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“Eyes a man could drown in”: Phallic Myth and Femininity in John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*

MAHITOSH MANDAL

ABSTRACT

This paper is a psychoanalytic study of “gender myths” as presented in John Fowles’s famous novel The French Lieutenant’s Woman (1969). It begins by describing Fowles’s interest in Freudian psychoanalysis and his use of psychoanalytic ideas in constructing fictional characters. The paper subsequently explains how the concept of “postmodern indeterminacy” as found in Fowles’s text needs to be read in connection with the “enigma” as embodied by Sarah Woodruff, the female protagonist. An attempt is then made to make sense of the “enigma of femininity,” a critical concern among the psychoanalysts. Elaborating on Lacanian developments and critique of Freudian ideas, this paper uses the psychoanalytic notions related to the truth of the feminine, fictionality of the masculine, jouissance, and sexual non-rapport to offer an analysis of the enigma of Sarah Woodruff, the failures of Charles Smithson the male protagonist, and the inconclusiveness of Fowles’s narrative. The discussion highlights the link between feminism and Lacanian psychoanalysis on the question of construction of gender identities.

KEYWORDS: *sexual non-rapport, jouissance, phallic myth, femininity, postmodernism, Lacanian psychoanalysis*

Do not ask me to explain what I have done. I cannot explain it. It is not to be explained. . . . I am not to be understood even by myself. And I can't tell you why, but I believe my happiness depends on my not understanding.

—SARAH WOODRUFF, THE FEMALE PROTAGONIST,
IN *THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMAN*, 342, 431

There is a *jouissance* . . . “beyond the phallus.” There is a *jouissance* that is hers, that belongs to that “she” that doesn't exist and doesn't signify anything. There is a *jouissance* that is hers about which she herself perhaps knows nothing if not that she experiences it—that much she knows. She knows it, of course, when it comes. It does not happen to all of them.

—JACQUES LACAN ON FEMININE *JOUISSANCE* IN *THE SEMINAR OF JACQUES LACAN BOOK XX (ENCORE): ON FEMININE SEXUALITY, LIMITS OF LOVE AND KNOWLEDGE*, 1972–1973, 74

INTRODUCTION

As a thinker and literary writer, John Fowles was quite substantially interested in the working of the unconscious mind, and in the psychological and psychoanalytic theories pertaining to the same. Eileen Warburton, Fowles's biographer, notes that Fowles was so fascinated with psychoanalysis that he was inspired to analyze his and his wife's minds by interpreting their dreams. His basic techniques of understanding the unconscious were Freudian, though he took recourse to Jungian, Alderian, and Hornerian methodologies as and when necessary. In *John Fowles: A Life in Two Worlds*, Warburton writes:

Fowles completed an intense period of analysis of his dreams and those of his wife. In his “method” he made the basic interpretation Freudian—that is, he wrote, “treat all imagery as illustration of pre-conscious traumas that have to do with (a) withdrawal of the breast-corruption of the pure mother-baby relationship, (b) feelings about parents or the parent substitutes; Oedipus complex and the rest.” Imagery, however, was to be interpreted using Jungian, Alderian, and Hornerian methodologies.¹

Fowles's fascination with psychoanalysis (Freudian) and analytical psychology (Jungian) is reflected in his literary writings, especially in his novels. A close study reveals that, to a great extent, Fowles's texts are psychoanalytically informed. His protagonists are subjected to "psychological tests," conducted by figures supposed to function as psychoanalysts and psychiatrists. His characters speak the vocabulary of psychoanalysis, frequently using in their conversations terms like "Oedipus complex," "repetition compulsion," "case histories," "sado-masochism," "hysteria," "father/mother-substitute," "gaze," and so forth. Real or fictional "case histories" (in the Freudian fashion) constitute, or are incorporated in, his narratives to the extent that his novels have been called "psychoanalytic trial narratives." That is not to say that Fowles mechanically imitates Freudian case histories which he found extremely fascinating and which he, in real life, made use of to understand himself and others. With postmodernist inclination, Fowles maintains an ironic, parodic, even interrogatory distance vis-à-vis the larger discourse of psychoanalysis (predominantly Freudian), as sometimes his fictional psychiatrists and psychoanalysts are shown to have ended up with false interpretation of the protagonists' minds. It has been rightly pointed out that in his novels Fowles does not merely *represent* psychical structures but also "interpret psychoanalytical meanings." Such "interpretations" and "interrogations" do not however indicate a gesture of rejection of psychoanalysis, provided Fowles's own preoccupations with the human mind. Throughout his career Fowles maintained a sustained interest in psychoanalysis. For example, later on, when Gilbert Rose wrote a Freudian reading of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*,³ presenting the unconscious significance of the novel to its author, Fowles was highly impressed and was immediately inspired to write an essay called "Hardy and the Hag," a psychoanalytic study of Thomas Hardy's novel *The Well Beloved*. Fowles's reinterpretation of psychoanalysis could also be considered as part of the larger climate of opinions and diversity of followers/schools⁴ that Freudian psychoanalysis (both in theory and practice) had eventually generated in Europe. With the rise of Jacques Lacan on the international psychoanalytic scene, his historic elimination from the International Psychoanalytical Association, accompanied by his widely influential weekly lectures/seminars on psychoanalysis in Paris for about twenty-seven years (1953–1980), most of these schools of Freudian psychoanalysis would gradually recede to the background.

It is hardly possible that Fowles had read Lacan. Fowles (1926–2005) was younger than Lacan (1901–1981); however, even though Fowles was psychoanalytically informed there is a curious absence of any reference to

Lacan in his works. There are direct references to Lacan's contemporaries like Roland Barthes (1915-1980) and Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) in his novels. In fact, a text like *The French Lieutenant's Woman* shows that Fowles is writing as a critically conscious post-structuralist. The first French publication of Lacan's major written work *Écrits* was in 1966 while the first English translation of the same was published in 1977. Similarly, the first published transcription of Lacan's lectures (*Seminar Book XI*) in French came out in 1973 while the first English translation of his seminars (*Seminar Book XI*) was available in 1977. In the English-speaking world Lacan was fairly unknown around the time Fowles was writing his masterpieces. This was mainly due to the fact that he spoke more than he wrote. Could we then conclude that the absence of Lacan in Fowles was due to the relative inaccessibility of his lectures and writings outside France? It remains a fact that Lacan was somehow less known to Fowles, who studied in Oxford and lived in Dorset, United Kingdom, than Derrida and Barthes whom Fowles fondly and playfully refers to in his novels.

It does not matter whether or not Fowles himself directly used Lacan in his writing; what matters is that both of them had shared interests in psychoanalysis. Apart from his critical interest in Freudian psychoanalytic ideas (as was the case with Lacan, albeit in a more rigorous and clinical way), Fowles, almost in all of his novels, was preoccupied with the working of the human mind and engaged with the issues of male desire and fantasy, the "enigma" of femininity, and the (im-)possibility of man-woman relationship. These ideas were the key concerns of Lacan—concerns that evolved into some original and immensely significant concepts including feminine *jouissance*, phallic myth, sexual non-rapport, and the limits of love and knowledge, found most notably in his *Seminar Book XX* and elsewhere. In a more critical sense, the problems with psychiatry that Fowles theoretically encountered (reflected through his attempt to disprove the diagnosis made by his fictional psychiatrists), can be rightly addressed using Lacanian ideas. It seems Fowles was eager to present some complex psychic situations that could not be easily fathomed, unlike some psychiatrists who thought they could do so. Through his clinical engagement with psychoanalysis, Lacan too had repeatedly addressed the ungraspable and not-easily-graspable domains of human psyche and criticized a class of practitioners who lacked the necessary critical edge in their theoretical and clinical engagements with psychoanalysis.

Indeed, the major postmodernist preoccupations of Fowles—his strategies of rewriting, parody and playfulness, his repeated keeping of

the endings of his stories unresolved, his use of metafictional moments and the moments of ontological frame-breaking as the author intrudes the narrative, and so on—could best be understood in poststructuralist terms in so far as Lacanian ideas have significant structuralist and post-structuralist implications. As Eli Zaretsky in his essay “Postmodernism and Psychoanalysis” points out, Freud’s theories originating as they did in the modernist period cannot explain all that a postmodern “subject” might experience. If, as Derrida says, inconclusiveness is one of the hallmarks of postmodernism and indeterminacy marks postmodern subjectivity, then Lacan, concludes Zaretsky, has given us the first postmodernist-poststructuralist conception of psychoanalysis “that truly broke with modernist assumptions concerning subjectivity and sexual difference.”⁵ Hence, he adds, a meaningful history of postmodernism should assign relatively more importance to Lacan. Zaretsky’s point might seem to be rather simplistic here, especially his understanding of Freud as a “modernist.” However, he has, as it were, hit the nail on the head, and has echoed a point that Slavoj Žižek makes in his studies on postmodernism. Žižek, while talking about the later films of Alfred Hitchcock, states that a post-structuralist reading of a postmodern text and another reading of the same text not informed by the poststructuralist ideas would be fundamentally different from each other, the former alone disentangling the true significance of the postmodern narrative.⁶

TRUTH OF THE FEMININE AND FICTIONALITY OF THE MASCULINE

One of the ways to introduce the concept of truth/fiction, a major concern in Lacanian psychoanalysis, would be to say a few words about the Japanese film *Rashomon* (1950), which won the Golden Lion Award (1951) and established Akira Kurosawa as an international film-maker. Famously, in this film, a murder incident and a related rape incident are presented in four different and somewhat contradictory versions presented from four different subject positions, each of which is initially, equally convincing. Through this film, Kurosawa gives us a number of critical insights on the question of truth. The original incident (murder or rape) or the primal scene is always already lost. But the loss is only too unbearable which is why a re-presentation of the primal scene becomes an imperative. It is only through the subjective re-presentation (with all the unconscious nuances of the word “subjective”) of the traumatic moment that the truth of that

moment can be constructed. In other words, truth cannot be accessed in its own abode, in an unmediated way. Truth exists only through the narration of it, that is, through the mediation of discourses/visuals. What is more important, the discursive representation of truth is precisely what *creates* the truth, which would otherwise be non-existent. Truth is devoid of any singularity and authenticity; it exists as “truths,” in the plural, in multiple versions and variations, deriving from the different subject positions at stake. Here, Kurosawa seems to have evoked a major Lacanian insight, as proposed by Lacan in “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter’”: truth is structured like fiction or truth reveals a “fictional ordering” where truth has proximity toward the Real as well as the Symbolic, in the Lacanian sense.⁷ Here, if fiction is considered to be (or based on, as in the case of John Fowles’s narrative to be explained shortly) deception or lie, even then such falsity may be said to be inscribed in the very text of truth. Insofar as fiction is understood broadly as the domain of language or the Symbolic, truth can only be half-said or half-articulated, for there is always something in truth that escapes symbolization or remains unsayable. It is this domain of the unsayable in truth that makes truth similar to the Real understood as that which escapes signifierization.⁸

For Lacan, the proliferation of fiction or discourses is directly linked to an attempt to avoid the void, to avoid an encounter with the Real or with a traumatic truth. A literary example here could be the case of the *Arabian Nights*, a sequence of interconnected stories which, as planned by Scheherazade, the storyteller-queen, have their roots in a traumatic event, that is, the betrayal by the first Queen, her murder by her Sultan-husband, and his consequent desperation to avenge the betrayal by marrying and murdering one virgin after another. The proliferation of the stories, meant to approximate 1001 stories, is an attempt to defer another traumatic moment, the death of the queen Scheherazade in the hands of her Sultan-husband, and the succession of marriages and murders that would have followed. Here, murder/death would be the domain of the Real or the traumatic domain of beyond-the-language while the constantly increasing stories would constitute the fictional/Symbolic universe which helps one in avoiding/hiding the Real. For Lacan, the domain of language is predominantly the domain of the Symbolic which is precisely what creates and categorizes what is known as “reality.” The entry of the human subject into the domain of the Symbolic, or vice versa is necessarily related to the exclusion of the Real from reality. However, the domain of the reality/Symbolic, for Lacan, is not just an exclusion of the Real/truth. The Symbolic is also that

which bears a truth, the truth about its origins in the Real. The Real does not “exist” in the Symbolic as such, but it “ex-sists” (exists outside but insists on) the Symbolic, and like the umbilical cord’s relation to the body, always functions as a remainder/reminder setting the Symbolic in motion. The Symbolic or the domain of discourse and representation has its origins in the Real/the unrepresentable/truth, and carries within itself the remainder, or traces, of the Real.

The proliferation of signifiers to avoid the void can be illustrated by the metaphor of an onion.⁹ The onion has multiple layers, which when peeled off, one after another, reveals that at its center, there is void. The layers could be compared with the discursive layers of the Symbolic reality which disguise a lack, precisely by containing it. One can uncover the layers of the onion to discover or “unconceal” the truth; however, in the place of truth one can find only a lack of it, a void, horror, the unsignifiable Real that must be hidden, or disguised, through discourse. It is understandable why Lacan has stated that every discourse is a semblance.¹⁰ Every discourse presents the semblance of truth while in reality in the place of truth there is only a lack. In his analysis of courtly love, Lacan has pointed out that the discourse of courtly love in the medieval times was not a mimetic exercise, it didn’t represent what was there in the feudal reality; rather, it represented what was *not* there.¹¹ Courtly love, for Lacan, was based on a lack of sexual advances or on maintaining proper physical distance from the lady on part of the knight. The discourse of love and romance represented an inevitable truth, that is, no such ideal love-relation could take place in actuality, that the lord/lady-knight relationships had an underlying tension that would lead to the eventual de-structuration of feudalism which Johan Huizinga has termed “waning of the middle ages.”¹² Courtly romance could be considered to be a kind of wish-fulfilment on the part of the upholders of feudalism, a wish that was far from being fulfilled in the domain of social reality; hence, the need for literary discourse.

It may be noted that the French word for truth is *vérité* which is a feminine noun. By and large, Lacan brings out the link between truth and femininity. It can be argued that femininity in the purest sense is a domain outside the phallogocentric language. Masculinity for Lacan is a fiction which is structured in law, logic, and language; whereas femininity is the domain of truth, the domain beyond language and representation, the domain that challenges the concepts of law and logic. The “myth of masculinity” or the “phallic myth” derives from the notion of the phallus. Lacan explains that phallus does not just refer to the biological organ; rather, it is predominantly

a Symbolic entity comprising a set of traditionally inherited concepts like virility, power, and superiority, supposed to construct the identity of the masculine subject. Phallus is an overcoat that the male subject is made to put on by the society, in order to achieve "manhood." In this sense, one can say, slightly modifying Simone de Beauvoir's oft-quoted statement, that one is not born a man; one becomes a man, that is, one has to internalize the existing notions of masculinity in order to have his subjectivity constructed.

Following Lacan, one can state that woman's (understood not as a biological but a psychoanalytic category) existence qua woman, or as "purely feminine," is the Other to language, and that woman cannot exist entirely as woman, or entirely as feminine, since that would make her completely incomprehensible and unrepresentable to others as well as to herself. For Lacan, woman is not entirely cut by language, and insofar as she is not cut by language, in so far as she verges on the Real, she is a potential threat to the fiction called masculinity and patriarchy. Patriarchy can at all exist and sustain itself so long as it can avoid encountering the purely feminine. Women themselves as subjects are trained from the beginning of their life to uphold and authenticate the patriarchal institution, at the cost of keeping aside, or sacrificing, the purely feminine or that which is fatal to the phallic. One can say that women function as the gatekeepers of patriarchy.¹³ Gatekeepers exist, ironically, at the margins of an institution but are instrumental in protecting the institution.

There are two ways in which women authenticate the phallic myth by apparently sacrificing "pure femininity" and fitting into the domain of language and understanding. These are what could be called "woman as masquerade" and "woman as symptom."¹⁴ As masquerade, a woman upholds and authenticates the phallic myth, the fiction about the virility, heroism, superiority, and power of the masculine subject. In other words, as masquerade, woman masks, or does not trigger, the disturbing questions regarding masculine subject's sense of being superior to women, or his right to exert power over women, for example. As masquerade woman protects man from experiencing existential crisis by making him sense a kind of psychic unity about his being. Woman, in the Lacanian sense, is also the symptom of man. Here, symptom would refer to woman as a site for the disguised fulfilment of man's repressed sexual desire. Sexual desire is repressed in the classical Freudian sense because the first sexual impulse was directed toward the mother, an impulse which had to be repressed because of paternal prohibition.¹⁵ For the masculine subject, woman is not an original object of desire but rather always a *substitute* for the first object of desire, that is, mother. If symptom is

understood as a return-of-the-repressed in a disguised form, then for man, woman qua man's substitute-object-of-desire stages man's repressed sexual desire. Because the original object is always already lost, woman is less an object than an *object cause* of man's desire and fantasy. Woman as substitute object cannot fulfil man's desire but brings back his repressed desires with the caveat that fulfilment of desire is impossible. Desire thus caused may not be fulfilled or may not aim at fulfilment but it does contribute to the articulation and recognition of the masculine subject as a desiring subject.

Both as masquerade and as symptom a woman contributes to a rather ironical sense of self-importance and security of the masculine subject. As masquerade, woman enhances the false sense of superiority and power of the masculine subject and as symptom woman offers sustenance of the masculine subject as a desiring subject with no possible promise to fulfil his desire ever. Further, both as masquerade and symptom a woman is understandable and explainable since she thereby fits into the coordinates of desire and fantasy of man and is hence graspable in language. However, woman qua woman is the Other to language and in so far as she is, she remains a perpetual threat to the entire Symbolic domain and phallic myth. As would be seen shortly in the discussion of John Fowles's woman protagonist, the encounter with this Other side of woman can lead to an absolute dissolution of the masculine subject. It is obvious that these three aspects of femininity correspond to the three Lacanian registers: the Imaginary (woman as object of fantasy or as man's symptom), the Symbolic (woman as masquerade), and the Real (woman ek-sisting the phallic domain).

Because masculinity is a fiction and for a woman to be related to man is to participate in the authenticating of this fiction, sexual "relationships" are by implication based on a kind of emptiness and falsehood. It is in this context that Lacan stated that there cannot be any "sexual rapport" between man and woman.¹⁶ The hyphen in the expression "man-woman" (as in "man-woman relationship") is crucial.¹⁷ The hyphen is like the bar between signifier and signified in Ferdinand de Saussure's formulation of the linguistic sign¹⁸:

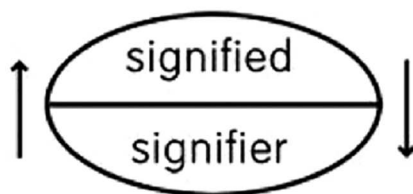


FIG. 1 Ferdinand de Saussure's diagram for the linguistic sign.

Lacan draws attention to the bar in Saussure's diagram. He argues that because of the bar, the signifier and signified will be eternally alienated from one another; hence, the arrows (signifying an interaction between signifier and signified) that de Saussure puts across the signifier and signified make no sense. In this way, the hyphen would keep "man" and "woman" forever apart. The hyphen and the bar could also be considered as the phallus where the phallus stands for fiction of masculinity and for woman's participation in the same as masquerade and symptom. To quote Garry Leonard, "For Lacan, the sexual relation consists of two interrelated gender myths: the myth of psychic unity and coherence that is the masculine subject and corresponding myth of the feminine subject as the site of the otherness and absence that guarantees the supposedly self-evident unity of man. The irony of this is that by believing in the phallus, and in the law and order that it represents, a man is symbolically castrated because his penis is, subsequently, just an easy rem(a)inder of his insatiable desire that must, henceforth, be completed and authenticated by something outside of himself."¹⁹

In this context, Lacan also talks about *jouissance*. A French term that has been kept untranslated for its uniqueness, *jouissance* can be understood as orgasmic bliss, that is, a kind of pleasant pain or painful pleasure, a paradoxical notion that derives partly from Freud's "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" and that clearly distinguishes itself from the idea of "pure" pain or "pure" pleasure. Evans puts it succinctly: "The term *jouissance* thus nicely expresses the paradoxical satisfaction that the subject derives from his symptom, or, to put it another way, the suffering that he derives from his own satisfaction."²⁰ *Jouissance* in this sense is related to a kind of transgression, for example, the desire to transgress the pleasure principle fixed by societal norms and conventions. Lacan talks about two kinds of *jouissance*, that is, phallic *jouissance* and the Other (feminine/supplementary) *jouissance*, and points out the crucial difference between "experiencing" them and "articulating" them. The phallic *jouissance* can be experienced and articulated. However, the feminine *jouissance* is an experience of transgressive pleasure that is on the other side of language and that can only be experienced but cannot be articulated or represented through language. This Other *jouissance* can be understood side by side with the notion of "pure femininity," truth, the Real, and the domain of "beyond the phallus." In his writings on the Baroque art, especially in his analysis of the Baroque sculpture "The Ecstasy of St. Teresa" in *Seminar Book XX*, Lacan draws attention to a certain ecstatic

experience similar to the Other *jouissance* which is inarticulable in phallogentric language. It is not for nothing that this Lacanian idea of an inarticulable feminine experience beyond the phallic would have an impact on the contemporary French feminists who would explore the possibility of an alternative language for the woman through, for example, the conceptualizing of “écriture féminine” or feminine writing. The problem with feminine *jouissance* is that since it is ineffable and resists phallicization, it unsettles the masculine subject who happens to confront it. This *jouissance* may expose the phallic pretensions and threaten the dissolution and fragmentation of the false sense of unified masculine selfhood.

PHALLIC MYTH AND FEMININITY IN FOWLES

John Fowles’s novel *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969), set in the nineteenth-century Victorian England, tells the story of a village-girl Sarah Woodruff—who is initially found as an outcast (a “fallen woman” since she *supposedly* had a liaison with a certain French lieutenant). She then apparently falls in love with the male protagonist Charles Smithson, who leaves his fiancée Ernestina for her, yet whom Sarah eventually betrays to ultimately make her way right into the heart of London, into the famous Victorian artistic household of the Rossettis. However, later on, Charles discovers Sarah a virgin, and that she has fooled everybody by circulating the story that she was the French lieutenant’s “woman.” Why did Sarah do this? We are left to ponder. After the intercourse scene, as Charles leaves her temporarily, promising to return to her shortly, Sarah suddenly disappears. Charles would desperately look for her for years. Why does she disappear? We are left to reflect upon the event. While through Sarah, Fowles successfully constructs one of the strongest and most complex women characters in literary history, he adds an unprecedented twist at the end of the narrative by assigning the story three different endings. The three endings are as follows: first ending is apparently a day-dream in which Ernestina and Charles get married, and Sarah no more comes on the scene except being casually spoken of once by Charles. In the second ending, Sarah appears to be a manipulator of Charles’s feelings. But then, to Charles’s and the readers’ astonishment, she reveals their child to Charles. There is a sort of union at last: Sarah’s “head against his breast shakes with a mute vehemence” (*FLW*, 439). What does it imply? Reconciliation? What will they do? Get married?

Would Sarah take him as an extension of her happiness? Any such resolution is kept suspended. The third ending takes off from the middle of the second ending just when Lalage, their child, is about to enter. Although the narrator has his excuses to suspend the earlier endings as inappropriate, the third ending is as inconclusive as the earlier two.

The multiple endings of the novel and the enigma called Sarah Woodruff (somewhat like the heroine in Luis Buñuel's 1977 movie *That Obscure Object of Desire*) have, for their obvious significance, repeatedly received critical attention. While Linda Hutcheon, among others, has attempted to analyze the formal structure of the novel, special attention has been paid to the psychic universe of Sarah and Charles by Robert Huffaker, Bruce Woodcock, Gilbert Rose, and Olga Kirillova, among others.²¹ The theories of Jung and Freud have been central to the majority of writings of this kind, except one article written by Olga Kirillova from a Lacanian standpoint. Also, all these scholars in different ways indicate the kind of impact Sarah's character has on Charles the male protagonist. Huffaker, for example, tries to understand Sarah in conjunction with Jung's insights through analytical psychology into the female mind. He contends that Sarah, by maintaining a passive attitude, aids Charles in his self-realization. Lauren Barral presents a somewhat similar insight by keeping a sustained focus on Charles: "Within the enigmatic narrative, the protagonist Charles Smithson first initiates a quest for Sarah's mystery. Progressively, the quest for Sarah turns into a quest for his own self-knowledge."²² Woodcock makes the point that Charles is forced to a realization of self and autonomy through his ironical or contradictory idealization of, and attempts to, appropriate Sarah. Bonnie Zare, in her powerful reading of Sarah Woodruff in "Reclaiming Masculinist Texts for Feminist Readers," talks about the richness of Sarah's character which motivates feminist readings. She refers to the author's ambiguous take on the changing roles of women in Victorian England and concludes: "the text is finally ambiguous enough to allow Sarah to transcend the bounds of the words which try to circumscribe her."²³ While such a conclusion is indeed of great importance for the present article, Bonnie Zare's article does not consider the significant Lacanian intervention in the understanding of femininity. Rose's article is probably the first proper attempt to read Fowles psychoanalytically in conjunction with Freud with an emphasis on the theme of loss in creative process. Olga Kirillova's article in Lacanian terms considers the French lieutenant a phallic signifier for Sarah and the relations between the characters as one of "transference." Some of these

articles provide new perspectives, no doubt, but they have their limitations. Sarah to both Huffaker and Woodcock apparently aids in the formation of Charles's self but their discussion seems to present Sarah as a mere part of Charles's consciousness, without a strong individuality. Rose's Freudian reading, even though it appealed a lot to readers including Fowles himself, does not seem entirely convincing because of its psycho-biographical inferences, given the limitations a piece of psycho-biographical criticism might have (problems with psychoanalyzing an author through one of his published books). Kirillova's clinically inspired reading (solely focusing on the concept of "transference") is undeniably a novel Lacanian engagement with Fowles; but in no way does it exhaust Lacan in the literary universe of the text.

Critically differing from all these existing readings and specifically focusing on Lacanian ideas, in this paper I claim that it would be insufficient to say that the novel with its multiple endings is an experiment with the narrative form. There is something more in it, an impasse that resists any straight forward resolution to the story. With specific focus on the female protagonist, I claim that this impasse is Sarah Woodruff herself, the content of whose character produces multiple and contradictory effects and possibilities both for the narrative as well as for the male protagonist. Fowles's biographical details suggest that the author was actually undecided as to how to conclude the story, given the kind of character he had constructed. Eileen Warburton, Fowles's biographer, writes that the ending of the novel, as was initially composed by Fowles, was like the following (including a twist even in this initial draft): "After a twenty-month search Charles finds Sarah living in Clapham, presumably married. Denying she ever loved him, she sends him away. Leaving with bruised pride, Charles cynically sends flowers of farewell and learns from the seller that Mrs. Smithson [Sarah] lives alone, supporting her baby son by modelling at the Royal Academy of Art. Joyfully, Charles rushes to a tender reconciliation to the promise of marriage and another child."²⁴ Fowles's wife, Elizabeth Fowles, rejected this ending by calling it "too pat": "Sarah," Elizabeth wrote, "was the one person who should come through strong as part of the twentieth-century conditions of complicated male/female female [*sic*] intellect . . . should stand as the tragic figure in some way. Your inconclusive *modern* human being. . . . Therefore I do not think you can end with the ending you have." Warburton adds: "In July 1968 Fowles wrote both a stronger version of the conventional happy ending and a new "tragic"

ending in which the couple part and Sarah continues mysteriously, as “your inconclusive *modern* human being.”²⁵ The expression “inconclusive modern human being” (with all the rich connotations of the word “modern” here) is key to my understanding of Sarah as a psychologically rich and complex woman character who baffles anybody (male protagonist/other characters/narrator/reader) who attempts to draw some simple and straightforward conclusions about her. My attempt in this paper would be to show that for some substantial psychoanalytic reasons, Sarah embodies what Lacan would have called an instance of “*dédoublement*,”²⁶ whereby she attracts the attention of others only to frustrate a conclusive understanding about her; whereby she participates in the construction of phallic myth only to “unconceal” the nothingness of it; whereby she becomes the agent of fiction and truth at the same time. My argument is that the incomprehensibility of Sarah derives from her embodying the truth or the Real of femininity, in the Lacanian sense, which puts the Symbolic/discursive/phallic/fictional universe at a loss, alongside her functioning as “masquerade” and “symptom” or as creator and upholder of the phallic myth and male fantasy/desire.

SARAH AS MASQUERADE AND SYMPTOM

In the narrative, Sarah creates and upholds the fiction of selfhood and the phallic myth in many ways. The idea of the “French lieutenant’s woman” is based on a lie. Sarah invents and circulates a false story about her liaison/sexual intercourse with a certain French lieutenant, whom as the story goes, she nursed when he was rescued from a shipwreck. Sarah disguises herself as a fallen woman, as a socially outcast. It is this falsehood and disguise that actually creates her identity or selfhood. She seems to imply that her “I” is a “lie.” Of course, in this case, Sarah *deliberately* takes recourse to a falsity to project herself as an outcast. However, by way of this fiction she can fool the Victorian mindset, turn the conventions upside down, and assert her agency.

Sarah’s participation in the creation of the fiction of masculinity happens on a more subtle, unconscious level. Arguably, the key to the narrative is the enigmatic gaze of Sarah Woodruff, described in the very first chapter. This chapter, beginning with an epigraph from Thomas Hardy’s poem “Riddle” (thus enhancing the sense of enigma about the female protagonist),

describes Charles and Ernestina at quite a length and concludes with a description of Sarah standing by the sea:

But where the telegraphist would have been at sea himself was with the other figure on that somber, curving mole. It stood right at the seawardmost end, apparently leaning against an old cannon barrel upended as a bollard. Its clothes were black. The wind moved them, but the figure stood motionless, staring, staring out to sea, more like a living memorial to the drowned, a figure from myth, than any proper fragment of the petty provincial day. (*FLW*, 5)

In the film adaptation of the novel,²⁷ this moment is captured tellingly. Sarah, whom Charles doesn't yet know, is found dressed in black, standing by the seaside of Lyme Regis and staring at the sea. As she stands there amidst violent storm and rains, she is seen by Charles, who has eventually arrived at that place with his fiancée Ernestina. Like a chivalric hero, he



FIG. 2 Sarah (Meryl Streep) staring at the stormy sea and chivalric Charles (Jeremy Irons) standing at a distance



FIG. 3 Sarah's gaze (performed by Meryl Streep)

approaches to rescue her from the impending disaster—rains and storm—when she looks back at this stranger coldly, indifferently for a few seconds, after which she once again turns toward the sea. Charles in a way is forced to leave her alone.

Sarah's enigmatic gaze is what attracts Charles and sets his desire in motion. The crucial quest for Charles has the form of questions: "Who is Sarah? From what shadows does she come?" (*FLW*, 96). In a sense the entire Symbolic order of the narrative is built around this gaze, which functions both as an *objet petit a*, as well as the unsignifiable trace of the Real. The title of the paper, especially the expression, "eyes a man could drown in" is very apt, and refers to these dual possibilities of Sarah's gaze, eyes that attract and then literally destroy the masculine subject. Lacan says that the Other as a whole does not cause desire; something in the Other, the voice or the look, for example, causes desire. It is the blank look that Sarah gives Charles, a look which for Charles turns into a gaze full of mystery and in need of exploration, that sets in motion the desire and fantasy of Charles. At a great length in the narrative, Sarah adds fuel to Charles's desire, and fiction about himself, by convincingly stating that Charles is the only person in the world who can take care of her, that Charles is kind of omniscient, omnipotent, and potentially heroic a figure, and so on. Charles gradually starts believing in this fiction to the point that he starts sexually fantasizing about Sarah, leaves his fiancée for Sarah, and afterward decides to spend the whole life looking for Sarah who had by then disappeared.

As masquerade in relation to the phallic myth, Sarah seems to deliberately affirm the sense of mastery, heroism, virility, and protective power of the male subject. For example, by paying attention to Charles she enhances his confidence: "As he talked, and was listened to with a grave interest, his disapproval evaporated" (*FLW*, 137). Again, when Sarah says, "I have no one to turn to. . . . I am weak. . . . I have sinned" (*FLW*, 138), she gives him the impression that Charles is the only person for her to turn to, the only person to save and protect her. She makes Charles believe that while he is strong she is weak. This authentication of Charles as a superior being is remarkably intensified by the following conversation:

Charles: I am most sorry for you. But I must confess I don't understand why you should seek to . . . make me your confidant. . .

Sarah: Because you have travelled. Because you are educated. Because you are a gentleman. Because . . .

Charles: It is beyond my powers—the powers of far wiser men than myself—to help you here.

Sarah: I do not—I will not believe that. (*FLW*, 139)

Sarah at these points enhances Charles's superiority as a masculine subject. And how does Charles react to this? Charles felt "obscurely flattered." Charles gains an inflated image of himself which fits into the masculine position he desires. Her giving of sea urchins ("they are all I have, to give") to Charles is also symbolic of her total surrender to this masculine subject. Same is the case with her completing of Charles's unfinished sentences, thus bringing completion to his selfhood:

Sarah: I have no one to turn to.

Charles: I hoped I had made it clear that Mrs. Tranter—

Sarah: Has the kindest heart. But I do not need kindness.

Charles: If I can speak on your behalf to Mrs. Tranter, I shall be most happy . . . but it would be most improper of me to . . .

Sarah: Interest yourself further in my circumstances. (*FLW*, 138)

As far as Sarah plays the masquerade vis-à-vis Charles, Charles seems to play the father with Sarah and we are told "he had a desire to protect her." On his first encounter with Sarah, Charles, was "overcome by an equally strange feeling—not sexual, but fraternal, perhaps *paternal* . . ." (*FLW*, 74, italics mine). A similar description is found in the following: "for a moment she was like a child, both reluctant and yet willing to be cozened—or homilized—out of tears" (*FLW*, 178). Charles here senses a paternal authority over Sarah, which also includes a taming of her "wildness," which gives him a sense of superiority. He may well replace Sarah's father. Her father's sending her to the boarding school (to be discussed shortly) is similar to Charles sending her to Exeter (for psychological treatment). In both cases the upholding of the masculine myth is involved. In both cases Sarah obediently listens to the demand of the masculine subject and thus authorizes the masculine position. Like other masculine subjects in the novel, Charles too takes pride in being charitable toward her, in offering to send her to a respectable asylum and also in proudly bearing the expenses for the same. Sarah's acceptance of these offers authenticates his superiority.

Apart from performing the masquerade in various ways, Sarah is also "symptom" of Charles's masculine position. As the signifier of Charles's repressed sexual desire, Sarah signifies the source of his pleasure. When Sarah

tells Charles about her affair with the French lieutenant, Charles's fantasy is tellingly at work: "He saw the scene she had not detailed: her giving herself. He was at one and the same time Varguennes [the French lieutenant] enjoying her and the man who sprang forward and struck him down" (*FLW*, 172). Charles-striking-down-Varguennes is the myth of Charles's heroism authorized by Sarah's "masquerade" that is ironically derivative of a fiction, the lie that she had a liaison with Varguennes. Sarah here becomes the "symptom," that is, the means for fulfillment of Charles's fantasy and his sexual desire. Thus Sarah functions as masquerade while authorizing Charles's phallic myth and as symptom as she arouses desire in him.

SARAH AND THE REAL OF FEMININITY

If Sarah initially upholds the phallic myth, she gradually, sometimes simultaneously, becomes instrumental in its dissolution. If Sarah's gaze at the outset of the narrative has set Charles's desire in motion, it has also revealed to Charles his emptiness as a subject, and has gradually led him to destruction. After his first meeting with her, we are told, Charles experiences emptiness about his life so far: Sarah "made him aware of a deprivation. His future had always seemed to him of vast potential; and now [now that, among other things, he was betrothed to Ernestina] suddenly it was a fixed voyage to a known place" (*FLW*, 129). Gradually when he falls desperately in love with Sarah who eventually stops reciprocating his love, he states: "But you [Sarah] must say that [you never loved me]! You must say, 'I was totally evil, I never saw in him other than an instrument I could use, a destruction I could encompass'" (*FLW*, 429). He adds: "This is my reward. To succor you . . . and now to know I was no more than the dupe of your imaginings" (*FLW*, 342).

In fact, the novel ends with Charles confronting the harsh truth about the vanity of masculinity as exposed by his apparent separation from Sarah. "And at the gate, the future made present, he found he did not know where to go. . . . [I]t meant thirty-four years of struggling upwards—*all in vain, in vain, in vain, all height lost* . . ." (*FLW*, 444). Metaphorically, Charles's realization of the nothingness of his high-sounding masculinity is represented by the corpse in the final description: "along that other deserted embankment Charles now begins to pace, a man behind the invisible gun carriage on which rests his own corpse" (*FLW*, 445). Charles has "at last . . . begun, though he would still bitterly deny it . . . to realize that life . . . is to be, however inadequately, *emptily*, hopelessly . . . endured" (*FLW*, 445).

This emptiness is the truth of the phallic myth; this emptiness, Charles realizes, is what characterizes his selfhood. As is obvious, the dissolution of Charles's masculine position is an effect of Sarah's refusal to function as masquerade and symptom.

Sarah has earlier shown her dependence on the masculine subject by projecting herself as a weak being in need of assistance from Charles; she later tells Charles: "It is as I told you before. I am far stronger than any man may easily imagine" (*FLW*, 342). Sarah reiterates her feminine position: "I do not want to share my life. I wish to be what I am, not what a husband, however kind, however indulgent, must expect me to become in marriage" (*FLW*, 430). Here she is a different woman, not what Charles or the reader imagined her to be (i.e., a woman in need of protection and security from a male subject like Charles). She shows here the other side of her character which tries to do away with the masculine position. She clarifies that she had actually loved Charles as she says, "There is one thing in which I have not deceived you. I loved you . . . I think from the moment I saw you. In that, you were never deceived." But she hastily adds, "What duped you was my loneliness. A resentment, an envy, I don't know. I *don't know* . . . Do not ask me to explain what I have done. I cannot explain it. It is *not to be explained*" (*FLW*, 342). I claim that Sarah here is being very honest about her state of mind. She is certainly trying to express herself but language fails her. It is in the gaps of the signifiers, it is in the ellipses that the feminine as the Real exists. Sarah's subject position becomes the unexplainable "other" to language. This otherness makes her an enigma, even to herself. Here Sarah functions not as masquerade or symptom but rather the Real as the feminine reveals itself through her in an unsettling way.

This particular aspect of Sarah's femininity figures at another place in the narrative in a remarkable way, as we discover Sarah's relation to her father (this point has not unfortunately received any critical attention). The narrator tells us that Sarah had an uncanny ability to "see through" people, to "classify other people's worth" (*FLW*, 57). The vanity and worthlessness pertaining to her father is devastatingly brought to light by Sarah. Her father was a vicar, not of a much respectable social status. But he believed in his ancestry, especially in its past status as gentry. He was boastful of this, in spite of his own diminished social condition. His past was a source of his pride and confidence. Due to this pride he sent Sarah, his only child (and also the only woman in his life since his wife was dead) for education to a boarding school (meant for people of higher social status). Although she went to the boarding school, thus partially authenticating her father's false

sense of superior social status, in the main Sarah could not take her father's boastful attitude sympathetically. After she came back from the boarding school, she "sat across the elm table from him and watched him when he boasted, watching with a quiet reserve that goaded him, goaded him like a piece of useless machinery (for he was born a Devon man and money means all to Devon men), goaded him finally into madness" (*FLW*, 58). To prove his masculinity, to prove his worthiness to his daughter as it were, he then bought a farm of his own. "But it was cheap and bad. . . . For several years he struggled to keep up both the mortgage and a ridiculous facade of gentility" (*FLW*, 58). Metaphorically, her father's struggle here is a desperate attempt to veil the harsh truth about his weakness as a male subject, a weakness which he is afraid to confront. The "mortgage" and "gentility" correspond to the two contradictory parts of his selfhood, and on "keeping up both" depends the unity of his selfhood which actually is a falsity. However, he did not get authorization or support from any female subject (Sarah vehemently resisted it). So, he went mad quite literally and was sent to the Dorchester Asylum where he died a year later.

As is obvious, both in the case of her father and Charles, Sarah's look, her "seeing through," her "gaze" which pervades the narrative (she "saw through" the vanities of her suitors and made all possibilities of man-woman relationship impossible), has a disconcerting character about it which is devastating for a man to the extent that it can strip off the façade of masculinity and can leave a man with the bare minimum, which can easily lead to his madness. It would be a mistake to state that Sarah as an individual deliberately engages in the acts of authentication and dissolution of masculinity. Whatever Sarah does is strongly informed by the position she occupies, the feminine subject position which is not entirely cut by language and which resists understanding even to the woman herself. Sarah herself indicates this "beyond" of understanding and articulation, by referring to the fact that she cannot help her contradictory attitudes, that she does not know why she does certain things though she cannot help doing those things. For example, as noted in the epigraph of this paper, she says, "Do not ask me to explain what I have done. I cannot explain it. It is not to be explained" (*FLW*, 342). At another point she states, "I am not to be understood even by myself. And I can't tell you why, but I believe *my happiness* depends on my not understanding" (*FLW*, 431, italics mine). The key words here are "happiness" and "not understanding." I claim that at this point Sarah is not expressing her vanity, as Charles would like to think; rather she is illustrating an important psychoanalytic finding of Lacan about the Other

jouissance. The Other *jouissance* is what women can experience but cannot understand, know, or articulate, since these involve the intervention of language which is predominantly phallic. It is important how Lacan understands the relation between *jouissance* and knowledge. Knowledge, according to Lacan, is motivated by some failure of pleasure, some insufficiency of pleasure: in a word, dissatisfaction.²⁸ Displeasure relates to knowledge; pleasure relates to the lack of knowledge. In the Lacanian R-S-I schema, pleasure or *jouissance* verges more on the Real (the unrepresentable) and knowledge verges more on the Symbolic (the linguistic). Sarah seems to make a striking point here by linking “enjoyment” with “I do not know why” or linking the feminine *jouissance* with the Real.

CONCLUSION

At the heart of the narrative of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is the Real of femininity which manifests itself through Sarah Woodruff, and which is in dire need to be avoided, represented and supplemented. In so far as Sarah is known as the French lieutenant's woman, she can be categorized and thereby understood as a “fallen woman.” In so far as Sarah performs the role of masquerade and symptom, in so far as she upholds the myth of masculinity (Charles's, her father's, and reader's) and remains the object of male desire and fantasy (Charles's, her suitors', and reader's), she can be represented. However, such easy and smooth understanding and representation of Sarah is repeatedly disrupted throughout the narrative, disruptions which lead to subjective dissolution (her father's, Charles's) and discursive indeterminacy (multiple endings of the narrative). There are moments in the narrative that should not just be explained away as an enigma of femininity. These are the moments when there takes place a significant interface between the Real and the Symbolic, moments when the entire domain of language and discourse is challenged and is almost on the verge of dissolution. Why does Sarah circulate a false story about her liaison with a certain French lieutenant? Why does Sarah “ego-massage” her father and Charles, creating and upholding falsity about them, only to eventually destroy the same? Why does she at different points in the three endings tell different kinds of lie about her present status? Questions of this kind refer to the impasse that the Real of femininity puts forward in the phallic domain of the Symbolic. The fictional domain of the narrative and the fiction of selfhood are time and again punctuated by the intrusion of the Real. The Symbolic has to rush in to come to terms with

the unbearable truth of the Real. In a sense, it is the Real which triggers the Symbolic, or, it is the Real of Sarah's femininity that demands Symbolic representation. Fowles's narrative becomes a prime instance of what happens to a discourse that is constantly punctured by a truth (embodied via the "dédoulement" of Sarah Woodruff) that has an existence outside, and that resists representation through, the phallogentric language.

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NOTES

1. Eileen Warburton, *John Fowles: A Life in Two Worlds* (London: Viking, 2002), 271.
2. Olga Kirillova, "If the French Lieutenant Never Existed, He Should Have Been Invented," *The Symptom*, no.2 (Spring 2002), accessed April 30, 2017, <http://www.lacan.com/olgak.htm>.
3. Rose actually talks about a number of literary issues. See Gilbert J. Rose, *Trauma and Mastery in Life and Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).
4. Theorists concerned here would include Carl Gustav Jung, Alfred Adler, Karen Horney, Melanie Klein, Anna Freud, and others and schools concerned would include ego psychology, object relations school, analytical psychology, and so on.
5. Eli Zaretsky, "Psychoanalysis and Postmodernism," *American Literary History* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 163, accessed May 3, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/490236>.
6. Slavoj Žižek ed., *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Lacan (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)* (London: Verso, 1992), 1–2.
7. Jacques Lacan, "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'" in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2006), 11.
8. Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 242.
9. I first heard about this metaphor from my teacher Professor Santanu Biswas of Jadavpur University, who introduced me to Lacan.
10. Lacan delivered a series of lectures constituting his Seminar of the year 1971 (unpublished until now), which he significantly entitled "A Discourse that Might Not Be a Semblance." See Jacques Lacan, "The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XVIII: On a Discourse that Might Not Be a Semblance, 1970–1971," unofficially translated by Cormac Gallagher from unedited French typescripts, accessed February 25, 2017, <http://www.lacaninireland.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Book-18-On-a-discourse-that-might-not-be-a-semblance.pdf>.

11. Jacques Lacan, "Courtly Love as Anamorphosis," in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book VII: Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959–1960*, trans. Dennis Porter (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 139–154.
12. The title of Huizinga's book is apt. See Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, trans. F. Hopman (London: Penguin Books, 1987).
13. I am indebted to Professor Santanu Biswas again for his discussion of the notion of women as gatekeepers of patriarchy.
14. Garry Leonard, "Spilling the Whisky on the Corpus," in *Reading Dubliners Again: A Lacanian Perspective* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 8–10.
15. Freud talks about the first childhood "stirrings of sexuality" in his reading of *Oedipus Rex* on the basis of which he formulates the concept of Oedipus complex. See Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 4, *The Interpretation of Dreams Part I*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Vintage Books, 2001), 262.
16. The concept is elaborated in Lacan's *Seminar Book XX*. See Jacques Lacan, *Seminar Book XX (Encore): On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1998).
17. I am indebted to Professor Biswas again for pointing this out to me.
18. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 114.
19. Leonard, "Spilling the Whisky on the Corpus," 9.
20. Evans, *Dictionary*, 93.
21. The details of Huffaker's, Hutcheon's, and Woodcock's books are as follows. Robert Huffaker, *John Fowles* (Boston: Twayne, 1980); Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (London and New York: Methuen, 1984); and Bruce Woodcock, *Male Mythologies: John Fowles and Masculinity* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1984).
22. Lauren Barral, "Mystery, Knowledge, and Freedom in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*" (Master's thesis, Université Stendhal, 2011), 2, accessed April 30, 2017, <https://dumas.ccsd.cnrs.fr/dumas-00710543/document>.
23. Bonnie Zare, "Reclaiming Masculinist Texts for Feminist Readers: Sarah Woodruff's 'The French Lieutenant's Woman,'" *Modern Language Studies* 27, no. 3/4 (Autumn–Winter 1997): 191, accessed May 3, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3195400>.
24. Warburton, *John Fowles: A Life in Two Worlds*, 295.
25. Ibid.
26. Lacan talks about a kind of splitting ("dédoublement") vis-à-vis the female subject. See Geneviève Morel, "Feminine Conditions of *Jouissance*," in *Reading Seminar XX: Lacan's Major Work on Love, Knowledge, and Feminine Sexuality*, eds. Suzanne Barnard and Bruce Fink (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 82.
27. The film script was written by Harold Pinter and the film retaining Fowles's title was directed by Karel Reisz and released in 1981. The two screenshots of the film

- are taken by me. See *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, DVD, directed by Karel Reisz (1981; Century City, Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox, 2002).
28. I have consulted Bruce Fink, "Knowledge and *Jouissance*," in *Reading Seminar XX: Lacan's Major Work on Love, Knowledge, and Feminine Sexuality*, eds. Suzanne Barnard and Bruce Fink (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 21–46.

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