

January 1991

Chapter V. Michèle Le Doeuff

Raoul Mortley

Bond University, raoul_mortley@bond.edu.au

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Recommended Citation

Raoul Mortley. (1991) "Chapter V. Michèle Le Doeuff" ,, .

http://epublications.bond.edu.au/french_philosophers/6

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Michèle Le Doeuff was born in 1948, and currently holds a research post in the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (Paris). She previously taught at the Ecole Normale Supérieure (Fontenay-aux-Roses). Her work is united by certain thematic lines of enquiry, though it is quite disparate in appearance. The impressive body of her historical work on Francis Bacon, and the history of science, is less well-known in Anglo-Saxon countries than her work on feminism, and the idea of the subject. Outside France she is particularly identified by her work on the philosophic 'imaginary'. Her own exploration of this theme gives her historical writing and her contemporary writing a consistency which turns on certain observations about philosophical method. Some of these observations are gender-based, but all could be described as critical: there is an enquiry into philosophy itself in Le Doeuff's work.

MICHÈLE Le DOEUFF

RM: It's not very common for French philosophers to be interested in the British philosophical tradition, yet much of your recent work has been on the thought of Francis Bacon, and you've taken the rare step of crossing the Channel. Could you say what your own training has been like, and how you became interested in the English tradition? Did you do philosophy at school, for example?

ML: Philosophy, as you know, is taught in France during the final year of the *lycée*, that is the high school. And it is an important subject, especially for the pupils or students taking A levels in the humanities. When I was 16, I took philosophy for nine hours a week for one year, in order to prepare for that kind of A level. And just after getting the *agrégation*, which is the national competitive examination for teaching. . .

RM: The *agrégation* is a kind of competition in which only a certain number of people are accepted or 'received'. It is a *concours*: is that correct?

ML: Yes, it is.

RM: Is it a form of recruitment for secondary teaching, or does it lead into university work as well?

ML: Both in a way. If you don't pass the *agrégation* you have very little chance of ever being hired by a university. But the *agrégation* in itself is not enough to be hired by a university. So after the *agrégation* I taught philosophy in *lycees* for a while and enjoyed it: this may sound exotic, I suppose, to anyone involved in the English tradition. But the kind of philosophy we teach or are taught at that level may sound even more exotic. There is a syllabus listing forty questions for an A level in the humanities (twenty questions for students taking

the scientific A level), including issues such as: consciousness, the unconscious, desire, power, society and the state, the other, history, theory and experience, work, liberty, religion, and so forth. Now we think that teenagers *are* able to manage the theories of Aristotle or Marx when we discuss the question of work, or society. We believe they can read a page by Kant when we talk about freedom, or a text by Plato, with our help, of course. And this is a feature of the French way of philosophizing, not to separate philosophical reasoning from knowledge of the history of philosophy, or acquaintance with the classics. Not only at school, but later on, at the university as well. In other words, when we discuss a philosophical problem, art for instance, we do always refer to the Greeks, or Kant or Hegel. And when we do the history of philosophy, we endeavour to keep a philosophical point of view.

Now I don't want to give any idealized or glamorous image of the situation of philosophy teaching in France. Even though the idea may seem attractive, the reality is often quite dull. I remember reading the last interview given by Sartre, an interview in which he told his life-story as a high school student, and how boring and ridiculous his philosophy teacher was. I read that after my essay on women and philosophy was published, in which I had emphasized the fact that, in order to become a philosopher, you have to be cruelly disappointed by someone who should have been your mentor. Socrates and Descartes were the examples I gave, and when I read what Sartre had to say about his early years, I understood that he had been in the same situation, but I also realized that, in my article, in describing the positive role of disappointment, I had told my own life story as well.

RM: You mean you benefited from having a bad teacher?

ML: Before being taught philosophy at school, I had read various books: Pascal, Alain, Kant's ethical theory. . . enough in any case to think highly of philosophy. Then, for nine hours a week I had to attend the lessons of a narrow-minded, badly-read, sometimes comic old man. I did not like him, and he didn't like me either; I'm afraid I must have been a pain in the neck. But, looking back, I'm sort of glad I had such a poor teacher. Thanks to him I discovered the principle of equality; I mean this - in philosophy hierarchy doesn't matter, because no social hierarchy is relevant when rational debate takes place.

It doesn't matter that someone is the teacher and the other the beginner, for when the beginner is convinced that he or she is right, and the teacher wrong, then the beginner starts understanding what philosophy is, in other words beginning to grasp what it is to think by oneself, and how necessary it is to think by oneself. You may consider this to be a counsel of arrogance; it is rather a counsel of freedom and responsibility. I don't pretend I'm a self-taught person, however. The next year, working for the examination to enter the Ecole Normale Supérieure, I did have a good teacher, efficient, well-read and intelligent. But, fortunately, it was too late for me ever to become a disciple. Later, at the Sorbonne, I became a student of the moral philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch, a remarkable and very kind professor, who did not want to have disciples, a man who was keen on students going their own way. In short, I have been lucky: I have had professors, books, but no mentor. Some authors have, of course, particularly influenced me, and among contemporary writers Foucault and Deleuze must be mentioned, I suppose, although I have never been a groupie of any of them.

RM: So you never had a mentor, or a *maître* as they say in French: it's an unusual thing not to have had a 'master' in France. What sort of figures did you identify with?

ML: I have friends with whom I talk. I always had - and this is central in my relationship to philosophy. I identify with my equals. As a child I had an absolute passion for Shakespeare, and I wanted to be a clown. I was more than fascinated, and I probably identified with those characters who were allowed to be impertinent to anyone; they were truth-telling, coarse-mannered, merry, melancholy, and profound - and also jokers. But the child found out pretty soon that life is not a play written by Shakespeare, no jobs for clowns are ever advertised by any royal court; and anyway, in Shakespeare, clowns are distinctively men. But when I discovered philosophy, it seemed to me so close indeed to the characters of Shakespeare that it could provide an approximate fulfilment of my initial wish. Jobs were available, and to women. It took me some years to understand that women were looked down upon in philosophy. To begin with, I was blind to that fact simply because the exclusion of women from philosophy was less blatant than in clownship.

By the way, another element delayed my realization of this: In the sixties, the final national examination, the *agrégation* I mentioned before, was not co-educational. Men and women didn't have to compete with each other: the State offered forty-five positions to women, and this gave a legitimacy to being a woman philosopher. The State was looking for forty-five women able to teach philosophy, and, as we all knew, they could be found easily enough. Each of us had to work hard to be among the forty-five because we knew that we had several hundred competitors capable of meeting the standards and demands. That kind of mutual regard and esteem made us partly blind to the fact that our male student companions thought women unfit for the remarkable subject that philosophy was.

You might think that I have forgotten the beginning of your question - what about my interest in the British philosophical tradition? Well, my field is British Renaissance philosophy and, as you said, it is not a very common field in France. But it is not so common in England either, I mean among philosophers. There are, of course, in Oxford, Cambridge or London, outstanding scholars who work on that period, but from the point of view of the history of ideas mainly, or literature. But my authors, Thomas More and Bacon, are completely neglected by philosophers. That's part of a wider problem in England, namely the lack of interest in the history of philosophy as such.

In France the same neglect may be seen as the result of something else: at the beginning of this century, various philosophical dogmas became established in the French academic world. The main one involved a simplistic worship of intellectualism, appraising the philosophical doctrines of the past according to the degree of value or hegemony they give to rationality. Because Kant intellectualizes more than Hume, Kant is thought to be a far greater philosopher than Hume. And, amusingly enough, a Kantian professor will look down upon his Humean colleague, but will in turn be looked down upon by any specialist of Hegel. Such an attitude leads of course to a definite contempt for the British Renaissance. So when I published a translation of Bacon's *New Atlantis*, with a commentary, no book by Bacon had been available in France for at least fifty years, except the *Essays*,

which were read by specialists of English literature only.

May I describe myself as having a rather independent mind? Whether I have or not, my idea of rationality certainly does not involve the worship of any hegemony. British Renaissance philosophy was a fallow land to me, a field open to new exploration. And it was a fascinating time, I think, because philosophers were then freeing themselves from an age-long dominance of religion. Remember that, during the Middle Ages, the official doctrine had it that philosophy was but a humble servant to theology. A philosopher like Sir Thomas More, though a Christian, thought reason could have its own independent consistency, and its own field, namely politics and social organization. I consider it to be of interest to study such a form of rationality, which seeks its own independence without claiming superiority over all other forms of thought: according to these philosophers, the revealed truth of religion was still supposed to be higher. As I said before, we try to study philosophical systems of the past, keeping in mind present philosophical preoccupations. I'm trying to put forward some questions about the variety of forms of rationality - how different from each other those forms are - and a critical reading of British philosophers may be a good test. One runs the risk of being looked down on by everybody of course, but, since a woman is doomed to scant respect anyway, it does not matter. If you have nothing to lose, you can afford to be daring.

RM: A unifying theme of your work seems to me to be the '*imaginaire*', the philosophical imagination. This is a difficult term to translate into English: it means both the capacity to imagine, but also the stock, or repository of images which colour philosophical discourse. And it's that side of it, I think, which has interested you particularly, that notion of the stock of images which are available in philosophy, or which perhaps even intrude in philosophy. Do you think that these images are an inevitable part of philosophy?

ML: I'm so glad you described the *imaginaire* as a unifying theme. Some people find it strange that I sometimes work on imaginary islands, utopias, or the idea of the island of reason, for example, and sometimes on the representation of women in philosophical texts. I can't see why they wonder, since it is one and the same approach in a sense. For what is called 'woman' or the 'feminine' in philosophical works is a

fantasy, an imaginary being produced by the philosopher for certain purposes. Like all other images-like the image of the island, for instance. Let me take another example: Bacon says that there are three different kinds of intellectual attitudes, one being that of the ant, which gathers but does not work on what it gathers, the second being that of the spider, which builds up from its own substance, the third being that of the bee, which first gathers and then works it through. Now bees, ants and spiders function here as mere images, to layout the difference between three kinds of intellectual attitudes, a difference which would not be easy to establish without the use of metaphors.

Bacon also says that nature is a woman, whom false knowledge deals with as if she were a prostitute, and whom true knowledge properly treats as its legitimate wife. A mere image this too, produced in order to emphasize a difference between two forms of knowledge, and assuming of course that the scientist is a male, and that to treat a woman properly is to father children through her. My work is about the stock of images you can find in philosophical works, whatever they refer to: insects, clocks, women, or islands. I try to show what part they play in the philosophical enterprise. But, obviously, when I work on the figure of 'woman', something more important is at stake than when I work on imaginary islands. First, because whatever a philosopher may write about islands, this will never do any harm to them, whereas what they say about women is generally an insult. As such, it has consequences. Secondly, because an average reader is prepared to acknowledge that what a philosopher writes about insects may not be a correct description of them, whereas anything and everything said about women is accepted without critical reflection. Recently I gave a paper on Bacon to an audience of people involved in the protection of the environment, and I mentioned the bees, ants, spiders, prostitutes and wives. A man in charge of our national parks protested during the discussion, along these lines: 'But ants are not like that at all, there are so many different species of ants. Some don't merely gather, but garden as well. Philosophers don't know what they are talking about. . . .' But nobody stood up to say: 'But women are not like that at all. Some are neither prostitutes nor wives, and many wives are not decently treated.' I have come to the conclusion that insects

are more protected against philosophical abuse than women.

You asked whether a stock of images, of pieces of pictorial writing, is an inevitable part of philosophy. I think so. First, because I have never come across a single philosophical system without images: even Kant, who is supposed to be an austere writer, has them. Secondly, I think that images play such an important part in a theory that no philosophical theory can do without them. In a sense they are the foundation of this or that system or way of reasoning; they organize the fundamental values of every system, they put forward, as it were, what is good and what is bad, and they express the differences the philosopher has to assume before getting started on his work. Nobody can object to the presence of myth and fantasy figures as such in philosophy. But I strongly object to the use of 'woman' as a construct of the imagination.

RM: I see that a recent article of yours discusses the idea of a dream of doctrine, a *somnium doctrinae*, in Kepler and Bacon. I recall a passage of Plato's *Theaetetus* where Socrates says he has had a dream: it always seemed strange that he should suddenly lapse from what seems to be ordinary philosophical argument into describing a dream he once had. It seems on the face of it irrelevant, an intrusion in the text. Philosophers aren't supposed to dream; they're supposed to come out with rational discourse. What do you think is behind this stratagem, if it is a stratagem?

ML: Any form of rational discourse proceeds from, or originates in, things which can't be sustained or produced through reason, things such as beliefs for example. In philosophy, these beliefs are set forth in the form of myths, or 'exempla', comparisons, images, or pictorial writing. But there is a contradiction here, since philosophy is also the assumption of a pure and total rationality: a philosophical discourse is supposed to appear as a self-grounded discourse [*auto-fondateur*]. This could be the origin of what you call a stratagem, namely the fact that no philosophical discourse can meet its own demands and standards. Day-dream and myth fill the gap, as it were, by providing the basic grammar of the system, by taking over from the conceptual work whenever there is a problem, and being sometimes ambiguous enough to support two opposite ideas at the same time.

Now, because philosophers are not supposed to be day

dreaming when at work, excuses or pretexts had to be invented. The main one, I mean the one most commonly used by philosophers, is the claim of the educational technique. They say they use images to teach, because myths are easier to understand than concepts. It's as if images were translations of theories, theories translated for the ignorant, or for beginners, or for 'the mob'. This is what Bacon says about the Greek myths: the first philosophers, before Socrates, translated their theories into fables, because they were so new that it would have been impossible for people to understand them. Now, in the article you referred to. . .

RM: That's the one on the doctrinal dream.

ML: Yes indeed . . . I tried to show that Bacon is not talking about Greek myths at all, but about his own. The examples he gives can be seen as having a connection with Bacon's philosophy and the difficulties or impossibilities of this philosophy, mainly the problem of how nature is in contact with the divine.

However, excuses are necessary only when the author has to acknowledge that he uses a myth or talks about dreams. Which is seldom the case. We, the readers, have been educated not to pay any attention to the pieces of fantasy in philosophical texts, and such an education creates a kind of connivance or complicity with the classical authors. We read them as they ask to be read. Some years ago, when I started my work on islands, I described it to my friends, and asked them whether, if they came across an island, they would be so kind as to let me know. Then, for a conference on seventeenth-century philosophy, I took up the comparison you mentioned between Kepler and Bacon, and, I must admit, read Kepler for the first time. Now Kepler mentions Atlantis, Thule and Hesperides every now and then. A friend of mine is an expert on this scientist. 'Why didn't you tell me that Kepler is mad about islands?' I asked. 'I had never noticed', the expert answered.

In a sense we don't notice the images in a philosophical work, because we have been trained not to notice them, but also because images are quite invisible: they are often short, one sentence here, two lines there; they must look conventional or classical - and of course nobody will pay attention to a commonplace; and they are more or less consistent with standard ideology.

RM: Could you explain a little more this point about the hiddenness of images, the idea that they appear standard, or normal?

ML: Well I'm trying to show that the philosophical *imaginaire* is specific: philosophy, as it were, has its own stock of day-dreams and myth. But on the other hand images must look as banal as possible, that is to say acceptable, that is to say invisible. They must look as consistent as possible with common ideology, though they are specific. Take sexism for instance: we do live in a sexist society, so, whenever a philosopher makes a sexist statement, the reader may take it as a matter-of-course remark. Now a closer look at any sexist fantasy - say in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* - will show that it is not just standard sexism, but a special blend of sexism devised in order to sustain Sartre's system and hide its blunders. So you have to look at philosophical images in a dialectical way, since they are home-made, but seem imported.

It is not just by chance, perhaps, that a woman and a feminist undertook the critical analysis of what you call the stratagem. I could not read the remarks male philosophers make on women as an invisible matter-of-course. I always found them stupid and revolting, and far below the theoretical demands of philosophy. But none of the other images were invisible to me either, probably because a feminist is not prepared to take at face value any declaration of self-satisfaction, nor to understand anyone as he or she asks to be understood. Philosophers are supposed to come out with a totally rational discourse, and on this ground they claim a distinctive superiority over everything else; they claim philosophy is better than any other form of discourse, knowledge or creation. A feminist doesn't believe in such a thing, though she lives in a world where this attitude is common indeed. I'm not only referring to the fact that many men assume that they are, as such, superior to women; I'm also thinking of a feature of machismo, the fact that the macho man thinks he is superior to all men as well, and more 'male' than any other. As you may imagine, we are a bit sceptical about that kind of fantasy, and we are not keen on hierarchy anyway. Now philosophy tends only too often to be the machismo of the intellectual world, so let us show that it is not what it pretends to be, and has no claim to superiority over any other form of knowledge.

In order not to be misunderstood, let me add two things.

I said that such a thing as a 'total rationality' doesn't exist. Yet one can acknowledge that there are rational efforts in the work of philosophers, and valuable ones. And if the assumption of uttering a self-grounded discourse is seen to be a form of intellectual machismo, this need not imply that rationality itself is masculine. In fact, I doubt that we can really know what is 'masculine' and what is 'feminine' in the absolute sense. Of course we can identify certain attitudes and pretensions as phallogratic, certain yielding or submissive attitudes as linked to the oppression of women, and some critical points of view as a position that can be shared by feminists and men who know that it is a pointless fight, indeed, the fight about who is more male than one's neighbour.

RM: You identify two, or three, sets of attitudes there: firstly the phallogratic attitudes, and we know the kinds of images involved here - rationality, penetration, emotionlessness. Secondly, a set of deferring attitudes which, in sources hostile to women, is often linked to femininity: being submissive, accepting, being penetrated rather than penetrating, and so on. But you also identify a possible third type of approach.

ML: I suggested this threefold classification, instead of the age old duality between the 'masculine' and the 'feminine', which seems to lead quite inevitably to the appalling mixture of images you just mentioned. Anyway, one should focus on social relationship, instead of differing natures; the duality of the masculine and the feminine should be replaced by this. And I must say I'm taken aback when I see contemporary philosophers use this simplistic set of categories, the masculine and the feminine. I thought that none of us believed any longer that such a thing as a 'substance' existed. Now when someone suggests that one thing is 'masculine' and another 'feminine', he is implying substantial qualities. I thought we had finished and done with any 'theory of the faculties': if someone says that reason is masculine, and intuition feminine, for instance, he's assuming that there are faculties, faculties so inimical to each other that they can't be part of the same subject. And when a male philosopher says of himself that he is partly 'feminine', in order to show that he is more complete than his colleagues, and so superior to them, what can this be? Alchemy? The idea that you can take the attribute of one substance to insert it into another substance . . . what philosophers say about the

difference between male and female nowadays is archaic and unworthy of philosophy itself.

Now 'phallogratic' does not mean simply 'masculine' - it's masculinity in a situation of power. Submissiveness is not an equivalent of femininity, but the actual situation of women oppressed: so the third category, which I call critical feminism, would be the point of view of people fed up with oppressive relationships, namely feminists of course, but also men who don't want the traditional '*machiste*' role. If anything like a 'universal' is to be found, it can't be but in this third category - or rather, it will have to be created there.

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