

Theses

Kalmár György:

„A női test igazsága” –

Esettanulmányok a női test és az igazság figuratív kapcsolatának történetéből Chaucertől

Derridáig

(“The truth of the female body” – Case studies about the metaphorical identification of truth and the female body from Chaucer to Derrida)

The present PhD dissertation is an investigation into the history of a certain tropological mechanism, the workings of one single metaphor, the figure of *nuda veritas*, the veiled woman representing truth. In his “L’instance de la lettre dans l’inconscient,” Lacan writes about the insistence of a signifying chain in the unconscious that reproduces itself and which is that of dead desire. In his analysis we can see the subject as the slave of language, caught and defined in this very insistence of the signifier. My central concern here – the insistence of the figure of the veiled woman as a metaphor of truth – can be well described in Lacan’s terms. This metaphor, a piece of signifying chain, keeps coming back through the history of literature and philosophy, eternally repeating itself and with itself the whole structure of the subject, the other, the quest for truth, and the place of *jouissance*, a dynamic structure driven by the dead desire of the subject inscribed in this very metaphor.

As one may see, this figure connects the fields of epistemology and gender studies: it explains one through the other, creating a mutual reliance between these seemingly distant fields of human culture. Through its understanding one may glimpse at the ways different areas of knowledge may influence each other: on one hand it shows how the understanding of gender may be based on general concepts about the universe and the position of the human subject in it, and on the other hand, it may show how often unreflected notions of gender and sexuality influence the „sublime” concepts of philosophy.

On one hand, this metaphor inscribed sexual and gender difference in a heterosexual matrix that is motivated by the acquisition of truth and knowledge in the metaphysical sense, and, on the other hand it models the process of the acquisition of knowledge on the stereotypical patterns of heterosexual seduction and copulation well-known in patriarchy. Thus, the history of this metaphor may inform one about the history of knowledge, sexuality, the body and desire, and also lead one to understand how these seemingly different „things”

have been connected and intertwined in different ways in different historical times. One psychoanalytical axiom behind the theses is that desire is present in all fields, parts and products of culture and the desires of different things (knowledge, sex, happiness) are connected, mutually influencing each other. This also means that the most „abstract” and „sublime” concepts of a certain civilization are intimately connected with the most everyday ideas about body and gender, and the formers cannot be fully understood without the context of the latter. Another important axiom is that the consistency of desire is partly due to the insistence and repetition of certain tropes and figures of speech: apparently there are „master tropes” of desire which are used and accepted through many centuries. I consider *nuda veritas* to be one of these, which may be a particularly important one because of its capacity to inscribe sexuality and desire in such a „grand” metaphysical pattern that connects many of the most important aspects of human life (sexuality, corporeality, desire, knowledge, metaphysics) in one single trope.

Obviously, the historical spectrum is vast: the first signs of this metaphor can be found in the earliest written documents of Western civilization, like the *Old Testament* or Plato. The dissertation does not aim at creating a historical grand narrative, but rather attempts at writing case studies, readings of texts that employ this figure and are also very influential in its history. As the reader may have already guessed, it is the singleness of this figure of speech that limits the scope of the dissertation to a manageable one (since I am investigating the occurrences of one single metaphor), and on the other hand, it is the multidisciplinary nature of the problems implicated that makes it multi-layered, complex and colorful. As the metaphor is rewritten in each age, it influences the self-understanding of philosophy as much as people’s notions about sexuality or gender roles. Though this metaphor (as most of our long-used figures) may bring a certain kind of consistency into the history of our culture, in different times and texts it also gets into different contexts, and therefore starts signifying slightly different things, in other words it also changes.

Methodologically the dissertation relies on the techniques of close reading developed by deconstructive criticism and further used by poststructuralist gender criticism. Paul de Man’s „rhetoric of tropes” is another influence to be named, since it claims that all sorts of texts (philosophy and literature alike) rely on the figurative dimension of language. Another theoretical toolkit comes from Lacanian psychoanalysis, a theory that serves as a frame for my investigations. Post-Lacanian gender criticism and contemporary French phenomenology are used to make Lacan’s conceptual framework more subtle and gender-sensitive.

The dissertation consists of an introduction, six chapters and conclusions. The six chapters do close readings of the following texts: Geoffrey Chaucer's „The Wife of Bath's Tale” and „The Knight's Tale”, the Marquis de Sade's *The New Justine*, John Donne's *Elegy XIX: To His Mistress Going to Bed*, Roland Barthes' *The Pleasure of the Text*, and Jacques Derrida's *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*. The first three case studies read texts in which one may perceive more „classical” or traditional workings of this tropology. These may show how concepts of knowledge, gender and sexuality were connected in fantasies that shaped our culture for centuries. The other three chapters present texts in which these tropological economies are displaced. The traditional notions of knowledge and gender roles are shaken and rewritten by very different contexts, desires and intentions. The ways these more „modern” texts succeed in rewriting old imageries or fail to do is most informative concerning the role of figures of speech in shaping the ethos of a certain culture or the (often illusory) feeling of continuity within it.

This way, the dissertation serves with glimpses of a history, snapshots that may reveal both continuities and discontinuities, analyses that have very serious implications for both philosophy and gender studies.

Previous publications by the author in the field

(in chronological order)

"A női test igazsága. (A női test mint az igazság metaforája a patriarchális diskurzusban.)"

Vulgo, 2000/ 1-2.

"She-who-must-be-obeyed. She, the veil, and the subject of *mâladie*." *The Anachronist*, 2000.

"A szöveg ezer öröm-teste." *Alföld*, 2001/ 9.

"A filozófia és az anyai fallosz. Sade és a metafizikusok." *Literatura*, 2001/ 4.

"The Gendered Other of Metaphysics." *Gender Studies*, 2002/ 1.

"A befordult férfi anatómiája." *Vulgo*, 2003/ 3.

"The before of order. (Fantasy, castration and the grounding of phallogocentric metaphysics in Geoffrey Chaucer's 'The Knight's Tale')" *Gender Studies*, Vol. 1, No 4/ 2005. 99-108.

„Szerelem, boldogtalanság, irodalom. (A női figura és az esztétizált boldogtalanság ökonómiája 'A lovag meséjében'.” *Nagyerdei megálló. Tanulmányok Vajda Mihály hetvenedik születésnapjára*. Kossuth egyetemi Kiadó, 2005. 164-191.

„Testek és áthelyeződések. (A tárgy tárgyának áthelyeződései a reneszánsz angol

költészetben: John Donne XIX. Elégiája)” Alföld, 2006/5.
„Derrida fátylai.” Alföld, 2008/7.