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ABSTRACT

In modern authorship, the writer is believed to be capable of working alone, autonomously, without being influenced by others. If the writer is a "true" author, he or she is also believed to be producing an "original" text and is accorded ownership of the text. These apparently neutral, natural moves actually participate in a hierarchy of authorship. At the one extreme is the true author, recognized by "his" autonomy and originality. At the other extreme is the plagiarist. This hierarchy, furthermore, is implicated in a set of gender-based assumptions that lead to disturbing conclusions about feminine authorship. Harold Bloom's "The Anxiety of Influence" and Thomas Mallon's "Stolen Words: Forays into the Origins and Ravages of Plagiarism," demonstrate the terms of these conclusions. Both Bloom and Mallon assert that all writing is influenced, none autonomous. Both, further, discuss writing with sexual metaphors that indicate a lack of appreciation for collaboration and other female inclinations. Robinson Shipherd was specific in linking originality to the masculine body, plagiarism to the female. Other 20th century writers, like Sigmund Freud, depict women as an obstruction to creativity. Meltzer finds that for Freud, men must acknowledge the feminine as the "passive and unproductive" elements in their work or they themselves will become feminized. Consider, also, William Perry's well-known explanation of exam-taking: rote obedient learning is associated with the female, while a subtle grasp of the abstract is associated with male learning. (Contains 19 references.) (TB)

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The Gendered Plagiarist

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In modern authorship, the writer is believed to be capable of working alone, autonomously, without being influenced by others; and if the writer is a "true" author, he or she is also believed to be producing an "original" text. If the writer is autonomous and original, he or she is accorded ownership of the text. These apparently neutral, natural moves actually participate in a hierarchy of authorship. At one extreme of this hierarchy is the true author, who can be recognized by "his" autonomy and originality. At the other extreme is the plagiarist. Like the properties of autonomy, originality, and ownership, this hierarchy is itself taken to be neutral and natural.

But it is not, for the hierarchy of modern authorship is implicated in gender relations. Two texts in particular demonstrate the terms of this implication. One is Harold Bloom's 1973 *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, which builds a theory not only of poetry but also of literary criticism by exploring the fear of plagiarism—and specifically, writers' fear of being influenced. The other is Thomas Mallon's 1989 trade book describing and excoriating the practice of plagiarism, *Stolen Words: Forays into the Origins and Ravages of Plagiarism*. Both Bloom and Mallon assert that all writing is influenced, none autonomous. Yet neither Bloom or Mallon appreciates textual collaboration. On the contrary, Mallon postulates individuation as the desired outcome of the creative process. He believes that

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the originary artist begins work in the shadow of others and then moves from community to individuality (123). Similarly, Bloom says that although all poets are influenced by precursors, they create new meaning when they misinterpret these sources (78-9).

So far these seem to be gender-neutral assertions. By way of explaining how they come to participate in gender relations, I would like to recall Miriam Brody's description of Robinson Shipherd's 1926 composition textbook, the first to offer an extended warning against plagiarism, a warning whose gender assumptions she explains in some detail.

Just as Shipherd's notion of plagiarism benefited from images of dangerous promiscuity, so too gendered representations of failures in writing emerged in his description of good style. . . . Faithful to the imagery in [Quintilian's] *Institutes*, whose wisdom Shipherd passed on without identifying the source, Shipherd offered a phallic representation of good writing, after paraphrasing Quintilian's remark that we must speak so that we are not misunderstood. [Shipherd's] most morally impaired plagiarist, who might contaminate the social body if not segregated from it, 'couldn't write a sentence that would stand erect'; hence when he borrowed someone else's prose, his theft was self-evident.

In his phallic metaphors, Shipherd is specific in linking originality to the masculine body, plagiarism to the female. We may recoil at his specificity, but when we look at contemporary Anglo-American criticism, we find these metaphors durable, indeed. Harold Bloom is consumed by an interest in "strong" poets, and his account of these writers is transmitted through metaphors of the body. He depicts the writer's precursors as poetic fathers who mate with muses, but the mating does not produce the poet-child.

Instead, the poet-child has to produce himself, has to father himself by breaking free of the influence of the poetic father (37). Integral to creativity is the poet's mating with his muse, but that mating is fraught with the anxiety of sexual territoriality: "His word is not his own word only, and his Muse has whored with many before him" (61).

We should particularly attend to the significance of one word, one adjective, in Bloom's account. It is "strong" poets who can father themselves, "strong" poets whom Harold Bloom values. "Strong" writing is, in Anglo-American culture, a masculine virtue. Brody explains that Quintilian was the major source for the Enlightenment's concept of "good writing as the embodiment of masculine virtues" and "effeminacy as the representation of weak writing," embodied in the figure of the eunuch. Working from Quintilian, eighteenth-century rhetoricians—and nineteenth-century authors of composition textbooks—defined good writing as "manly, noble, and chaste." Plagiarism, a notion which gained currency in the late nineteenth century, enabled a differentiation of the merely literate (the feminine) from the "strong," masculine writers. "The responsibility to pursue manly eloquence was elevated to the binary struggle to maintain the structure of gender as it had been cast" (Brody 30).

Harold Bloom is far from the only twentieth-century commentator who imagines women on the outside of literary originality. Françoise Meltzer points out that Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* depicts women as a downright obstruction to creativity (32-33). Meltzer finds that for Freud, the feminine threatens men's writing; men must

acknowledge the feminine as the "passive and unproductive" elements in their work, or they will themselves become feminized.

The bovine metaphor for writing, which appears in various modern authors, including Charles Reade and Thomas Mallon, participates in this gendered economy of authorship. Consider, for example, William Perry's well-known explanation of exam-taking: students who write only "bull" (generalizations) on their exams should receive higher grades than those who adduce only "cow" (specifics). Whereas the cow (female) shows only rote, obedient learning, the bull (male) indicates subtlety and a grasp of the abstract. The bullster is a "colleague" whom one can "trust"—a student who "at least understands the problems of one's field" and who can, when motivated to do so, readily acquire the necessary concrete data (255-7). In Perry, Reade, and Mallon, the bovine metaphor operates to associate abstraction with the masculine, and the concrete (the body) with the feminine.

From these various sources we might construct a provisional definition of *plagiarist* in its gendered context:

1. A female writer.
2. A male writer whose work is so weak as to feminize him.

The associations of authorship with gendered bodies that I have discussed so far seem fairly straightforward, reducible to such dictionary nuggets. The rhizomes of the association of plagiarism with the female body become tangled, though, in the familiar claim that plagiarism amounts to disease, rape, or adultery. Shipherd's textbook makes the issue of disease abundantly clear. Describing the teaching of composition as the development

of character (Brody 166), he warns against students' plagiarism, which he associates with venereal disease. Representing plagiarism as a moral and legal offense, Shipherd compares it to a sexually transmitted disease, calling it the 'moral problem of our subject,' our 'bete noir of sex hygiene.'"

Disease is, of course, of the body. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White note that the expression "the Great Unwashed" emerged in the 1830's in England. At that time, fear of contamination ran rife, resulting in a fear of touching. "'Contagion' and 'contamination,'" they say, "became the tropes through which city life was apprehended" (135), and the fear of contamination extended beyond hygiene to a fear of the "spiritually inferior" (136).

In the modern economy of authorship, the spiritually inferior is, of course, the plagiarist, the binary opposite of the true and thus moral author. The immorality of plagiarism is infectious, capable of contaminating those who come into contact with the plagiarist. Thomas Mallon describes Charles Reade's compulsive plagiarism as a "virus" (81). The *Chronicle of Higher Education* reviews the "recent rash of plagiarism cases" (Mooney A13). As a result of surveying students in introductory courses at Miami University of Ohio, Jerold Hale concludes that plagiarism is "an epidemic" ("Plagiarism Is Rampant"). And Margaret S. Geosits and William R. Kirk, as well as Terry Nienhuis, offer a "cure." Augustus Kolich adds, "The worm plagiarism spoils the fruit of intellectual inquiry and reason, and starves the seeds of originality that foster such inquiry" (145).

Like the image of plagiarism as disease, the claim that it is a form of rape has quite a tradition in Western letters. Wendy Wall describes the writing of Thomas Dekker, who is among those Renaissance writers who deny a desire to publish. Anthony Scoloker, she says, parodies such authors' disavowals when he refers to publishing as undergoing "a Pressing"—which is a double entendre suggesting the "loss of authorial virginity" (1). Scoloker equates publishing with forced entry. Wall explains that he was drawing upon the "conventional gesture" of using "the axis of gender to encode anxieties about unauthorized social and textual circulation in early modern England" (3). In this encoding of anxieties, women were tropes. "Gender . . . provides a focal point . . . for querying the issues of authorship, privacy, and class energized by the spread of print technology" (Wall 7).

Theodore Pappas is one of the many twentieth-century writers to draw upon the female trope as a means of hierarchizing authorship. Pappas introduces the word *rape* into his description of the plagiarism of Martin Luther King, Jr. ("Truth" 41). Similarly, Thomas Mallon has frequent recourse to images of plagiarism as rape (105, 134, 164). Mallon therefore imagines plagiarizing professors as potential corrupters of their students (172, 177).

The images of rape wielded by Scoloker, Pappas, Mallon, and so many other commentators on authorship in the modern period make it impossible to reach closure with the statement that originality is strong and masculine, while plagiarism is weak and feminine. If plagiarism is rape, we must examine the usual associations with the act of rape: it is committed by a male,

a strong male, upon a weak, traditionally feminine body. Plagiarism as rape therefore evokes images of strength, however violent. Thus the gendering of authorship is ineluctably complicated far beyond Brody's assertion—and that of Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar—that originality is represented as masculine and plagiarism as feminine. Toward some understanding of the complexity, we might ask who is being raped. Is it the originary, proprietary male author? Or is it his property, his text? Since the plagiarist has recourse not to the person of the proprietary author but to his text, it is the text that plays the feminine role of rape victim. The outrage of plagiarism, therefore, is that the text belongs to the proprietary—male—author. That proprietary author *is* male: in the Western tradition, Françoise Meltzer notes, women don't own the product of their labor (82-127) and thus cannot, in the Lockean sense, be authors. Nor, of course, can they be rapists, and hence not plagiarists.

Women, as Harold Bloom's image of the poet-father establishes, are not original; cannot influence those who are; and cannot be relied upon to be faithful to those who are. The rape metaphor for plagiarism further establishes that women are not even subjects, capable of the volition that is plagiarism. They are instead objects, property, subject to violation. Both originality and plagiarism—indeed, all authorship—have thus been subsumed under the masculine. The original author is the strong male; the plagiarist is the violent or feminized male. Hence we must contemplate a revised definition of *plagiarist*:

1. A male writer whose work is so weak as to feminize him.
2. A male writer who ravishes the female property of another male writer.¹

Plagiarism is what happens when a writer—an intellectual—a man—is “fooled” in the Platonic sense by the body; when he veers into too-close proximity with the body—the female. Then the male intellect becomes confused by the sensory data of the body and, in a kind of literary hysteria, runs amok, committing crimes of the body: rape, adultery, or gender confusion. Sex and gender, says Judith Butler, are “regulatory fictions that consolidate and naturalize . . . power regimes . . .” (33). We can apply the same description to the properties of authorship—originality, ownership, and autonomy. These are regulatory fictions that consolidate and naturalize gendered power regimes. The very notion of plagiarism is both product of and reproducer of gender ontology. We must number it among what Butler calls “the categories of identity that contemporary juridical structures engender, naturalize, and immobilize” (5). The associations of originality with masculinity and plagiarism with femininity are, though valid, insufficient for understanding the gendering of modern authorship. It is more accurate to say that authorship in all its forms is attributed to the masculine gender, and that in plagiarism we have that gender threatened, by proximity to the female. Authorship is not only masculine, but it is

¹ This definition is completed in the figure of the plagiarist as adulterer. Mark Rose observes that in the *Essay on the Regulation of the Press*, Daniel Defoe speaks of the invasion of authors’ properties as “every jot as unjust as lying with their Wives, and breaking-up their Houses” (qtd. in Rose 40). Robinson Shipherd’s 1926 composition text portrays the teaching of composition as the development of character and compares plagiarism to sexual promiscuity (Brody 166-74). And when Theodore Pappas (“Truth”) and David Levering Lewis discuss Martin Luther King, Jr.’s, plagiarism, they conjoin it with his adultery.

compulsorily autonomous. Because collaboration is feminine, it is not authorship. Plagiarism therefore represents authorship run amok—hence gender rendered indeterminate—and thus invokes a kind of gender hysteria in the community in which it occurs.

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