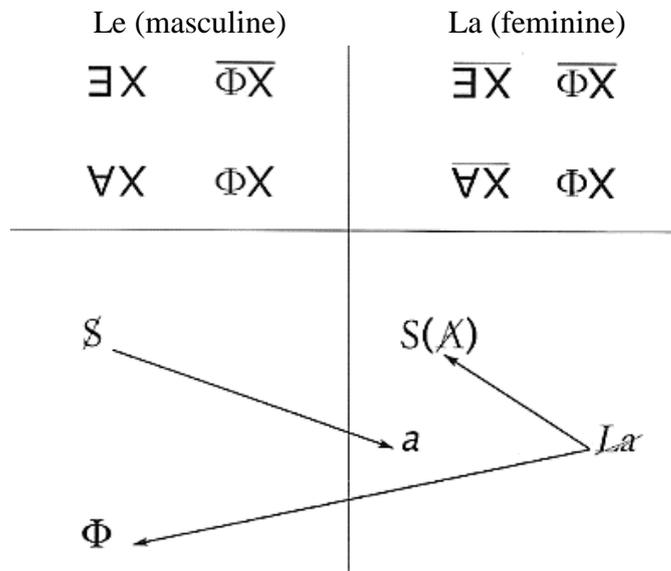


Figure 1. (Lacan, 1998, 78)

According to this diagram, sexuation is determined through the phallic function, and each side—masculine and feminine—occupies a distinct and non-interchangeable ontological¹ position.

Let us first examine the left column, representing the masculine subject: the upper part of the column tells us that there is at least one *x* that does not depend on the phallic function and is determined by refusing the castration; this is Freudian Father himself. The next line says that each *x* obeys the phallic function and the phallic function is valid for every single *x*. According to Freud, all males are castrated; the castration rule is applied to men except the Father. The lower part of the masculine column shows that $\$$ —crossed out and divided subject—is a desiring subject; the desire directed to objet petit *a*; the object-cause of desire, which is always on the female side and a possession of the **Other**. We can see that the sexuation of the male is organized around a phallic exception (the Father) and the objet petit *a*.

On the opposite side of the female pole, there is no a priori or exceptional element. As we see in the upper line, "There is no woman who is not castrated"; the bottom line of the female column is the outcome of this statement: woman, a subject with a fundamental and substantial lack, whose desire is directed to an element on the opposite side (the Φ) for

¹ It means “way of being” here, not the classic metaphysical-cosmological studies nor Heideggerian notion of being or *Seinsweise*.

Aufhebung¹-ing her castration even in an imaginary sense. Hence, male jouissance is all phallic, symbolic, and limited; there always is an obstacle between a man's desire for what is articulated in S and his satisfaction. As a result, satisfaction is always delayed and there is always something to be desired; phallic jouissance appears now. The added jouissance A, unlike the phallic jouissance, goes beyond the subject so makes no identity: $\bar{L}a$; there is no woman.

When we read the upper and lower masculine parts together, we find an impassability in the masculine form of jouissance. If the upper part was considered as the male fantasy of general jouissance, it means that the man believes: first, perfect jouissance can be achieved through a specific action or object, and secondly, someone possesses perfect jouissance, and this makes the man, so that Nietzsche sees Plato² find his jouissance as insufficient; on this basis, man is called the subject of obsession. According to Derrida, the existence of that exception on the male side plays the main role in the sexuation of the two poles; the father-phallus is the sign of the transcendental signified, which is not a part of the set of castrated men, but it is the head of the chain and the condition of its existence. This external element produces the richness and completeness of the male world. On the other side, such exception does not find; every woman is castrated. The first line above says that there is no x that lends itself to the phallic function, and the bottom says that the phallic function is not valid for all x's, and all female jouissance is not phallic; "by S(A) I designate nothing other than woman's jouissance" (Lacan 1999, 84). Castration is a condition linked to a man, while a woman is not required to have a relationship with castration. Because of the lack of the Father, there cannot be a set of women, for each woman is castrated; therefore, it is not possible to form a closed group of women. In other words, it is confirmed that each rule requires at least one exception; and a woman, who does not have this exception, avoids from the phallic rule. In this not-set, each member has a unique relationship with castration³ which gives her subjectivity a hysterical tone; in this sense, there is no woman.

Therefore, the two male and female sides of the diagram are opposites, "Each side is defined by negating the phallic function, including and eliminating absolute jouissance (not phallic jouissance)" (Copjec, 1994, 24). Each side takes a completely different path from the other, so "there is no sexual relationship". A man is a subject who completely obeys the phallic function and is enclosed in language; therefore, it can be said that male limitations are the basis of symbolic order. Hence, castration and phallic jouissance are his pieces from what he earns through fantasy; "the first signifier, the signifier of the Father, which is the origin of the chain of signifiers. Therefore, male jouissance, phallic jouissance or symbolic

¹ A core concept of Hegelian dialectic that has multiple meanings including to lift up, to keep or to cancel, to abolish. The thesis that is negated by antithesis does not completely eliminate, rather it both lifted up and denied; So, the thesis is "Aufhebung" ed.

² Nietzsche criticizes Plato for his utopian ideal world that makes the world of phenomena secondary and insufficient; so that man seeks the pure and whole jouissance at the other world.

³ Woman is not whole, so cannot roll as a signifier. Women are individuals forever and individuals, no matter how countless they are, are not able to set a horizon of subjectivity up.

jouissance does not go beyond the limits of the phallic" (Lacan, 2006, 324). And a woman – the subject who has not submitted to the phallic jouissance; Plus phallic jouissance, she is structurally talented to achieve another type of jouissance -surplus jouissance. The relation of S_1 (a fundamental signifier which remains other forever and is basically different from other signifiers) and surplus jouissance or **Other** jouissance is not the same as man's relationship with S_1 : S_1 is a limit and boundary for a man and an openness for a woman to the optional beloved beyond her anatomical and biological structure. In the binary distribution of sex, not only does nature play a role, but also significance necessity and a single choice between the phallic all and not-all¹. In this way, whether the subject considers himself full in his sexual emotions or under compulsion, he is faced with this necessary choice between all and not-all. Not-all excludes any universality because it only understands one series about multiplicity for lack of an exception; an exception that can make it all. Not-all is tied to **Other** jouissance, an ex-sist jouissance, that femininity hides it in the margins. Sexuation (which is formulated in L'étourdit²) makes men and women identified according to their jouissance.

The term "sexuation" identify man and woman, in the final analysis, by their modes of jouissance. The formulas of sexuation note and explain what we observe every day: the reign of the **Other's** norms stops, it could be said, at the foot of the bed (Soler, 2006, 177).

Yet still, Lacan insists: *There is no sexual relationship*. And: *Sexual identity is paradoxical* (Lacan, 1998, 116). What, then, is this thing we call "sexuality" in everyday life? "Sexuality is not some being that exists beyond the symbolic; it 'exists' solely as the contradiction of the symbolic space that appears because of the constitutively missing signifier, and what appears in its place—*jouissance*" (Zupančič, 2017, 42).

In Lacan's second seminar on Joyce (1979), he revisits a crucial distinction: the difference between the hysteric's position and the woman's position. "In the place where he distinguished the sexes by 'having or being the phallus,' he came to say, 'having or being a symptom.' The two formulas are not equivalent; they are, in fact, opposites. The phallus is a negative function of lack; the symptom is a positive function of *jouissance*. Thus, wanting 'to be the phallus,' as Lacan attributed to the hysteric, means precisely not wanting to be the symptom. A woman is specified by being a symptom. The hysteric, by contrast, is one who is fascinated by the symptom of the **Other**" (Soler, 2006, 63–64).

Therefore, Lacan describes the hysteric as wanting to be the phallus, which is to say: not wanting to be the symptom.

¹ Pas tout

² A lecture in 1972 which he discusses about the situation of psychoanalysis and the power of language or "talking cure". (Lacan, 2001, 449)

The representation of the phallus borders the relationship between woman, desirable (the object of desire) and man, desiring (subject of desire). To "Be the phallus" is a description of a woman's position in a sexual relationship; it must be underlined that it is a woman's position and not a woman's identity, because to "be the phallus" is not a woman's identity, but rather a status and position that a man's desire considers as complementary of his desire. It is a role—one dictated by desire—not a fixed essence. In this phallogocentric dialectic, everything can be referred back to the woman only as long as she represents the absolute **Other**.

Everything can be referred to the woman as long as she represents the absolute **Other** in a phallogocentric dialectic (Lacan, 1982, 94).

The subject is always represented in fantasy¹, and fantasy is the main actor of man's desire. In the absence of an original object, fantasy offers a space in which the subject learns how to desire. The fantasy formula shows the relationship between the subject and the object-cause of desire, or the *objet petit a*:



Figure 2. (Lacan, 2002, 487)

◊ or Fantasy, formulates the specific relationship between the subject and the Freudian object—the lost object². The subject, grounded in a fundamentally fantastic structure, wanders along the trajectory of desire in search of the *objet petit a*—the representation of his castration. This *objet petit a* is none other than the Freudian *das Ding*³: a not-thing that becomes a thing through its connection with desire. It is an elusive presence, and the subject endlessly busies himself attempting to fill his eternal and insatiable lack—his castration—through the fulfillment of this *das Ding*.

we might just as well characterize this object as a lost object. But although it is essentially a question of finding it again, the object indeed has never been lost (Lacan, 1997, 58).

So, *Das Ding* is the first object; the one that is lost, and that must be found again. The Thing is at the center of the subject, as excluded, as that which cannot be said.

According to Lacan's graph of sexualization, fantasy is structurally masculine because male desire is always directed toward the object situated on the feminine side. In this schema, a

¹ Fantasy is an essential element of sexuality; desire, at an already given up battle, consumes objects to make itself a fullness and fantasy is the director of this scene. Fantasy is not a personal adventure, but it includes very general spaces like cinema, art, literature, politics etc. to dictate subject how to desire.

² *Objet petit a*

³ This "thing" is like a blackhole- an emptiness that absorbs everything around and never fill. It is not an actual object, but rather a placeholder for something lost or absent.

man must desire—his desire is necessary—whereas a woman merely has to allow herself to desire. “Man’s desire is the desire of the **Other**” (Lacan, 1998, 38): it is inescapable, indispensable, and inevitable. In contrast, woman’s desire is fluid, contingent, and emerges from her non-existence (*ex-sistence*) within the phallic order.

For a man, woman is fantasy—she is the *objet petit a*, the cause of his desire. But “for a woman, man is anything you please, specifically an affliction that is worse than a sinthome. A ravage, even if there is no equivalence” (Lacan, 2016, 84). The distinction between male and female desire is a paradoxical one: it constitutes a difference that “distinguishes one sex from another [but] belongs neither to this sex nor to that one” (Le Gaufey, 2006, 11). In this way, the sexual division of desire does not belong to either side in itself but rather marks a structural impasse between them.

Lacan describes this impasse through a biological metaphor:

We know that sexual division, insofar as it reigns over most living beings, is that which ensures the survival of a species.... Let us say that the species survives in the form of its individuals. Nevertheless, the survival of the horse as a species has a meaning—each horse is transitory and dies. So, you see, the link between sex and death, sex and the death of the individual, is fundamental (Lacan, 1987, 150).

Sexuation thus names the structure that clarifies the relationship between sexual reproduction and death. Death, here, becomes the name for the negativity inherent in sexuation. In urging its individuals to reproduce, the species guarantees its own survival by way of their destruction. Survival and destruction contain one another. And it is at this point of negativity that human beings differ from animals (*diaphora*): *what distinguishes us from other species is the singularization of this negativity—a negativity that, paradoxically, is also what we share with animals* (Zupančič, 2017, 93).

Lacan’s early reflections in *The Signification of the Phallus* (1958) followed a different path, presenting sex through the lens of phallogocentric distinction:

Let us thus examine the effects of this presence [of the signifier]. They include, first, a deviation of man’s needs due to the fact that he speaks: to the extent that his needs are subjected to demand, they come back to him in an alienated form.... What is thus alienated in needs constitutes an *Urverdrängung* [primal repression], as it cannot, hypothetically, be articulated in demand; it nevertheless appears in an offshoot that presents itself in man as desire (*das Begehren*). The phenomenology that emerges from analytic experience is certainly of a kind to demonstrate the paradoxical, deviant, erratic, eccentric, and even scandalous nature of desire that distinguishes it from need” (Lacan, 2006b, 579)

The dialectic of the phallus stages the comedy of sex, in which each gender plays a role: one plays the role of a man, the other of a woman. Masculine performance and feminine

masquerade are not symmetrical. Yet the male representation feminizes the other by projecting onto them the locus of desire. In the dimension of masquerade—where the **Other** is present—the subject is released into their sexual role. Here, homosexuality can emerge as a response to the disappointment of the demand (Lacan, 1970, 280).

It is crucial, however, not to read this **Other**-masquerade in Kantian terms. There is no hidden truth behind the semblance; the **Other** is *semblant* itself. Truth and semblance are not opposites, but continuous surfaces of the same Möbius strip. Thus, the **Other**'s sexual role is not a false mask concealing the Real—it is the very reality of sexuality.

These are the coordinates of what Zupančič calls the *Anti-Sexus device*: Sexuality is problematic because it involves the **Other** who—unpredictable, unreliable, with her own will, caprices, indispositions, or unavailability—eludes any fixed role or function (Zupančič, 2017, 27).

In this way, it can be said: woman is the **Other** woman, even as she is real. That is all he notes in *Lecture de L'Étourdit* (Lacan, 2001, 29). In other words, the **Other** emerges in the sexual role through masquerade (Lacan, 1982, 93–94).

Lacan's later position on the "sexual" no longer describes any particular content or activity, but rather outlines a specific logic of relationality—a mode of thinking about the non-relation that structures all forms of human linkage. In this sense, "sex" is not the name of any natural or experiential category, but rather a gap, a minus, a constitutive absence—what Zupančič calls the *constructive minus*—that defines the very space of sexual being. Neither the penis nor the phallus defines sex; rather, it is the absence of an Idea of sex (in the Platonic sense) that defines it.

Does a Woman Have a Hysterical Desire?

Freud defines woman through the concept of *forcing*, which operates as a masculine economy of desire. In contrast, Lacan posits that woman is not defined by an organ, by a "La femme," but rather as *une femme*—a singular instance, never universal. As the diagram of sexuation demonstrates, the absence of an exception on the feminine side renders the category of women untotalizable. Thus, "woman" is always *une femme*—always a woman selected or signified by a man. The **Other** grants her this singular article "une," binding her to a position of individuality that cannot escape the symbolic. This symbolic position, in which woman is always the object-cause of the man's desire, compels us more than ever to examine her through the structure of hysterical discourse.

$$\frac{\cancel{S}}{a} \rightarrow \frac{S_1}{S_2}$$

Figure 3. (Lacan, 2006, 12)

In the structure of the hysteric's discourse, the subject (\$) or symptom occupies the agent position, compelling the Master Signifier (S1) in the place of the **Other** to produce S₂—knowledge. This knowledge is hysterical in form: mediated by the **Other** and grounded in the *objet petit a*, which occupies the position of truth. Yet this truth—an incursion of the Real into the Symbolic—remains irreducible to signification. It anticipates the perpetual deferral of desire, neutralized by the knowledge that seeks to grasp it. The hysteric persistently demands the Master produce knowledge, only to disrupt his responses, pointing always to a remainder that eludes total understanding. The *objet petit a* as truth reveals a structure that refuses epistemic closure.

Returning to the diagram of sexualization, one observes a threefold relation in woman's position: on one side, she desires the phallic function (Φ) from the masculine side; on the other, she aligns with the feminine side, yet both axes signal a scent of absence and loss—not a lack of having, but a lack of being. It is here that hysteria finds its opening: feminine jealousy, in the hysterical mode, emerges not from envy over possession but from an existential deficiency. The hysterical woman, occupying the position of the subject, ironically invites domination—“let your will be done unto me”—while simultaneously interrogating this desire, recognizing it as a symptom of her alienation. She asks, “What do you want me to be?”

The hysteric seeks a man who *is*—one whose existence is organized around knowing the object. But this object is never grasped, always deferred. The man in his phallic entirety is defined by *jouissance*, and thus “there is no sexual relation.” This ontological impasse is mirrored in the woman's blocked access to being. She is not-all (*pas-toute*), marked by a non-phallic mode of desire—an impossibility that resists totalization. As Soler (2006) notes, woman is not fully inscribed in the symbolic order. Lacan insists, “I am not obliged to measure woman by castration” (Lacan, 2001, 21); she lacks the exception that would complete a set—she is that very absence.

Man never encounters the **Other** (his sexual partner) except as *objet petit a*, the cause of his desire. He cannot cross to the other side of the line; he cannot reach the woman *as* woman (Lacan, 1998, 80). So, when Lacan reinterprets Freud's question—“What does a woman want?”—he answers: the woman seeks *jouissance*. Yet the hysterical subject is divided: she neither fully desires *jouissance* nor fully rejects it. What, then, does the hysteric want? She wants to *be*. The woman strives to “rise”—to affirm existence—through her dissatisfaction with the **Other's** *jouissance*, producing a surplus being from this gap.

Is woman, then, the hysterical subject? While hysteria and femininity are often conflated, they are not the same. Their proximity emerges through mediation by the **Other**. “Where woman exercises this mediation in order to realize herself as a symptom, the hysteric uses the desire of the **Other**

and identifies with its lack” (Soler, 2006, 160). The diagram below outlines their formal overlap while preserving their divergence.

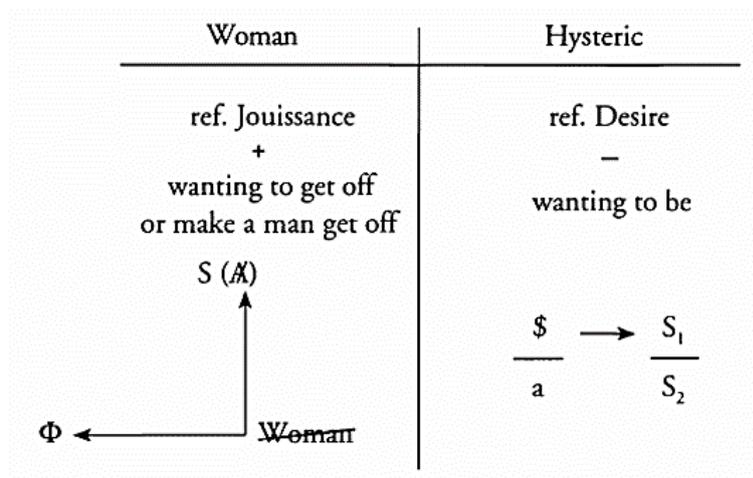


Figure 4. (Soler, 2006, 62)

The woman seeks *jouissance*, the hysteric seeks desire. These two—*jouissance* and desire—structure sexual difference and sexuation. But beyond these, what does the hysteric pursue in her multiplicity of lovers? Each man plays a role: he may amplify her *jouissance*, or he may serve as a *sinthome*—a condition of her psychic consistency. Sometimes, his presence simply secures her relation to her own body. *Being* remains the ultimate question. Woman as *La*—the one who does not exist—struggles to affirm her existence. Her “not-all” nature resists full symbolic identification, placing her always at the edge of being.

Hence psychoanalysis links femininity and masochism. In the sexual imaginary, woman is a pliable prop in the staging of male fantasy. That she may find pleasure in this role—by proxy—is possible, even likely. Yet this pleasure is a masochistic offering of her body to a desire that is not her own, leaving her dependent on man (Irigaray, 1985, 25).

Both Freud and Lacan affirm the masochistic dimension of feminine desire. Lacan calls it “a fantasy of the desire of the man” (Lacan, 1982, 92); Freud claims it is intrinsic to femininity, a pursuit of *jouissance* through pain, even martyrdom (Freud, 1961, 161). Pain—the most immediate sensory impression—renders the female body present to itself. This is the deadlock of femininity: *La*, who does not exist, wounds herself in order to experience her body—one constituted by absence, by the void of the vagina. This hysterical-masochistic dynamic creates a paradoxical subject who offers herself as object: “do with me what you will.” She displaces the masochism onto alienation, but when masochism emerges, she recognizes herself as symptom—symptom of the gap in language.

Might woman be conceived as a non-phallic exception, a constitutive minus that renders language itself possible? Is *La* an opening onto a late ontology? Woman as *In Praise of Pain*—a work-in-being—charts a metaphysical path that studies a non-existent signifier, a nothingness that nevertheless strives toward existence. In this light, femininity becomes a rebellion against the symbolic order, which it simultaneously preserves and disrupts.

Conclusion

This essay demonstrates the psychoanalytic discourse's inability to define woman through any fixed, identifying characteristic. Woman resists categorization; she eludes conceptual closure. This failure is not incidental—it marks the site where language collapses upon itself. The transgressive nature of sex reveals the internal limits of the signifying chain. Not that sex is chaotic in itself, but that it emerges precisely at the fault line of linguistic consistency. Here lies the paradox of femininity: What does the woman—who does not exist—want? She wants to *be*.

In the end, to be erratic, unreadable, and elusive is not a pathology but the essence of what woman *is*. Consequently, movements that blame culture or symbols for the constraints placed on women are not radical enough. The woman, by her very being, is a scratch on the face of civilization, culture, language, and the **Other**

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