Femininity as Performance

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INTRODUCTION

As girls at school, as women at work, we are used to performing. We are used, too, to dramaturgical metaphors which tell us that life is a performance in which we do nothing but act out a series of roles [1] or indeed that these roles can be peeled away like layers of an onion to reveal a repressed core, a true self, which has been inhibited, clouded by the layers of social conditioning which obscure it [2]. Such views form much of the common sense of ideas about gender socialisation in relation to education. Girls are conditioned into passivity, the story often goes, this is why they do badly at school: implicitly, femininity is seen as a series of roles often imposed by agents of socialisation, of whom the worst offenders are taken to be women: mothers and female teachers. But I want to tell a different story, one of female success, one which criticises the idea that socialisation works to render girls and women wimpish, feminine and passive.

Let me begin with an example, one which can be multiplied many times over. A woman teacher, one of my students, receives a well-deserved distinction for her Master's degree. She received more or less straight 'A's for all her work, but still she cannot believe that the distinction belongs to her; it is as though the person with her name exists somewhere else, outside her body: this powerful person that she cannot recognise as herself. Instead, she feels that she is hopeless, consistently panics about her performance and appears to have little confidence in herself. She can, however, express her views clearly and forcefully and the external examiner in her viva thanked her for the tutorial! I am sure this story has resonances for many women. Indeed, I am sure that I related this story because I too have been constantly aware that the Valerie Walkerdine that people speak well of feels as though it belongs to someone else, someone who I do not recognise as me.

How come, for many women, the powerful part of themselves has been so split off as to feel that it belongs to someone else? It is not the case that here is a simple passive wimp femininity, but a power which is both desired, strived after, yet almost too dangerous to be acknowledged as belonging to the woman herself.

In this paper I shall explore this phenomenon, using work from both post-structuralism and psychoanalysis and using data from my research on gender and schooling (Walkerdine et al., 1989) to illustrate my arguments.

PERFORMANCE IN SCHOOL

There is a widespread myth that girls and women perform poorly in school. In the Girls and Mathematics Unit we investigated this issue in relation to mathematics in...
research, spanning several years and with children aged 4 to 15 (Walkerdine et al., 1989). The first way in which I want to deal with the issue of performance is to challenge the idea that femininity equals poor performance and to concentrate rather on the ways in which femininity is read. What I am concerned to demonstrate is the discursive production of femininity as antithetical to masculine rationality to such an extent that femininity is *equated* with poor performance, even when the girl or woman in question is performing well. In other words, I am not talking about some essential qualities of femininity, but the way in which femininity is read as a constellation of signs which mark it off as antithetical to ‘proper’ performance to an incredible degree. When we first became aware of this, Rosie Walden and I called it “the just or only phenomenon” (Walden & Walkerdine, 1982). By this, we meant that whenever a positive remark was made about girls’ performance in mathematics, particularly the strong sense that girls performed well in school up until the transfer at 11, a remark would be brought in which suggested that the performance was to be accounted for by ‘something which amounted to nothing’. In other words, no matter how well girls were said to perform, their performance was always downgraded or dismissed in one way or another. These pejorative remarks usually related to the idea that girls’ performance was based on hard work and rule-following rather than brains or brilliance (in other words what was supposed to underlie real mathematical performance) [3]. This reading of girls’ performance was consistent across schools and the age-range. In the younger age-groups it was common for teachers to talk about boys as having ‘potential’, a term often used to explain their poor performance. Throughout the sample of 39 classrooms, not one teacher mentioned ‘potential’ within a girl. Quite the contrary, if a girl was performing poorly there was no way she could be considered good, indeed if she were performing well it was almost impossible for her to escape pejorative evaluations, while boys, it seemed, no matter how poorly they performed, were thought to have hidden qualities:

> Very, very hard worker. Not a particularly bright girl... her hard work gets her to her standards.

This typical example of a comment about a girl can be compared with the following comment about a boy, of the kind that was never mentioned for girls:

> ...can just about write his own name... not because he’s not clever, because he’s not capable, but because he can’t sit still, he’s got no concentration... very disruptive... but quite bright.

Indeed, it was as though boys did indeed in fantasy possess the ‘phallus’ [4] while girls represented a fictional ‘lack’ or absence. For whatever was said, again and again, the presence of certain attributes, like good performance, was read as an indication of a lack of something much more fundamental even when, as in the case of many boys, they did not perform well academically, as in the quote above.

This led me to point out that in engaging with issues concerning the ‘truth about women’ it is necessary to avoid being caught in an empiricist trap in which we are led to attempt to prove the mathematical equivalence of girls (Walkerdine et al., 1989). For here we are not presented with something as straightforward as ‘the evidence of our own eyes’. Here, girls are doing well and yet they are said, in one way or another, ‘not to have what it takes’, while many boys, whose performance is poor, are said to possess something even when it is not visible in their performance. In order to examine and to understand such a situation I believe that we have to move away from a simple empiricism to a position in which we understand fact, fiction and fantasy as interre-
lated. It is to post-structuralism that I turn for an account which will allow us to examine how it comes to be the case that gender difference is produced in fictional ways which have power in that they are part of the truth-effects of the regulation of children in classrooms. They form a basis of the ‘truth about women’, in this case the truth that women do not have rational powers of the mind. Such a truth, I shall go to argue, has to be desperately re-asserted for fear that it is not true; only the paranoia of the powerful keeps it in circulation.

RATIONAL POWERS OF THE MIND

Counting girl’s performance as evidence is not distinct from the issue of which it is taken to be evidence of. We have not only to debate about the data but also to engage with why this decision is made at all, what it means, and what its effects are in terms of practical consequences for girl’s education. Classically (within philosophy, for example), the truth of such statements has been the subject of epistemological critiques. But what the latter do is treat truth as though it were a timeless matter, separating the conditions of the production of truth from what truth itself. The question that I want to pose is not ‘Are the arguments true?’ but ‘How is this truth constituted, how is it possible, and what effects does it have?’ Such questions, derived from the methodology of genealogy utilised by Foucault, can help us begin to take apart this truth about girls. Only if we understand its historical production and its effectivity, can we begin to go beyond it. We shall argue that we can chart the historical antecedents of the position that females do not possess a capacity for reason or have ‘mathematical minds’ and so document how and why the arguments in support of that position have such a force now, and how we might challenge them.

The argument, in a nutshell, is that ideas about reason and reasoning cannot be understood historically outside of considerations about gender. Since the Enlightenment, if not before, reason, or the cogito, has been deeply embroiled with attempts to control nature. The rationality of the cogito are taken to be a kind of rebirth of the rational self, in this case without the intervention of a woman. The rational self was in this sense a profoundly masculine one from which the woman was excluded, her powers being not only inferior but also subservient. The ‘thinking’ subject was male; the female provided both the biological prop to procreation and to servicing the possibility of ‘man’.

The development of science from the seventeenth century was intimately connected to the control of nature by man. From the nineteenth century, particularly with the work of Darwin, the human was also accorded the status of natural (rather than God-given). ‘Human nature’ therefore became the object of a scientific inquiry that, from its inception, was deeply patriarchal. It legitimated doctrines that existed previously within philosophy, and, with the transformation of this doctrine into a science, the female body and mind both became the objects of the scientific gaze [5]. In this way it began to be possible to make ‘true’ statements about the female nature, no longer an object of debate but resolvable by resort to evidence. Yet what counts as ‘female nature’ does not pre-exist the development of those doctrines, bodies of knowledge and scientific practices that produced it as its object. In this sense, the truth of scientific statements is not discovered: it is produced.

Moreover, we can monitor the effects of such ‘facts’ on the fate of particular girls and women. For example, the legitimation of their exclusion and of practices of discrimination could now be based on fact; the proven inferiority of girls and women.
It was quite common in the nineteenth century to exclude women from higher education and the professions on the grounds that they were swayed by their emotions and not, therefore, invested with the capacity to make rational judgments. It is by argument such as this that the sexed body (the seat of 'nature') becomes the site for the production and explanation of mind, since the very differentiation between men's and women's bodies is central to the approach, there is no way that reason can ever be gender-neutral.

Discussions about failure have focused on a minority of girls [6]. Of course, it is not surprising that later science 'discovered' the 'female intellect' [7]. Thus, women, taken also to possess the capacity to reason, were allowed to enter the competition. If they had enough ability. But this means that the terms of the debate are never changed; it is still up to women to prove themselves equal to men, I have tried to show why we should not unquestionably accept these terms but should question their very foundation. We are not duty-bound to accept existing truth conditions. We would argue that showing the truth about girls to be a production in which there are no simple matters of fact is a central and strategic part of our struggle.

If those successes for which girls have struggled are refused as data, then it continues to be possible to explain, as a fault within women themselves, the relatively small number of women in the professions (except the caring professions, to which woman are 'naturally' suited). 'Brilliant' women are few indeed in number, but women's painstaking attention to detail, and their 'capacity for hard work' makes them excellent material for the support of a 'brilliant academic male'. For the rational self of the cogito, like the reasoning child, cognitive development, 'proper conceptualisation' and rationality, are attained naturally: there is no work involved. In modern lower school practices, work is downplayed in favour of play. When girls work hard, therefore, there is something wrong. Women's labour (domestic and otherwise) makes intellectual inquiry, as play, relatively easy; it shoulders all the work that makes such creativity possible.

Within both the development of women's education and the rise of child-centred education, there are important shifts in the definition of pedagogy that I have charted elsewhere [8]. However, for the present purposes, let us dwell on the concept of 'the child' (gender unspecified) that is taken to develop within a 'facilitating environment'. The two terms form a couple; a child developing in an environment. Further analysis suggests that the mother and the teacher both become part of the environment. They are defined by the very qualities that are opposite to those of 'the child', who is active, inquiring and whose activity leads to 'real understanding'. The teacher and the mother, by contrast, are not necessary to instruct but to watch, observe, monitor and facilitate development. The teacher and mother are defined as 'passive' in relation to the child's 'active'. They are nurturant, facilitating, sensitive and supportive, and they know when to intervene but not to interfere.

I have argued elsewhere that this opposition of the passive teacher to the active child is necessary to support the possibility of the illusion of autonomy and control upon which the child-centred pedagogy is founded [9]. In this sense, then, the 'capacity for nurturance' grounded in a naturalised feminity, the object of the scientific gaze, becomes the basis for woman's fitness for the facilitation of knowing and the reproduction of the knower, which is the support for, and yet opposite of, the production of knowledge. The production of knowledge is thereby separated from its reproduction and split along a sexual division which renders production and reproduction the natural capacities of the respective sexes.
The central concepts in the child-centred pedagogy and early mathematics education may themselves be regarded as signifiers, that is, aspects of discourse. That discourse claims to tell the truth about the universal properties of ‘the child’ which ‘has concepts’. In this view, the attempts within psychology and mathematics, for example, may be seen as aspects of the attempt to construct a rationally ordered and controllable universe. We have argued that such an attempt is deeply bound up with the modern form of bourgeois government and the emergence of the modern state. It is also deeply involved with the attempt to describe and therefore regulate ‘woman’, ‘the child’, ‘the working class’, ‘blacks’ and ‘the mad’.

The purpose of examining the conceptualisations which form the bedrock of modern practices is to draw out the terms which are key to the regime of truth which is constituted in and by the practices. My claim is that the discursive practices themselves, in producing the terms of the pedagogy, and therefore the parameters of practice, produce what it means to be a subject, to be subjected, within these practices. It can be stated that the terms in the discourse, such as experience, discovery, stage, etc., are signifiers which take their meaning from their position and function within the discourse itself: they enter as a relation. But this does not mean that there is a simple relation of representation between the material and the discursive. The discourse itself is a point of production and creation. When we say then that experience is created as a sign within the practice, or the child is produced as a subject, what we are talking about is the production of signs. If language does not represent reality, but rather the regulation of a practice itself produces a particular constellation and organisation of the material and discursive practices, then it can be argued that something is produced. It is in this sense that Foucault’s power/knowledge couple can be applied here.

By means of an apparatus of classification and a grading of responses ‘the child’ becomes a creation, and yet at the same time provides room for a reading of pathology. There are no behaviours which exist outside the practices for producing them, not at any rate in this particular sequence, constellation and with these particular effects. The discursive practice becomes a complex sign system in which signs are produced and read and have truth effects: the truth of children is produced in classrooms. ‘The child’ is not co-terminous with actual children, just as Cowie (1978) argued that the signifier ‘woman’ is not co-terminous with actual women, but central to the argument is the specification of that relation that is between the signifier and signified. If children become subjects through their insertion into a complex network of practices, there are no children who stand outside their orbit. I use the concept of positioning [10] to examine further what happens when such readings are produced and how children become normal and pathological, fast and slow, rote-learning and real understanding and so forth. In other words the practices provide systems of signs which are at once both systems of classification, regulation and normalisation. These produce systematic differences which are then used as classifications of children in the class. It is the meaning of difference which is a central feature in the production of any sign system in terms of the relations with other signs within the discourse. Similarity, that is, those signs which are linked within the discourse also pile or heap together to provide evidence of a related classification. Thus activity, doing, experience, readiness and so forth operate in relations of similarity, while rote-learning and real understanding are signs of contrastive opposition, of difference. I will attempt to demonstrate that these signs are produced and that often one sign may be taken as an indicator of the presence of another (similarity). Thus, for example, activity heralds a sign system, a complex discursive practice, whose terms and limits may be specified. Within this then, children
become embodiments of 'the child', precisely because that is how the practice is set up: they are normal or pathological and so forth. Their behaviour therefore, is an aspect of a position, a multi-faceted subjectivity, such that 'the child' describes only their insertion into this, as one of many practices. But the behaviours do not precede the practice precisely because their specificity is produced in these practices. This is why discourses of developmental psychology themselves can be understood as not simply providing a distortion of a real object, but may be read as evidence of real understanding, while passivity may be read as co-terminous with, or similar to, rote-learning, rule following.

These produce the practices in which 'the child' becomes a sign to be read and in which a normal is differentiated from a pathological child. 'The child' develops through active manipulation of 'objects' in an 'environment'. Here all of the practices become objects existing in a biologised environment. The Plowden Report is full of illustrations, all of which describe the school, the classroom as an 'environment'. This sets up another aspect of the readings which are to be made. 'The child' is a unique individual, developing at 'his' own pace in an environment. In this way, the classroom therefore becomes the site of such development. However many children there are in a classroom, each is an individual—there is no sense of 'a class'. Indeed, it will be remembered that 'the class' forms a signifier in contrastive opposition to 'the child'. In this way, examining both the texts and practices themselves, it is possible to produce a reading of the pedagogy pre-existing object, 'the real child' which they fail to represent or describe adequately. In this sense they are our 'raw material', the 'real' of a child is not something which can be known outside those practices in which its subjectively is constituted. The signified only forms a sign out of fusion with the signifier. The signifier exists as a relation within a discourse. The material can only be known as a relation within a discursive practice. To say, therefore, that 'the child' is a signifier means that it must be united with a signified. Particular children therefore both are—and, that is, the practices determine what they do anyway—but also they do present behaviours to be read—they may be normal or pathological.

The question remains, of course, what precisely is it that produces these current truths? I have argued that current claims themselves rest upon a constant 'will to truth' [11] that investing certainty in 'man', constantly seeks to find its other and opposite in 'woman'. This truth is constantly reproven within classrooms in which the very apparatuses themselves differentiate between success and its posited causes. This has profound material effects upon the life chances of girls.

It is suggested above that within current school mathematics practices, certain fantasies, fears and desires invest 'man' with omnipotent control of a calculable universe, which at the same time covers a desperate fear and desire of the other, 'woman'. 'Woman' becomes the repository of all of the dangers displaced from the child, itself 'father' to the man. As I have argued, the necessity to prove the mathematical inferiority of girls is not motivated by a certainty but by a terror of loss. In all these respects, I have wanted to suggest a story in which these very fantasies, fears, desires become the forces that produce the actual effectivity of the construction of fact, of current discursive practices in which these fantasies are played out and in actual positions in such practices which, since they can be proven to exist, literally have power over the lives of girls and boys, as in Foucault's power/knowledge couple.

In this case, we could take the signifiers 'child', 'teacher' and 'girl', or the
dichotomies 'active/passive', 'rote-learning'/real understanding' as examples. We can ask how the contradictory positions created within these practices are lived and how these effect the production of subjectivity, for examples, fears, desires, and fantasies (cf. Walkerdine, 1985).

The first and most important thing to state is that there are no unitary categories 'boys' and 'girls'. If actual boys and girls are created at the intersection of multiple positioning, they are inscribed as masculine and feminine. It follows, therefore, that girls can display 'real understanding' or boys 'nurturance'. What matters is what the effects of these positions are.

At first sight, it seems curious that such qualities could be displayed inside a pedagogy designed not only specifically to produce their opposite but also to avoid their appearance at all costs. It is important that in this respect the pathologisation of these qualities, linked to the fear of totalitarianism and authoritarianism, has related to certain developments in post-Freudian psychoanalysis, notably the work of Klein. However, as much as their appearance is dreaded it is also needed. Such ascriptions frequently are correlated with 'helpfulness', in which helpful children become an important part of the maintenance of calm, order and the smooth regulation of the classroom. Our research demonstrated that it is as common for female teachers to fear such qualities as much as they want them.

In the classroom discourse itself, there appears to be an overt message concerning activity, exploration, openness and so forth, derived from the child-centred pedagogy. However, our work in the primary classrooms suggests that the discourse of good behaviour, neatness and rule-following exists covertly alongside overt messages. It would have to be covert because it is the exact opposite of what is supposed to take place. Moreover, all of those aspects—good behaviour, neatness and rule-following—are taken to be harmful to psychological and moral development. Thus, they act as a fear- and guilt-inducing opposite. It is not surprising that teachers cannot afford to acknowledge the presence of such qualities in the classroom or, if they do, to pathologise their appearance in girls, while failing to recognise that they are demanding the very qualities they simultaneously disparage. This possibility allows us to explore how girls come to desire in themselves qualities that appear the opposite from those of 'the child' that the pedagogy is set up to produce. Clearly, further investigations would have to engage with the classroom production of such contradictions, examining both the overt pedagogy and its covert shadow.

It is common in some psychoanalytic discourses, for example, to counterpose 'fantasy' to 'reality', and yet it is this division that appears most questionable. After all, if it is the case that some girls respond to the covert regulation of the classroom, we cannot say that such behaviour is pathological with respect to the real. It is precisely that certain aspects of the regulation of the practices are themselves suppressed. Simultaneously, the 'reality' of the child-centred pedagogy seems to be the object of an elaborate fantasy. It appears that here in the practices there circulates a vast and complex network of meanings, in which the play of desire, of teachers for children, of children for each other, envy, jealousy, rivalry and so forth are continually created and re-created. It is not necessary to counterpose fantasy to reality, but to demonstrate how fantasies themselves are lived, played out and worked through in their inscriptions in the veridicality of discourses and practices.

I have begun to explore what this might mean elsewhere [12] but here we can take the analysis a little further, using the distinctions work and play, rote-learning/rule following and real understanding. Work forms a relation in the 'old discourse'. In the
new, children learn through doing, activity and play. Work forms an opposition of this. Work is bad because it relates to sitting in rows, regurgitating 'facts to be stored', not 'concepts to be acquired', through active exploration of the environment. Work, then, forms a metaphoric relation with rote-learning and rule-following. Each describes a practice, a mode of learning which is opposite and antithetical to the 'joy of discovery'. Play is fun. There are also other aspects of work, which could be further elaborated—it leads to resistance. Children regulated in this way do not become self-regulating. But work is also a category to be outlawed by a system of education set up in opposition to child labour. It constitutes a category which frees 'the child' to be something distinct, playful, not an adult, outside the field of productive labour, innocent, natural. Related therefore is a series of values, fantasies, fears, desires which are incorporated into the discursive practices. The multiple significations, connecting, weaving in and out of different discursive practices. It follows that work, as constituted as an opposite of play, can be recognised as a difference, as everything which does not signify play. It can also be recognised as a danger-point, a point to be avoided. It is pathologised. It is learning by the wrong means, it is not 'natural' to 'the child'. If any child is observed 'doing work' this is likely to be understood as a problem. Hence, the distinction between 'rote-learning' and 'real understanding' discussed earlier. Firstly, what happens when a child produces high attainment as well as producing behaviour to be read as work? If play is the discourse of the school, through what discourse do children read their performance? If 'real understanding' is co-terminous with the fantasy of possession of total power and control, how is it distinguished and what is the relation of this to 'getting the right answer', 'being certain' etc.? How does possession of real understanding provide fantasy, a chimera which has to be constantly and continually provided to exist out of a terror that lurking around every corner is its Other, rote-learning, work? Why is there such pressure, remorseless and unrelating, to 'prove' that real understanding causes real attainment, and moreover that certain children have 'it' and that others just so surely do not, despite high attainment? What is invested?

One of the features of the apparatuses and technologies of the social, the modern production of truth through science, is that proof and practices for the production of evidence are central to the production of a truth, the certainty of 'real understanding' is ceaselessly proved in practices even though the evidence is often ambiguous. Here we want to dwell not so much on the evidence itself, as to question the motivation to provide proof, in particular of the opposition of work and play, rote-learning, work? If play is the discourse of the school, through what discourse do children read their performance? If 'real understanding' is co-terminous with the fantasy of possession of total power and control, how is it distinguished and what is the relation of this to 'getting the right answer', 'being certain' etc.? How does possession of real understanding provide fantasy, a chimera which has to be constantly and continually provided to exist out of a terror that lurking around every corner is its Other, rote-learning, work? Why is there such pressure, remorseless and unrelating, to 'prove' that real understanding causes real attainment, and moreover that certain children have 'it' and that others just so surely do not, despite high attainment? What is invested?

Now, if the power of control over the universe invested in mathematical discourse is a fantasy, I am not setting out to demonstrate the real of the proof that girls really can do maths or boys actually do not have real understanding. Rather, it is how those categories are produced as signs which we are interested in and how they 'catch up' the subjects, position them and, in positioning, create a truth. For is not girls 'bid for the 'understanding' of the greatest threat of all to a universal power or a truth that is invested in a fantasy of control of 'women'? Teachers will often go to great lengths to demonstrate that boys have real understanding. By the metaphoric chain created, activity is frequently read as a sign of understanding. Understanding, then, is evidence by the presence of some attributes and the absence of others. It is activity—playing, utilisation of objects (Lego, for example) rule-breaking (rather than following) and so this can encompass naughtiness to the point of displays of hostility and conflict towards the teacher. All of these and more are taken to be evidence. Conversely, good behaviour in girls, working hard, helpfulness, neat and careful work are all read as danger signs of a lack. The counter-evidence—hard work in boys and understanding in
girls is also produced as evidence, but when it is, other positions come into play (see Walkerdine, 1984). Evidence of real understanding, therefore, depends firstly upon a set of practices in which real understanding is the goal of an explicit framework of the 'activities' set up, as in all of the examples given here. Secondly, readings are made possible that the correct accomplishment is the result of understanding, and failure produced through a lack of requisite experience, readiness, concepts. Thirdly, the likelihood to favour one explanation of success over another depends upon other characteristics which define a real learner. However, boys frequently do not achieve terribly well and yet evidence of failure itself is produced as evidence in support of understanding.

In these pedagogic practices, facilitating and nurturant Others (teachers, mothers) are necessary to the facilitation of a 'natural' sequence of development in 'the child'. But this means that the designation 'child' sits uncomfortably on actual little girls. If 'women' is other to rationality, how is 'girl' lived, as child or potential woman? These contradictions are lived out by girls in pedagogic practices.

Let us explore two aspects of this. First, girls' attainment, relative to boys', is not, in itself, in any simple or general sense the problem. Rather, the pointed cause invests the attainment with value as reproduction (rote-learning, rule-following) and not production (real understanding). It follows, therefore, that this attainment itself, while the object of much agonising about the poor performance of girls, is precisely that combination which is required for the entry of girls into the 'caring professions', in this case specifically the profession of teaching young children. Recruitment to elementary teacher training in Britain requires advanced qualifications, but usually a lower standard (poor pass marks, for example) than for university entrance.

Secondly, the production of reasoning requires and investment of desire in knowing, as in the phrase 'attracted to ideas', for example. Rational argument requires the transformation of conflict into discourse, such that the nurturant other facilities an illusion of autonomy or control by the other, rendering invisible the power of parenting and teaching. In addition, mathematical reasoning presumes mastery of a discourse in which the universe is knowable and manipulable according to particular mathematical algorithms. This, along with the production of hard 'facts', is usually understood as the very basis of certainty. However, conversely, we might understand it as the fear, the necessity of proof against the terror of its other, that is, loss of certainty, control and attempted control of loss; we might understand it as the impossibility of the object of desire, 'women', and elaborate fantasies to control consequent desire and avoid dependency or powerlessness.

It is the location of this feared and frightening other that is important to understand with respect to those classifications, particularly when they relate to girl's performance. Yet, as argued above, the very contradictions in the practice set girls up to achieve the very thing which is simultaneously desired and feared—passivity. It is feared in 'children' and yet the very quality desired in nurturant care-givers, women as mothers and teachers.

SPLITTING THE DIFFERENCE

If women being powerful within mathematical, and pedagogic, practices is so threatening, it is hardly surprising that many women are fearful of recognising power within themselves. No wonder the woman I mentioned in the Introduction has such difficulty in establishing that the person with a distinction is actually herself. What she lives as a
psychic problem is a profoundly social one, but a social one in which psychic processes are at the heart of the matter. Women's success appears to present such a threat to masculine rationality and to the bourgeois and patriarchal power which it underpins, that it is very dangerous for women to admit their own power. How is that deep contradiction lived for such women? Is femininity a performance, a defence against the frightening possibility of stepping over the gender divide?

In this section of the paper I shall explore this issue, firstly with reference to the work of Wendy Hollway (1982, 1989), who has discussed splitting in couple relations and the work of women psychoanalysts who have attempted to address this point, particularly Joan Riviere's (1985) work on womanliness as masquerade.

Wendy Hollway (op. cit.) analyses adult heterosexual couple relations in terms of the way in which rationality and emotionality are split between partners, with the woman being taken to 'hold' the emotionality for the couple, a quality which the man also projects her into so that she can be the emotional one, meaning that as long as it is located in her, he does not have to come to terms with his own emotional vulnerability. Similarly, the man can hold rationality for the couple. Hollway analyses in great detail how this is achieved by the couple. The concept of splitting which she uses is derived from Kleinian psychoanalysis [13]. In Klein the split off part of (in this case) 'man' is projected into and held by 'woman' and similarly rationality in woman cannot easily be accommodated and therefore has to be experienced as though belonging to someone else. To put the argument in this way is completely different from the essentialist view of femininity in which certain characteristics simply do not belong to women or a socialisation account which treats the social as though it were added on to the psychic rather than seeing them as produced together [14]. Lacan [15] argued that 'woman' exists only as a symptom of male fantasy. What he meant was that the fantasies created under patriarchy (or the Law of the Father or Symbolic Order, as he calls it) create as their object not women as they really are but fantasies of what men both desire and fear in the Other. Women, then, become the repositories of such fantasies, and the effect for the psychic development of women themselves is extremely damaging and complex. Many psychoanalysts have attempted to engage with the problem presented by femininity under patriarchy. Freud tended to naturalise women's procreative function as a normal solution to the problem posed by the gendered splitting of rationality and emotionality. He did not investigate in great depth the elaborate fantasies which uphold the patriarchal and bourgeois order and which I am suggesting are projected onto women. It is not surprising, then, that many women analysts who discovered the terrible confusions in their women patients around their power tended to essentialise them. The analysis I am suggesting here makes the essentialising tendency impossible. It is also the case that there is no easy division between fantasy and an observable reality since the social contains the elaborate fictions and fantasies of which I have written.

If masculinity and femininity may both be seen as defences against the qualities held by the other, then there can be no natural division of the sexes, but a complex order through which difference is held in play. Joan Riviere (1985) presents an interesting analysis of femininity in relation to cases of women patients. In her paper entitled 'Womanliness as Masquerade' she gives the example of a woman academic who after giving an academic paper has to flirt with men, often picking a 'fatherly' type as object of her flirtation. Riviere suggests that such flirtation provides her with reassurance that she is, after all, a woman. It acts as a masquerade, and elaborate defence against her fear that her femininity is a mere charade. If the male gaze, in Lacan's terms,
constructs the object of the gaze as a masquerade, what lies beneath the mask? Lacan would have us believe that there is nothing, or a confusion. However, we could equally well ask what it is that the fantasy of the phallus holds up. In the academic scenario it appears that the fantasy of femininity is kept in place by the discursive truths which define and regulate the evaluation of women's performance. The struggle both to perform academically and to perform as feminine must seem at times almost impossible. No wonder that some of us split them apart in various ways or have different conscious and unconscious methods for dealing with the unbearable contradiction [16].

To maintain this requires a tremendous amount of social and psychic labour. Luce Irigaray (1985) points clearly to these phallic fantasies and suggests that there is another libidinal organisation for women that cannot be spoken in the present Symbolic Order. However, where Lacan presents women as a lack, Irigaray presents her as having Other desires screaming to be spoken. The feminine performance in this view is not only a defence against masculinity, but against a powerful and active sexuality quite unlike that defined under patriarchy, although of course precisely that which is pathologised as bad or mad. Irigaray celebrates the plurality of woman as the plurality of a sexual pleasure which does not have a goal of a single orgasm nor a single site of pleasure. Bronwyn Davies (1988) has explored women's sexual fantasies and suggests too that those fantasies are unlike the ones to which women are subjected. I am suggesting, therefore, that to become the object of those fantasies the ones which render women as the object of the male gaze—require a tremendous amount of work to cover over not an essential femininity but a different set of desires and organisation of pleasures (cf. Foucault) than those which can either clearly be articulated at the moment or are sanctioned in the practices in which femininity circulates as sign.

PEDAGOGIC STRATEGIES?

If girls' and women's power is a site of struggle, constantly threatening the tenuous grasp of male academic superiority, then any engagement with these issues in practice cannot rest upon a rationalistic base of choice or equal opportunities. Not only must the fiction of the gendered splitting be taken apart, but the psychic struggle engaged in by girls and women to live out the impossibly contradictory positions accorded to us must be addressed, as must the paranoias of the powerful that understand women's success as a (conscious or unconscious) threat to their position of superiority, shaky as it is. This requires a strategy which engages with the educational politics of subjectivity, a politics which refuses to split the psychic from the social and attempts to understand the complexity of defence and resistance, and to find ways of dealing with those for teachers and students alike. Equal opportunities and models based on choice simply cannot engage with the complexity of the issues I have tried to spell out in this paper. Indeed, the danger is that when such strategies fail, as they do, educators will resort to essentialistic arguments, as they do, to explain, for example, the failure of girls to take 'non-traditional' subjects. Such essentialism is completely unwarranted, but working on fiction, fantasy and contradiction is to work in dangerous and threatening territory. It is that territory that we have to move into if we are to proceed in the struggle which recognises that women, after all, can be very powerful indeed.
NOTES

[1] See, for example, HARTNETT et al. (1979).

[2] Social conditioning is a term which is commonly used and, although it may once have referred to social learning theory, I think that its roots in behaviourism are often forgotten.

[3] This idea is discussed more fully in WALKERDINE (1988) and WALKERDINE et al. (1989).

[4] This is a term used by LACAN (1977) to indicate not the real penis but the idea of male and patriarchal power invested in the possession of a penis. Possession of the phallus is both a metaphor and a fantasy.

[5] In WALKERDINE et al. (op. cit.) we discuss in more length the way in which physiological evidence is used to support the contention that educating girls would be physiologically dangerous, by in the end, affecting their capacity and desire to have children.

[6] Of course, not all girls fail. (The discussions about failure concentrate on the failure of girls and women to enter higher-level careers requiring maths and to obtain higher level passes in the subject, but the issue is generalised so that explanations for this are sought with respect to all girls (see WALKERDINE et al., op. cit.).

[7] Higher education began to be open to women when the caring professions began to be based on the idea of the amplification of capacities for maternal nurturance (see WALKERDINE et al., op. cit.).


[10] See WALKERDINE et al. (1989) for a further discussion.


[12] WALKERDINE et al., op. cit.


[16] One example of a little girl coping with the contradictions of being both her father's feminine little baby and a tomboy are discussed in WALKERDINE (1985).

REFERENCES


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