The Erotics of Topography in Scudéry and Lafayette

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ABSTRACT

Spatial metaphors predominate not only in French feminist theories mapping out the *ailleurs* of Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, but also in seventeenth-century women's novels by Madeleine de Scudéry and Marie-Madeleine de Lafayette. The "Histoire de Sapho" and *La Princesse de Clèves* explore the relations between power and geography suggested by the work of Michel Foucault. Scudéry and Lafayette's heroines resist their century's *mise en discours* of the female body by refusing, through their *rougeur* or *modestie*, to be inscribed in the story. These heroines undergo a synecdochic dismantling from salon and court spaces to found their erotic topographies where Eros is invested in spatial metaphors and the mind integrated in the body's passion.

RÉSUMÉ

Les métaphores spatiales caractérisent non seulement les théories féministes d'Hélène Cixous et de Luce Irigaray, mais elles marquent aussi les romans des écrivains femmes du dix-septième siècle, Madeleine de Scudéry et Marie-Madeleine de Lafayette. "Histoire de Sapho" et *La Princesse de Clèves* explorent les rapports entre pouvoir et géographie que suggère l'oeuvre de Michel Foucault. Les héroines de Scudéry et de Lafayette s'opposent à la mise en discours du corps féminin quand elles refusent, que ce soit par "modestie" ou par "rougeur," de figurer dans l'histoire. Ces héroines se réduisent en synecdoques pour s'échapper à l'espace officiel, et pour fonder des topographies érotiques où l'Eros s'investit dans des métaphores spatiales, et où l'esprit participe à la passion du corps.

Questions of Geography

In his introduction to *Baroque Topographies*, Timothy Hampton relates the problem of identity ("discursive originality") to "a question of territoriality": "The subject's struggle to speak is the struggle to forge a site for itself within the web of discourses in which it is caught, to create what Michel de Certeau calls 'the fiction of one's own place'" (Hampton, p. 8).[1] Spatial metaphors are apt to describe the "struggles of the subject," since geographical terminology overlaps with the military lexicon from which it largely derives (Gordon, p. 69).[2] One need only cite the *Préface* to the *Dictionnaire des Précieuses:* Somaize conflates his description of the *précieuses'* "poétique," that is, their "struggle to speak," with their "géographie". He summarizes their "guerres, conquêtes et victoires, etc, [...] avec un dénombrement des villes plus remarquables et des princesses du royaume [...]" (Somaize, p. xl).[3] The relations between power and geography, the strategic and the geographic, help explain why spatial metaphors predominate not only in twentieth-century French feminist theories, but also in seventeenth-century novels by Madeleine de Scudéry and Marie-Madeleine de Lafayette. Spatial metaphors are "symptoms of a 'strategic,' 'combative' thought" (Gordon, p. 70) which inscribe power struggles in the figures of discourse.[4] Long before Hélène Cixous spoke of the "ailleurs" of writing (Cixous, pp. 131-32; 180) and Luce Irigaray of the "ailleurs" of female pleasure (Irigaray, p. 77), Scudéry and Lafayette's heroines were mapping out private places whose very geographical isolation bespoke their opposition to the then dominant ideologies. If, as Certeau has said, narratives are "spatial trajectories," and "Every story is a travel story" (Certeau, p. 115),[5] these women writers

take their readers on a journey through seventeenth-century social spaces to *ailleurs* where female subjectivity is represented as eroticized topographies.

However, these novelists, prior to plotting out spaces where their heroines achieve their autonomy, must navigate the latter through what Foucault has called the "dispositif de la sexualité," meaning the configurations of power – understood as the unstable play of institutional and social forces – that define sexuality (Foucault, pp. 121-24). Both Foucault and Irigaray have specified the discursive nature of this power: "the web of discourses in which [...] [the subject] is caught" are the discourses on sexuality, which inscribe the constraints of power on the human body. Indeed, Foucault's "mise en discours du sexe" – the proliferation of discourses, which, from the seventeenth century onward, produce and control sexuality[6] – has certain parallels with Luce Irigaray's gender-specific theory that women's "value-invested form" depends on "what man inscribes in and on its matter; that is, her body" (Irigaray, p. 187). Matter, or the body, serves as "a support for speculation" (Irigaray, p. 177), a site for the discourses of power "qui s'articulent directement sur le corps" (Foucault, p. 200).[7] The seventeenth century produced a profusion of theological, philosophical and medical tracts which elaborated gender-informed representations of power based on the "inferiority" of the female body.[8] This inferiority is pervasive in the term "le sexe," by which the century designated women and confined them to biologic and domestic parameters. "Natural" hierarchy dictated that women be subordinate to their husbands in marriages, which were referred to as "the seminaries of State" (Davis, pp. 125; 128; 142).

Seventeenth-century domestic space could certainly be considered what Foucault has referred to as a "lieu(x) de saturation maximale" (Foucault, p. 65), that is a place where the dictates of power are concentrated. For Fénelon, the family is a "petite république" sanctioned by the church (Fénelon, pp. 155; 158; 143). Because "Les femmes ont d'ordinaire l'esprit encore plus faible et plus curieux que les hommes" (Fénelon, p. 91), "elles ne doivent ni gouverner l'Etat, ni faire la guerre, ni entrer dans le ministère des choses sacrées" (Fénelon, p. 92). Rather, woman is "l'âme de toute une grande maison" (Fénelon, p. 92), thus Fénelon admonishes his reader, "Renfermez-là dans les bornes de sa condition" (Fénelon, p. 166). Images of enclosure abound in Fénelon's text,[9] since, as Jacques Olivier stated, "la Femme est une vigne en la maison de son époux" (Olivier, p. 113). Just as, according to La Bruyère, love is a woman's destiny, "Une femme insensible est celle qui n'a pas encore vu celui qu'elle doit aimer" (La Bruyère, p. 129),[10] procreation is her function. Scudéry and Lafayette challenge this *mise en discours* of the female body.[11] These novelists, implicitly recognizing Irigaray's notion that (female) matter serves to uphold male speculation, accordingly fragment the bodies of their heroines in order that the latter no longer comply with the discourses of inferiority inscribed on them. These women writers disperse their heroines' bodies in synecdoches, be they Sapho's "modestie" or the princess' "rougeur," in order to disrupt the official "mise en discours du sexe." Their heroines evanesce through corporeal fragmentation not only to elide the politics of literary and social spaces, but also to reclaim the power of abstraction so long denied them: the female body is disengaged from social frames and, in a paroxysm of privacy, newly consolidated in *ailleurs* with a markedly erotic valence. I will now examine the rhetorical and spatial strategies whereby Scudéry and Lafayette invest Eros in topographic metaphors which conserve the mind's participation in the body's passion.

Old Spaces: The Body Dispersed

These novelists, in order to give their particular version of what Natalie Z. Davis has called "woman-out-of-her-place," a topos in early modern cultural production (Davis, pp. 144; 150), first extract their heroines' bodies from the salon and court spaces defining and confining them. If, as Fénelon wrote, the family is a "petite république," Scudéry and Lafayette's orphaned or soon-to-be orphaned heroines immediately designate themselves as reluctant participants in the family romance.

From the very beginning of Scudéry's "Histoire de Sapho," the eponymous heroine is situated in the inhospitable domain of the Island of Lesbos, where

the father's legacy is the son's rightful heritage: Sapho's father, upon dying, "avait partagé son Bien fort inégalement" by willing the greater part to Sapho's brother, "quoy qu'à la vérité il ne le meritoit pas" (p. 331). When the latter enacts his heritage by proposing that Sapho marry Tisandre, a man for whom she feels no *inclination,* Sapho moves outside the "bornes de sa condition," that is, the "maison de son époux." She opts instead for salon space and the *précieux* refusal of marriage: "Je veux un Amant sans vouloir un Mary" (p. 415). However, since the salon's boundaries are delimited by a rigid code of *bienséance* excluding both female writerly identity and the indissociable expression of *inclination,*[12] – "quelque plaisir qu'elle trouvast à entretenir Phaon, la bien-séance l'emporta sur son inclination" (p. 534); "Car enfin les femmes ne doivent jamais dire qu'elles aiment, qu'en souffrant seulement d'estre aimées" (p. 497)[13] – Sapho's trajectory is hardly completed. Rather, her progressive withdrawal from salon space, usually considered feminocentric,[14] is initiated by over fifty direct and indirect references to her *modestie.* "Je n'aime point qu'on me loue" (pp. 381; 459), is Sapho's typical response to praise of her writing, intellect, or learnedness:

> De grace (interrompit cette admirable Fille en rougissant) ne parlez jamais de moy en ma presence: car je ne puis souffir qu'on me puisse soupçonner de prendre plaisir à des loüanges si extraordinaires: puis qu'il est vray qu'à parler avec toute la sincerité de mon coeur, je suis fortement persuadée que je ne les mérite pas. (pp. 406-07)

Sapho's protestations of modesty, a kind of self-withdrawal prefiguring her eventual flight to the land of the "nouveaux Sauromates," are logical since the "Histoire de Sapho" represents the *mise en scène* of the woman writer,[15] a project which, as the text constantly reminds us, is anathema to the salon ethos of *honnêteté:*[16]

> Car enfin, je pose pour fondement indubitable, que dès qu'on se tire de la multitude, par les lumières de son esprit, & qu'on aquiert la réputation d'en avoir plus qu'un autre, & d'escrire assez bien en Vers, ou en Prose, pour pouvoir faire des Livres, on perd la moitié de sa Noblesse, si l'on en a: & on n'est point ce qu'est un autre de la même Maison & du même Sang, qui ne se meslera point d'escrire. (p. 366)

The obsessive citations of Sapho's modesty at once deflect the audacity of her writerly project and paradoxically emphasize it. These references effect a synecdochic dismantling of the heroine from salon space, "au milieu de tant de monde" (p. 507) and "au milieu d'une Grande Compagnie" (p. 509).

The princess, like her predecessor Sapho, resists being inscribed in the story through synecdochic dispersal. In Lafayette's novel, the rejected courtly milieu replaces the forsaken salon, and the princess' *rougeur* is substituted for Sapho's *modestie.* Because *modestie* and *rougeur* are appropriate reactions for the *honnête femme, honnêteté*'s very enactment here foreshadows its undoing: *bienséance* dictates withdrawal, but the latter's consequences undermine the ethos of sociability and reveal its contradictions.[17] Both heroines reject domestic space, since the role *bienséance* confers on "l'âme de toute une grande maison" (Fenelon, p. 92), precludes *inclination.* It is clearly the heroines' *inclination* which seeks an alternative frame to the hostile spaces of house, salon, and court. "La bienséance l'emporta sur son inclination" (Scudéry, p. 534); "il n'y avait de surêté pour elle qu'en s'éloignant" (Lafayette, p. 204), are at once forms of self-withdrawal and logical responses to passion whose objects, Phaon and Nemours, are represented as the very agents of that passion's extinction: Phaon is thus depicted in the salon habitués' letters to Sapho, and Nemours is so described in Mme de Chartres' admonitions to her daughter. From the outset, the princess elides the story written by this particular "mise en discours du sexe." She withdraws not only through her "rougeur" and her "trouble," but also through her elected places of refuge: her mother's advice, often a double of *bienséance,* Coulommiers, the convent, the land in the Pyrenees, and especially, her repeated "maladies":

> Mme de Clèves sachant qu'elle était obligée d'y être, qu'elle y verrait M. de Nemours [...] prit le parti de feindre d'être malade [...]. Ainsi elle demeura chez elle [...] et, remplie de ses propres pensées, elle avait toute la liberté de s'y abandonner (p. 268).

A network of over fifty terms signaling flight is generated by the sight or mention of Nemours, that is, the heroine's *inclination* (a term occurring over twenty times): "L'inclination qu'elle avait pour ce prince lui donnait un trouble dont elle n'était pas la maîtresse" (p. 193); "la vue de M. de Nemours acheva de lui donner une rougeur qui ne diminuait pas sa beauté" (p. 191). The prince himself understands the sexual component of his wife's illnesses: "Vous ne vous trouviez donc mal que pour lui" (p. 275). The princess' politics of evasion is recognized by the text when she is described as "une personne qu'on ne pouvait pas atteindre" (p. 152). Indeed, Mme de Clèves cannot be reached, since she is constantly disappearing; she truly desires to be *ailleurs.* When Phaon and the prince exhort their mistresses' confessions, "Je vous demande le nom de celuy pour qui vous avez fait des Vers que je pris dans vostre Cabinet" (Scudéry, p. 501); "Et qui est-il, Madame, cet homme heureux qui vous donne cette crainte?" (Lafayette, p. 211), they seek to discover the nature of this elsewhere. They also continue a Western tradition which, according to Foucault, originates in seventeenth-century confessional manuals exhorting the Christian to "faire de son désir, de tout son désir, discours" (p. 30). Power inscribes the confession of truth, conceived as "du discours vrai sur le sexe" (p. 84) in the process of individuation. If, as Foucault has hypothesized, confession in Western societies is a ritual associated with producing the truth about sex (Foucault, pp. 78-9),[18] Sapho's and the princess's "truths" about their sexuality take their lovers to lands they would scarcely have envisioned. The "truth" these heroines reveal is that, in their *ailleurs,* sexuality is constructed by female minds, despite Fénelon's conviction that "Les femmes ont [...] l'esprit encore plus faible [...] que les hommes" (Fénelon, p. 91).

New Places: The Erotic Fortress

Foucault, referring to the diffused nature of power, which contaminates even resistance to it, states that "Il n'y a donc pas par rapport au pouvoir *un* lieu du grand Refus, âme de la révolte, foyer de toutes les rébellions, loi pure du révolutionnaire" (Foucault, p. 126). However, the geographical isolation characterizing Sapho's land of the nouveaux Sauromates and the princess' convent, as well as her houses in Coulommiers and the Pyrenees, seemingly challenges Foucault's assertion, if only in regard to fictional topographies. Resistance in both Scudéry and Lafayette is accomplished through distance and enclosure: the land of the nouveaux Sauromates is surrounded by a desert it takes three days to cross, "il y a tout au moins trois grandes journées de Deserts à passer" (p. 569), and the house at Coulommiers by a forest of one day's journey, "à une journée de Paris" (p. 237).[19] Mme de Clèves' final alternating retreats, her once-mentioned land near the Pyrenees and the convent, are all the more remote for their imprecise localization. These isolated topographies can indeed be called fortresses, since they result from "the subject's struggle [...] to forge a site for itself" (Hampton, p. 8). Both Sapho's "petit Etat"[20] and the princess's final "retraite" are strongholds to be defended against representatives of the abandoned social space: Sapho and Phaon "ont obligé la Reine [of the nouveaux Sauromates] à faire une défense exacte de recevoir nuls Etrangers [...]" (p. 608); and the princess "ne s'exposait point au péril de le [Nemours] voir" (p. 314). The stasis indicative of these enclosed places favors the consolidation of a new identity in which female subjects accede to abstraction without forfeiting their right to passion. These private topographies represent a reconciliation with nature, for it is here that the body, divested of negative social discourses, is reinvested in a phantasmic geography animated by *inclination* and controlled by a female mind. Both heroines implicate the relation between power and geography when they manipulate space to write alternative "mises en discours du sexe".[21] Indeed, fragmenting the body's coherence has inherent sexual connotations, since it is motivated by the desire to be *ailleurs,* and this elsewhere is an erotic fortress.

For these heroines, writing "the fiction of one's own place," involves preserving *inclination* through intellectualization, by writing the body into the land. Thus, they fragment not only the body's coherence, but also that of the "master discourse" of Cartesianism, which, according to Susan Bordo, "secures all the boundaries [...] between the 'inner' and the 'outer,' between the subjective and the

objective, between self and world" (Bordo, p. 98). Sapho, safely ensconced in her "Petit pays," "écrit sans doute tous les jours des choses galantes et passionnées" (p. 608); like the princess, Sapho knows that "pour aimer toujours avec une esgalle ardeur, il ne falloit s'espouser jamais" (p. 607). Indeed, Nancy K. Miller, referring to the scene where Nemours spies on the princess seated before his portrait, points out that Mme de Clèves' "retreat to Coulommiers [...] must be thought of not as a flight from sexuality but as a movement *into* it" (Miller, p. 350). And yet, it is not only at Coulommiers that Nemours' *regard* participates in the princess' fantasy of sexual possession.[22] After this incident, Nemours rents a room opposite Mme de Clèves' apartments, "pour aller regarder les murailles qui la renfermaient" (p. 298). Since these "murailles qui la renfermaient" recall those that surrounded her at Coulommiers, enclosure itself becomes erotically charged. Each time the princess flees Nemours, her place of refuge, by a kind of slippage or metonymy, becomes an erotic topography framed by Nemours' *regard;* both the property near the Pyrenees and the convent participate in the eroticism of Coulommiers. However, in both the "Histoire de Sapho" and *La Princesse de Clèves,* enclosure, understood as the *act* of enclosing, is not necessarily synonymous with closure, meaning the *condition* of being closed. The erotic fortress constitutes itself in response to, and thus in company with, the forces opposing it: just as Sapho does not escape the salon, which she nonetheless reinvents as the utopian land of the nouveaux Sauromates, the princess does not free herself from Nemours' gaze, which she reinvests in her own phantasmic geography. In opposition to closure, Sapho and the princess' erotic topographies represent a version of Cixous' *ailleurs* of writing,[23] since they elide binarism by fusing the mind and body sundered in Cartesianism.[24] By investing the eroticized body in the land, Scudéry and Lafayette reinstate the soul, which according to Susan Bordo, Cartesian rationalism wrested from nature (Bordo, p. 102). These novelists resemble Erica Harth's Cartesian women, who "dismantle(s) the barrier that denies an emphatic connection between thinking subject and object" (Harth, p. 106). In these novels, stasis does not result in resolution, rather it is the precondition of writing, understood as a process of constant deferral: writing desire preserves its dynamic by eluding its object. Fénelon, referring to "le sexe," warned: "Retenez leur esprit autant que vous pourrez dans les bornes communes" (Fénelon, p. 131). Scudéry and Lafayette's heroines exceed the "bornes communes" of domestic space through their erotic topographies where the mind is integrated in the body's passion.

NOTES

1. Hampton here cites Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 118.
2. "[...] certain spatial metaphors are equally geographic and strategic, which is only natural since geography grew up in the shadow of the military. A circulation of notions can be observed between geographical and strategic discourses" (Gordon, p. 69).
3. Somaize uses fifteen geographical terms to refer to the "royaume des Précieuses" (xxxix-xl). His catalogue of "leur langue" – l'extravagance des mots – is fortified by enumerating "leurs estats, empires, villes, provinces, isles, mers, fleuves, fontaines, et leur géographie tant ancienne que moderne" (Cxl).
4. One need only recall Foucault's use of spatial metaphors such as territory, domain, and displacement to emphasize the relations between power and knowledge. See Gordon (p. 68).
5. Narratives, like the modes of public transportation the residents of Athens call *metaphorai*, take us somewhere: "they traverse and organize places; they select and link them together; they make sentences and itineraries out of them" (Certeau, 115). According to Certeau's distinction between "space" and "place," both Scudéry and Lafayette take their readers on a "tour" of seventeenth-century spatial practices. This tour leads to a "map," a place where new identity is founded.
6. Foucault argues that Western civilization, far from repressing or censuring sexuality ("l'hypothèse répressive," p. 18), has instead produced a profusion of discourses on sexuality, a "mise en discours du sexe": "Plutôt que le souci uniforme de cacher le sexe, plutôt qu'une pudibonderie générale du langage, ce qui marque nos trois derniers siècles, c'est la large dispersion des appareils qu'on a inventés pour en parler, pour en faire parler, pour obtenir qu'il parle de lui-même, pour écouter, enregistrer, transcrire et redistribuer ce qui s'en dit" (p. 47).
7. Foucault thus defines the goal of his study: "montrer comment des dispositifs de pouvoir s'articulent directement sur le corps ..." (p. 200).
8. For a discussion of these texts, see Maclean, pp. 25-63.
9. Fénélon is concerned with keeping women in their place, that is, in the house. They should go out as seldom as possible (p. 112), their instruction should be limited (pp. 163, 165), and their intellect should be restrained (p. 131).
10. According to La Bruyère, a woman who does not love a man is unnatural (p. 123).
11. Davis has noted that even feminists such as Poullain de la Barre did not challenge the notion of women's subordination to men in marriage. See also Perrault's *Apologie* (p. 9).
12. "Passionate love had no place in a system predicated on total control over internal feeling" (Stanton, p. 135).
13. See also pp. 434; 451; 484; 501.
14. See DeJean, esp. pp. 18-24. According to DeJean, the salon fostered the tradition of French women's writing. In women's novels and memoirs, the romantic and the political are indissociable. DeJean emphasizes the power of these fictions: "At times, even places with an existence no more 'real' than in the pages of a book [...] were far from socially impotent" (p. 18). For a different point of view, see Harth, who argues that "the salon's freedom proved largely illusory, its subversion unfruitful" (p. 54).
15. See DeJean, pp. 43-50, and 78-85. The "Histoire de Sapho" reverses a prevalent seventeenth-century gender dichotomy discussed by Harth, in which male academies were associated with writing, and predominantly female salons with conversation (p. 22).
16. See Stanton, pp. 96-97. *Honnêteté* disdained the professionalism of the serious writer. The *honnête homme* and the *honnête femme* could engage in writing only by designating it as a frivolous diversion. Even though Scudéry is often referred to as a *précieuse*, Stanton cites her as one of the theoreticians of *honnêteté*. According to Stanton and others, the salon of the hôtel de Rambouillet was the birthplace of *honnêteté* (p. 27).
17. Stanton cites Scudéry: "in society there is nothing so *malhonnête* as to be withdrawn and wrapped up in oneself" (pp. 134-35).
18. Foucault explains that confession does not liberate. Rather, it is traversed by power and plays a role in the construction of the subject (who is also subjected). Power is the prerogative of the listener, who is the "maître de la vérité" (p. 89). The forced nature of Mme de Clèves' much-discussed confession (pp. 239-40) seems to validate certain of Foucault's assertions.
19. The reader learns that the house at Coulommiers is surrounded by forests when Nemours passes through them before reaching the pavilion where he surprises the princess and her husband (p. 238).
20. The land of the nouveaux Sauromates is described as a "petit Etat" or "petit Pays" on pp. 568; 569; 570, and 601.
21. The relation between power and geography is insistently evoked in Lafayette's novel. See pp. 237; 251; 261, and 314. See also DeJean, who emphasizes that the princess seeks to control her own geography (p. 120).
22. The princess, while gazing at a painting wherein Nemours figures, entwines yellow ribbon (Nemours' colors) around a cane belonging to him (pp. 281-82).
23. Cixous' concept of the *ailleurs* of writing is related to Derrida's critique of the binarism underlying Western philosophical discourse. Writing is the place where, through the tension of presence and absence characteristic of Derrida's "différance," binary oppositions no longer dictate meaning (see Moi, pp. 104-07).
24. See Bordo, Ch. 5, "Purification and Transcendence in Descartes' *Meditations*" (pp. 75-95), and Ch. 6, "The Cartesian Masculinization of Thought and the Seventeenth-Century Flight from the Feminine" (pp. 97-118).