

DOKTORI DISSZERTÁCIÓ

**“Thank God I’m a man” –
the implications of masculinity in George Orwell’s life and non-fiction**

Császár Ivett

2012.

Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem
Bölcsészettudományi Kar

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Budapest, 2012

First and foremost the Orwell discourse is a discourse on totalitarianism, especially on the effects of totalitarianism on intellectual freedom. This discourse, mainly drawing on *Nineteen-Eighty Four* and some essays, has highlighted those aspects of Orwell's work and life that are connected to the anxiety about totalitarianism, like, for example, his participation in the Spanish Civil War where he had a glimpse into the methods of Soviet Communism in crushing the revolution, whereas it downplayed those aspects of the same events and writings that raise issues other than that of totalitarianism, to remain with the same example, the role of gender in participating in war as a "test of manhood" and in the glorification of war and violence. As an authority on and indirectly, through the figure of Winston Smith, as the hero of totalitarianism, his shortcomings have not been challenged and the discourse remained a coherent discourse on totalitarianism. However, this approach to Orwell is inadequate because it cannot explain the contradictions that disrupt the oeuvre. In my dissertation I am arguing that examining Orwell's life and work from the aspect of gender can offer a discourse in which the Foucauldian unity of author and work is kept and the contradictions become intelligible.

Beyond the fact that Orwell's essays have not been examined extensively through gendered lens – Daphne Patai's feminist reading of Orwell embraces mainly his novels – a gendered critique of Orwell's non-fiction is especially imperative as Orwell's genius is said to be manifested in the genre of the essay and journalism. Since he contributed significantly to the political and social discourse of his day and still speaks to us in the present, his concept of gender needs due consideration. The andocentrism that underlies his ethos and oeuvre and that as a logical end gives way to the marginalisation of women in the propagandist pamphlets during the war has been ignored by criticism that praises his essays for being "purposeful, vigorous, often polemical, and a real attempt to see things afresh" and praises his unremitting fight for a just and egalitarian society.¹ As a political author whose vision of society is still relevant in our time and is held in high esteem, it should be emphasised that this vision is certainly not based on any kind of gender equality.

¹ Davison, Peter. *George Orwell: A Literary Life*. London: Macmillan, 1996. p. 94

Starting from and arguing for the Foucauldian unity of author and work, I present evidences of a lack of gender sensitivity both in Orwell's life and in his non-fictional writings, and I examine the sources and consequences of his "unmitigated masculinity" that went together with prejudices against women and against forms of life that challenged the historically and socially established norms of genders, like homosexuality, feminism, pacifism. In 'What is an author?' Foucault argues for the impossibility of the project to abolish the idea of the author as the origin of the work in the present form of culture. According to Foucault, certain notions, the idea of the work and the notion of writing, which are intended to replace the privileged position of the author, are contra-productive in the sense that they actually preserve that privilege and work against the disappearance of the author. We cannot do without the writer and study the work itself, because it is the relationship, the unity of the author and work that create present-day literary discourses. The author's name performs a specific role in the discourse of literature. It has a classificatory function, it permits the reader to group certain texts together, differentiate them from and contrast them to others. Far from the death of the author as claimed by Barthes, Foucault insists on the important role the author plays in today's literary discourse. The author is called upon as "a regulator of the fictive," an ideological figure which prevents a proliferation of meaning. The author is in this sense a functional principle by which "one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition and recomposition of fiction."²

After contextualising Orwell's oeuvre by providing an outline of the thirties, its key political and literary concerns, the merging of the two, and not last the gendered nature of the literary scene and canon of the time, I am examining what happens to the work, in my focus to Orwell's non-fiction, if the author disappears or is made to disappear from the reading. Stripping the work of the author leads to a proliferation of meaning, to the free manipulation of the work. Disregarding the ideological figure of the author, the regulator of readings, have led to the foregrounding of the ideology of the reader, in this way Orwell has been endowed with various convictions, like

² Foucault, Michel. 'What Is an Author?' In *Modern Criticism and Theory*. ed. David Lodge. London: Longman, 1988. p. 209.

conservatism, socialism, Catholicism, and even the extreme right laid claim to him. An examination of the various politically-motivated responses to Orwell's oeuvre throws light on the contradictions and deficiencies of these approaches. Criticism originating in political or religious ideologies ultimately fail in providing a coherent criticism based on the unity of author and work and remain entrapped within one or another political ideology without being able to cope with Orwell's subscription to an ideology different from that of the critic. Thus, the shift of from socialism to patriotism that constitutes a focus of my analysis is often interpreted as a shift from left to right with unaccountable motives behind it. Yet, if one scratches the surface of political ideologies and examines what fundamental human experience they embrace and build upon, it turns out that the kind of socialism and patriotism to which Orwell both subscribed do not differ from each other in terms of a fusion with masculinity. The imperative to do one's gender right and especially the urge to perform manliness prove to be strong fundamentals on which various political ideologies build, therefore, the seeming discrepancies of Orwell's oeuvre are to be accounted for best by resorting to an examination of his work and life from the aspect of gender.

With reference to the Foucauldian principle of the unity of author and work, I am arguing that it is the compulsory performing of heterosexual masculinity that runs like a thread through Orwell's life and work and informs much of his diverse and sometimes self-contradicting ethos. Daphne Patai has shown how andocentrism lies at the core of his fiction; I am examining how andocentrism and the urge to perform manliness explains his way of thinking as it is presented in his non-fiction – I am especially interested in his views on women and in his turn from socialism-driven commitment to peace to ardent patriotism and the link between the two. I am arguing that just as the inclination to perform masculinity and the anxiety about not doing his gender right played a significant part in his active socialism, in literally “going over” to the working class, the adherence to the traditional masculine norm (including duty, action, self-sacrifice for public affairs, self-sacrifice for the homeland, heroism) backed up his equally active patriotism and allegiance to the English nation. I propose that reading through the lens of gender makes his writings more intelligible and coherent.

In examining the gender constitution that Orwell's way of life and writings reflect I resort to Judith Butler's theory of performativity. Referring to Simone de Beauvoir's argument that "one is not born but becomes a woman" (and one should add "a man"), Butler argues that gender is not a given and stable identity but a construction, "a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo."³ The body takes on its gender through a series of acts that are historically and socially sanctioned. Because gender is constituted through a "stylized repetition of acts," it is capable of being constituted differently from the historically established norm. However, since the doing of gender is accomplished within a theatrical context, i.e. it is open to the perception of others, gender construction happens under social duress and deviation from the norm is punished. Gender as a performative act is a public act and a project which has cultural survival as its end. Those who fail to comply with their gender are regularly punished by society.

Since gender is the sedimentation of acts through time, I am examining Orwell's autobiographical essay 'Such, Such Were the Joys' from the aspect of what effects his education and upbringing might have had on his gender constitution. In the all-boy school he felt himself to be the odd one out, who could not conform to the requirements of the school in sports and bravery, and who did not have the "guts and character" so essential for survival. His much resented failure had a gender aspect: by failing in bravery, in sports, in having guts and character his masculinity was being threatened. An experience in such a sense of failure is to be reckoned with when one is confronted with his anxiety about masculinity in adult life, either if one comes across contemptuous remarks on women, on feminists, on homosexuals, on pacifists, or if one sees the socialist Orwell suddenly on the "war-mongers" side in 1940. The short sketch 'Slack-bob', written for the Eton newspaper, is examined as a parable on Butler's theory of gender performance under social pressure. That the young Orwell had an early experience in social punishment for not doing his gender right explains much of his later adherence to the masculine norm, masculinity accomplished either directly through

³ Butler, Judith. 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.' *Theatre Journal*, Volume 49. 1988. p. 520.

his own emphatically masculine performance or indirectly through the ostracism of others who failed to do their gender right one way or another, for example feminists who do not perform enough femininity or homosexuals and pacifists who do not perform enough masculinity.

I link Orwell's disposition to categorisation and prejudice to a sense of gendered failure. His prejudice against ways of life that do not conform to the historically and socially established gender norms imply that he remained captive of the gendered abuses of his schoolyears: he was anxious to do his gender right and avoid punishment in the form of failure and shame for not performing masculinity and he handed down the abuses he had a share in to all who – so he surmised – did not comply with the established gender norms, thereby confirming his own gendered self. Both his social radicalism and his intolerance toward various groups of people, two phenomena that seem to exclude each other – had roots in a sense of abuse and inadequacy. That many of his biases were gendered, like the bias against homosexuals, pacifists, fat socialists, feminists, or simply sandal-wearers and fruit-juice drinkers originated in the gendered nature of his failure.

Feminist consciousness has been the strongest challenge to Orwell's reputation. That he was “no comrade of women” manifested itself not only in his contemptuous and stereotypical views on women but also indirectly in his andocentric outlook.⁴ Reinforcing the assumption that the public domain is men's reserve, as a political writer the implied reader of his essays and articles more often than not was male. He invited male readers into homosocial bonding even if his subject would have more readily allowed the inclusion of female readers too. Categorical statements like “one of the surest signs of [Conrad's] genius is that women dislike his books”⁵ not only stigmatise women as a homogeneous group with low artistic and intellectual abilities but also exclude any female voice from the discourse, and thereby, in Foucauldian terms, from

⁴ Rodden, John: *The Politics of Literary Reputation: The Making and Claiming of 'St George' Orwell*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989. p. 211.

⁵ Orwell, George. *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus ed. Vol. I-IV. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc, 1968. Vol. I. p. 227.

the production of knowledge and power. Discourse is saved for male intellectuals, thereby homosociality is confirmed.

Beyond taking account of the feminist literature on Orwell, in the chapter 'Women on Paper' I am examining Orwell's journalism written in the 1940s from the aspect whether the claim that there was a positive evolution of his attitude to women and women's issues is justifiable. I am arguing that both his unceasing prejudices against women, feminism and femininity and his ambivalent relation to homosexuality, i.e. his simultaneous homophobia and homoeroticism, are to be traced back to the anxiety about gender constitution. Both feminism and homosexuality challenge traditional masculinity by blurring standard gender and sexual norms. Orwell experienced at school that not complying with the imperatives of masculinity and thereby breaking the socially sanctioned gender norms leads to excommunication and punishment. That he later on handed down the same abuses to his fellows (by labelling them pansies, by branding them effeminate etc.) is psychologically understandable, intellectually questionable.

Following the analysis of Orwell's views on women as they appear in his journalism, I turn my attention to Orwell's personal relations with women. Just like Orwell's personal experience of totalitarian practices in the Spanish Civil War is important for critics is dealing with Orwell's public preoccupation and writings on intellectual freedom, his personal relationship with women is informative about the concept of gender and sexuality that his writings reflect. Orwell's first wife's, Eileen O'Shaughnessy's recently discovered letters written to her girlfriend constitute an important source about the author. These letters that were included in the last volume (*The Lost Orwell*) of Peter Davison's huge Orwell collection were written neither by, nor to the author himself. The fact that Eileen's letters to her girlfriend are published in the Orwell collection supports Foucault's standpoint on the central importance of the author. Davison's meticulous collection implies that anything that is connected to Orwell is to be published, i.e. the work becomes important through the Foucauldian author-function. In my analysis Eileen's letters will be an important contribution in painting the portrait of the author primarily from the aspect of gender, and this portrait

will be contrasted with Orwell's own views on women, finding that the author and work do comply.

Instead of conscious misogyny it was an all-too-anxious adherence to the dictates of traditional masculinity and the following andocentric outlook that informed his ideas and attitude to women and women's issues. In my analysis I reflect on how critics and biographers have approached or – more often – neglected Orwell's andocentric outlook and biased attitude to women, suggesting that the majority of his critics by-passed and indirectly approved his gender-based biases. The conformity with which biographers labelled Eileen O'Shaughnessy as a supportive literary wife who played second fiddle to her husband's talent, based – no doubt – on Orwell's own treatment of his wife, speaks not only about Orwell's but about his critics' lack of gender sensitivity.

In the last chapter I am examining what are the consequences of Orwell's andocentrism and how his prejudices against women work at a time of crisis, the Second World War. Drawing on theories on the interplay of masculinity and nationalism, I am arguing that Orwell's uncritical internalisation of traditional masculinity precipitated his patriotic alignment to his country during the war. At least since the creation of the nation states in the nineteenth century patriotism has been a required, if not compulsory, element of masculinity, reinforcing other attributes like courage, a strong will, self-constraint, heroism, commitment and participation in public affairs. The examined aspects of Orwell's personality and writings get an additional meaning in the patriotic essays. A key aspect of his "private" personality and "public" literary persona that I examined beforehand was the sense of failure and the fear of excommunication, both in a general and in a gendered sense. From this aspect patriotism meant a relief, it gave him the delusive reassurance of belonging to the imagined community of the nation. His andocentrism and prejudices against women, examined both in his life and in his writings, led to the marginalisation of women under the heat of newly discovered patriotism: in the essays examined women appear only as mothers and prostitutes. By propagating against birth-control and contraception with reference to the decline in birth-rate, he strips women of agency and instrumentalises individual female lives in the interest of the nation. I propose that Orwell's andocentric

outlook has a curious resemblance with the centrality of masculinity and the resulting domestication of women in fascism. In contrast, Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas* will provide an alternative way of thinking about the war and her idea about the unreal loyalty to the nation offers a delicate counterpoint of a wider intellectual horizon than Orwell's uncritical nationalism.

Critics' responsibility in pointing out the shortcomings of Orwell's ideas on gender is increased by the fact that he was a political writer cherished for what he wrote rather than how he wrote. The critic who silences the discussion of his misogyny by referring, for example, to the fact that his biased remarks are only scattered and do not form a coherent ideology, or by arguing that it is anachronistic to expect feminist concerns from a writer right before the Second World War, perpetuates misogyny, because by approving the discourse that disregards and silences a popular writer's prejudices against women they legitimise those.

Besides arguing that a gendered analysis can count for tensions and contradictions of the oeuvre, my analysis of Orwell's patriotic essays also draws attention to the consequences and materialisation of latent prejudices. Orwell's gender-biased statements that occasioned charges of misogyny are only the-tip-of-the-iceberg phenomena that signal – if they are not ignored as being insignificant and irrelevant in the entirety of the oeuvre – an all too eager adherence to the traditional notion of binary genders. Not only women fall victim to the urge to comply with and perform heterosexual masculinity but every group that threatens the historically established boundaries between the polar genders: feminists, pacifists, homosexuals. That is, if one does not by-pass these signs of the iceberg, the tension between his social sensitivity and his rigid categorisation of people, as well as other contradictions, like that between socialism and patriotism, become intelligible.

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