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No Penis, No Story: an Analysis of Gender Discrimination in Creative Writing and Literary Authorship

Heidi J Loos

Everyday millions of stories are told and received, spoken and heard, written and read. The act of storytelling is in every culture and in every human civilization and society across the globe, whether distributed by mouth, by gesture, or by various forms of human-constructed mediums. According to my psychology textbook, children are taught through stories and learn to tell stories at a very young age because storytelling is a crucial element of human interaction and human connection (Smith, Nolen-Hoeksema, Fredrickson, & Loftus 157). For a person to tell a story using language, I have always assumed, they need only a mind to grasp and organize their ideas and words and a method by which to give their story back to the outside world. However, it has recently come to my attention that in the present day patriarchal western society in which I live, to tell and to write a story that will be heard and/or read one needs to have a certain appendage dangling between their legs. Apparently, in our culture, a penis is an essential tool for creative writing and storytelling. Therefore, in this essay I am going to discuss gender and authorship in literature and creative writing and I am going to examine why so many female authors have chosen or are choosing to publish under male or gender neutral pseudonyms. By providing both classical and contemporary examples and discussing them in relation to feminist theory, essentialism, and mainstream essentialist discourses, I will discuss how authorship in creative writing and literature is still a very asymmetrical and male-dominated profession.

I chose to engage in this topic because it is relevant to my own life. I am a university student taking creative writing and hoping to pursue authorship – to become a published writer. Also, like everyone else who is living in the postmodern, label-obsessed twenty-first century, I am, without choice, rendered a gendered subject. The major problem is that I am the visible type of gendered subject because I am a female-bodied individual. I am cis-gendered so I do self-identify as a woman, but my gendered body or femaleness is the problem. My femaleness is visible, and like Michel Foucault says, “Visibility is a trap” (Foucault 176). It is from Foucault’s theories that I draw the idea that people’s names, like any other words, labels, or titles in the English language, act as signifiers of the sex and/or gender of the subject. Because my name is Heidi, which is considered a feminine or female name, it signifies the label “woman” and “[r]ather than a stable signifier that commands the assent of those whom it purports to describe and represent, women, even in the plural, has become a troublesome term, a site of contest, a cause for anxiety” (Butler 29). This anxiety stems from the mainstream essentialist discourse and media that has assigned

specified feminine qualities, such as passivity, to female bodied people, to women. This discourse, therefore, demands that female writers and authors neither deviate nor attempt to deviate from these “innate” characteristics that essentialists have constructed.

Depending on the subject matter I choose to write about, the genre that I choose to write it in, my target audience, and how much money I want to make, I may have to consider writing under a male or androgynous pseudonym to pursue my dream of authorship. I have had this conversation multiple times and I have encountered some very naïve and problematic reactions because the majority of people that I have discussed male pseudonyms with have become very defensive and even outraged by my accusations of gender inequality in authorship. From my experiences, people are so desperate to believe that gender equality has been reached in modern day western society that they can easily overlook or just blatantly ignore the facts that I lay out in front of them.

The people I have conversed with on the topic of gender and authorship argue that women and female authors’ oppression in writing and literature is in the past, and that today there are an equal number of well-known, and well-paid female authors to their male counterparts. I accept and respect these optimistic yet terribly naïve beliefs, and I do agree to some extent because I agree that “the future [in women’s writing] must no longer be determined by the past” (Cixous 347). As feminist scholar Helene Cixous has written on the subject of gender, authorship, and women’s writing, “[I, too,] do not deny that the effects of the past are still with us” (347). The facts that I draw upon for my arguments of gender inequality and gender discrimination in authorship are facts drawn from recent, contemporary statistics and surveys. These facts demonstrate that, more often than not, male authors are taken more seriously than female authors; male authors get paid more than female authors; and male authors have not and do not use female or gender-neutral pseudonyms as much as female authors use male or androgynous ones. Although these details are usually covered up or made invisible by mainstream media, the truths about inequality, gender biases and discrimination in present-day authorship are just one or two clicks away on any search engine. I am especially interested in the gender biases and gender discrimination in contemporary western literature and western literary culture because it is so often overlooked, ignored and rendered invisible.

If one were to search online to find a list of female authors who publish or have published under male or gender-neutral pseudonyms they will easily come across a Wikipedia entry with a list of eighty names on it. There is, arguably, a Wikipedia entry for almost everything, accurate or not, but there is no such Wikipedia list of male authors who have chosen to publish under female or gender neutral pseudonyms. If equality has supposedly been reached in the contemporary literary and creative writing sphere, then why is there only one list? And why are there so many

more male authors read and studied in literature classes than female authors? Some articles that I've examined credit this limited knowledge and minimal exposure to female works and female authors to the notion that writing *used* to be a fundamentally male pursuit, but this discredits the fact that in reality it still is. True: historically, conditions were much worse. Women were forbidden to write and were often illiterate because it was not acceptable for women to pursue education, or, as Virginia Woolf puts it in her essay *Women and Fiction*, "in England in the sixteenth century, when the dramatists and poets were most active, the women were dumb. Elizabethan literature is exclusively masculine" (Woolf 142).

Gradually it has become acceptable for women to write and to pursue authorship. First, however, as with any other traditionally male and masculine job titles, the word "author" needed to be "spotlighted" and feminized for women's use. Like actor and actress, steward and stewardess, host and hostess, waiter and waitress, a woman author was first known as an "authoress." This spotlighting is an example not only of how language is gendered, but also of how language and writing is predominantly and universally male. "Spotlighting is another practice connected to language conventions, gender, and social positions ... [and w]hile this gives additional information about the individual filling a particular role, it also marks her ... as an anomaly" (Mathews and Beamon 66-67). By marking or feminizing these words, the meaning automatically holds a red flag and is marked by a type of stigma. Although the title "authoress" has faded away, the spotlighting and stigmatization of female authors did not and has not. Women's writing is marked writing "that, until now, far more extensively and repressively than is ever suspected or admitted, ... has been run [and restricted] by a libidinal and cultural—hence political, typically masculine—economy" (Cixous 350).

Spotlighting is similar to the concept of seeing and hearing the word "women" when the actual word that is being used is gender; it is a learned perception. People do it subconsciously because of dominant essentialist values and ideals that they are bombarded with as children. As Cixous describes, "here they are, returning, arriving over and again, because the unconscious is impregnable. They have wandered around in circles, confined to the narrow room in which they've been given the deadly brainwashing" (Cixous 349). Children are taught, or, I argue alongside Cixous, not so much taught as brainwashed with inherently essentialist values and principles from a young age: for example, children are often told that the social constructions such as masculinity and femininity are "innate" and "natural" characteristics of female- and male-bodied people. From early on in childhood most of us were taught what objects and concepts are linked to masculinity and which to femininity, and therefore what we must perceive as masculine and what as feminine.

Just like different colours, pink and purple, red and blue, we internalize the idea that differ-

ent genres of writing are either masculine or feminine, male genres or female genres. The main problem and major inequality that I want to address is that most contemporary genres of creative writing and literature are male genres, and in my opinion this is the key element to understanding why so many female authors choose to write under male or gender neutral pseudonyms. However, I must note, I find the words “choose” and “choice” ironic here because this choice is clearly forced, and highly asymmetric. Male authors are not faced with the same predicament. Female authors are often forced to give up their female identity and feminine given-name in order to survive in our present day materialistic, capitalist, neoliberal and patriarchal society.

Essentialist discourse tells us that it is feminine to observe, to love, to romanticize and to speak and write in the passive voice, but never in the active voice. As Cixous writes:

It is well known that the number of women writers (while having increased very slightly from the nineteenth century on) has always been ridiculously small. This is a useless and deceptive fact unless from their species of female writers we do not first deduct the immense majority whose workmanship is in no way different from male writing, and which either obscures women or reproduces the classic representations of women (as sensitive—intuitive—dreamy, etc.)(349).

Drawing from these essentialist notions that have been embedded in the classic representations of women and female writers’ writing, “In the early nineteenth century, women’s novels were largely autobiographical” (Woolf 146), because it was considered feminine to observe. In the early nineteenth century, women and female writers gained access to the genre of the diary. According to Virginia Woolf, the genre of autobiography, or “diary,” became known as a feminine, less respectable, easy to write, and less concentrated art form. Today, women can write diaries, letters, and romance novels because these are the genres that are typically permitted to female writers and female authors. These genres are known and widely recognized as feminine and female genres.

“[T]o sum up the character of women’s fiction ... one would say that ... it keeps closely to what women feel. It is not bitter. It does not insist upon its femininity. But at the same time, a woman’s book is not written as a man would write it” (Woolf 146-147). Because of this widespread essentialist implication the only genres that you will ever see men or male-bodied people using female pseudonyms and feminine pen names for are genres targeted directly at women, for women, by women, for female-bodied and “female-minded” audiences, and which pursue feminine topics such as motherhood, love and romance. “To examine American fictions in light of how attitudes toward women shape their form and content is to make available to consciousness that which has largely left unconscious and thus to change our understanding of these fictions, our relation to them, and their effect on us” (Fetterly 564). Basically, the only genre that it is not completely unheard of for this backward name swap in which a male takes on female writing per-

sona is the category of romance novels. A contemporary example of this is the famous romance novelist, Tom Elmer Huff, who has written twenty-three gothic and romance novels under the pen names Edwina Marlow, Beatrice Parker, Katherine St. Claire, and Jenifer Wilde.

I could not find any credible sources or statistics to detail how many male romance novelists write under female or feminine pseudonyms. However, by exploring the internet and finding numerous articles, sites, and blogs devoted to discussing the topic of female authors using male pen names and only a small and lonely few sites devoted to the opposite, I can guarantee that the number of male authors who choose the route of a feminine pseudonyms regardless of genre is significantly smaller than the number of female authors who choose to publish under male or gender neutral pseudonyms. I am now going to examine three examples of female authors who have chosen to write under male and gender neutral pseudonyms: George Eliot, Anne Rice, and J.K. Rowling, and I am going to discuss some of the reasons why they made this particular choice.

First, George Eliot. For the purposes of this paper, I asked various large groups of people such as university students, professors and faculty if they had read or knew of the author George Eliot. A majority of them had at least heard of her. However, very few people that I asked could tell me George Eliot's real name because her male identity is the only name circulated in mainstream media and discourses. Her real name was Mary Anne Evans and she was a famous English author from the Victorian Era. She wrote eight novels, all under her pen name, George Eliot. During this time period it was fully legal for women to write and be published, but of course it was still very much more difficult for female writers to get their works read, published, and taken seriously, as it still is today. Thus, Mary Anne Evans made the "choice" to write under the male pseudonym George Eliot.

Second, Anne Rice is a best-selling American author of erotic, gothic and religious-themed books from New Orleans, Louisiana. I chose to mention her because I read an article by a contemporary journalist, Kristen Anderberg, called "Women Writers in Alternative Media Using Male Pseudonyms," and Anderberg links Anne Rice's choice to use a gender neutral pseudonym to the taboos and shame that surround women's sexuality. Anne Rice writes erotica under the pseudonym A.N. Roquelaure, and on this Anderbeg writes, "One could still argue that if sexuality and women's writings were more accepted, we would not feel so much need to isolate the different genres with different names" (Anderberg 1). Similarly, Hélène Cixous talks about the history of female writers' and female authors' oppression in relation to the history of the oppression of women's bodies and women's sexuality.

The last example I want to consider is a contemporary example that almost everyone in the Western world is familiar with: the author of the *Harry Potter* novels, J.K. Rowling. J.K. Rowling used her real name, Joanne Rowling, on her first *Harry Potter* novel, but her publisher, Blooms-

bury, told her she must change it or else her target audience of young males would not read it. Joanne Rowling was one of many female authors struggling to make enough money to get by, so her choice was hardly a choice at all. Again, for Rowling, it was simply a matter of making enough money to be able to survive in our capitalist and patriarchal economy. "Although the claim of universal patriarchy no longer enjoys the kind of credibility it once did, the notion of a generally shared conception of 'women,' the corollary to that framework, has been much more difficult to displace" (Butler 355). J.K. Rowling was forced to make her choice because we still live in a patriarchal culture in which men and boys have internalized the idea that they cannot read and relate to female author's works because dominant essentialist brainwashing techniques have told them that it will jeopardize their masculinity. Obviously, a woman, a female-bodied person with a female name and feminine identity, cannot write a story that men and male-bodied people can relate to because she does not have the essential storytelling tool hanging between her legs. No penis, no story. In their eyes she is still just an *authoress*. However, for some peculiar reason, *we*, women and girls, do not jeopardize our femininity when we read books written by male authors about male protagonists because the male voice and the male hero in literature and creative writing and, arguably, also in the real world represents everyone. Until "he" is no longer the universal subject, gender equality in literature and creative writing authorship cannot and will not be reached.

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