

Lynn Turner

## **The becoming literary of the clitoral: the inclination of sexual différence after Artemisia Gentileschi**

‘[...] the austere moral subject does not incline, not even on itself.’

– Adriana Cavarero, *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude*, 2016

‘Why must we stop painting the portrait of the clitoris just as it appears, its ink still wet, so to speak?’

– Catherine Malabou, *Pleasure Erased: The Clitoris Unthought* [2020] 2022

How do ‘we’ stand before the law? After Derrida’s dazzling response to Freud’s indictment of ‘emancipated’ literary women as the worst or best exemplars of penis envy, I take erection as my subject. Direction, moral rectitude, rights and writing are organised by Freud within the defensive formation of the fictional phallic stance, eternally erect. Rather than counter Freud in modes that would retain the same logic, through denial (there is no castration) or a false equivalence (everyone is castrated), Derrida welcomes the changes in size quietly admitted in Freud’s parenthesis. Thus, an inherent variability displaces the binary of presence or absence of penis (sexual difference reduced to sexual sameness for Luce Irigaray’s *Speculum of the Other Woman*). The *fort/da* of detumescence/tumescence is our general condition. The blood that Derrida follows in the *Death Penalty* seminars - blood constrained to cruelty, to being made to flow and/or disappear into the concept – now pulses within the vicissitudes of erection ‘in men and in women,’ both situated as sites of sexual differences.

In critical dialogue with Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero’s *Inclinations*, this essay leans away from Freud’s appropriation of the bloody encounter of *Judith and Holofernes*, a scene more famously expressed by the painter Artemisia Gentileschi, and reanimates another of Gentileschi’s works: her *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting* (1638). Catherine Malabou’s own advice in *Pleasure Erased* takes an ironic turn since her book contains no trace of the 1998 revelation of the extent of clitoral anatomy through urologist Helen O’Donnell’s scans (bar a passing comment in the English translator’s introduction) and indeed her clitoral ‘portrait’ is barely touched upon. Brush in one hand, palette held perpendicular to the viewer in the other, this paper turns towards Gentileschi’s self-portrait of herself painting herself in auto-affective anticipation of flaring clitoral structure, dismantling our binary preconceptions of scale, of visibility and sex before the law. By means of a poetic emphasis on the sound ‘cli-’ the essay assembles a phonic climate that can perhaps put rectitude to bed.

Bio:

Originally trained as an artist, Lynn Turner is a writer working between continental philosophy (especially deconstruction), feminist theory, psychoanalysis, animal studies and visual culture. She is the editor of *Erotics of Deconstruction: Auto-affection After Derrida*, (Edinburgh University Press, 2024); author of *Poetics of Deconstruction: on the threshold of differences* (Bloomsbury, 2020); co-editor of *The Edinburgh Companion to Animal Studies* (Edinburgh University Press, 2018); editor of *The Animal Question in Deconstruction* (Edinburgh University Press, 2013) and co-author of *Visual Cultures*

*As... Recollection* (Sternberg, 2013). She is the co-Head of Department of Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths, University of London.