Activating Jewish Women’s Bodies with Eugénie Foa (1796-1852) and Hélène Cixous (1937-)

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Abstract

In a comparative study across genre and nearly two centuries of historical and political ferment, the writings of Eugénie Foa (1796-1852) and Hélène Cixous (1937-), two female French-Jewish writer activists, present through their fictional and autobiographical works, respectively, nuanced criticisms of what for each in their times constituted a control of Jewish women’s bodies. In the context of Foa’s engagement, crafting tales in alignment with popular national narratives, specifically those featuring disenfranchised Jewish female characters, her work takes on the task of reassessing the ancient and modern systems of marriage and divorce that contribute to the systematic oppression of women. Her stories call into question the sinister ways religious and national systems of patriarchal control place Jewish women at the mercy of choices made concerning their bodies. Cixous, with several decades of ardent feminist engagement in her arsenal, turns this lens inward, remembering and reimagining her upbringing in a Jewish family in French-Algeria, one punctuated by war, racism, wide-spread anti-Semitism, and competing nationalisms. She offers a series of stories that illustrate pivotal moments in her understanding, through her own experience and those of whom she was close to, of the ways meanings assigned to women’s bodies contribute to their harmful mishandling by the systems that exploit them. When analyzed together, their works reveal fascinating parallels which the following study explores through specific examples from their texts.

Keywords: France, Jewish Women, Women’s Bodies

“I dream of entering into the country of which I am the stubborn miscarriage” (Cixous, 2000, p. 132). In a shocking, layered declaration of failed and forbidden access, Hélène Cixous captures the state of ambiguity of being born to two Jewish parents in French-colonized Algeria. In her “Rêveries de la femme sauvage,” a dream-like, episodic memoir published in 2000, Cixous plunges herself and her reader into the intimate details of her early life in Algiers and Oran before her final departure in 1955. The images and memories from which she pulls are recontextualized by her retrospective musings, and, in turn, lend themselves to further a conversation set in motion by Jewish female writers who have come before her writing under the
strains of destabilizing national and global phenomena. Her declaration thus carries with it the weight of a collective memory, one in which women before her similarly inscribed themselves into representation, offering their words in whatever forms literary tradition would allow, and willed their way back to the bodies whose meanings had been misplaced and boundaries defaced.

Nearly two centuries earlier from the time of Cixous’s work, Eugénie Foa, one of the first women identified as having written French-Jewish fiction (Samuels, 2009), began her career crafting stories of Jewish women engaging in contemporary and ancient scenes at once familiar and exotic to French life. Within her storylines centered on marriage, divorce, and submission to the unyielding demands of religious tradition, Foa’s female characters meet disproportionally tragic fates in consequence to the crime of endangering their carefully guarded purity or disrupting the plans laid out for them by calculating paternal authority. Apart from the most obvious similarity of Cixous and Foa both being French-Jewish women rewriting historical narratives, an examination of their stories, though an unlikely pairing, reveals attempts by both to confront the limiting definitions assigned to women’s bodies through their relation to and understanding of their Jewish identities. A close-reading of key passages from each of their texts demonstrates what for each in their respective moments constituted a control of women’s bodies from the inside-out. Foa’s depictions of marriage and divorce and Cixous’s handling of issues concerning reproduction illustrate how they present the case of the Jewish woman’s body and its state of exclusion in order to challenge the ways that women’s bodies are forced into imprisoning roles that perpetuate the systems that exploit them.

Despite being most well-known in her career for her contributions in children’s literature, Foa’s earliest published works centered on Jewish custom and tradition of the past and as she had witnessed it evolve and diffuse into French society following Emancipation in 1791. This period of vast social reorganization opened up a space for Jewish subjects to be absorbed into the inventory of concerns of the collective French public. In spite of such openings, being a Jewish woman, let alone a Jewish femme-auteur, would have been hazardous grounds to step on to attempt to make a living. In her writing, Foa engages in the discourses surrounding Jewish régénération, a path to assimilation for Jews in France, by taking the concept and reworking its meaning and targets. She does this notably from her position as a woman whose absence “was largely a function of the highly patriarchal nature of Jewish society,” meaning that their status
“could scarcely figure more prominently in the discussion [of regeneration] than that of women in general” (Schechter, 2003, p. 16).

Fortunately for Foa in this literary moment, her choice of subject matter and character depictions fell swiftly, and deliberately, into alignment with a genre of popular fiction of the early nineteenth-century in which Jewish characters were focalized and portrayed within positive and romantic stereotypes. The figure of the Jewish woman in particular, the “belle juive,” or the typified beautiful Jewess, had become a trademark taken up by many French writers of the time. Engaging in this area of French romantic fiction, dominated primarily by male-conceived stereotypes, provided a point of entry and an opportunity to represent all the features of this character while exposing the carefully dissimulated circumstances that bring about her ubiquitous, tragic demise. It can be said that through these representations, going against Schechter’s observation as stated above, Foa makes the Jewish woman figure more prominently in discussions of French collective identity where their stories tend historically to get overridden.

Published in her first collection of stories in 1833, “Tirtza or the Divorce,” a story taking place in ancient Jerusalem, follows a young wife and mother, Tirtza, and her husband, Zimram, who discovers her, with two witnesses at his side, helping an unfamiliar man escape outside of the walls of their home. Blinded by his rage and “without other proof” (Foa, 1833, p. 134), Zimram would later demand in front of the grand priest and the members of the religious court that he receive a divorce, thus “abandoning his wife to the justice of the laws” (Foa, 1833, p. 134) and declaring her guilt whether the basis for her crime had been confirmed true or not. In the Jewish legal tradition, a divorce can only be initiated by the man and presented to his wife; no protocol exists for a woman to initiate the ritual herself or to object to one being imposed upon her. The crime exists, though, not as much in her infidelity, but more so in the fact “that a man had secretly penetrated, and in the night, the home of Zimram” (Foa, 1833, p. 133), publicly attacking his patriarchal authority and creating a scenario in which it would be assumed that he had lost full control of her body and could no longer regulate or be certain of her purity. In the eyes of the community, her lack of purity presents a direct threat to their own sense of purity, or certainty of the lack of contamination to the stable identity preserved in the collective whole. What comes from her body will inevitably become part of that community, and it is this fear that necessitates control. Once the divorce is completed, Tirtza is stoned to death by the swarm of witnesses to her shameful disavowal.
Despite this story being modeled on practices from ancient Judaism, it still serves as a jarring depiction of the punishment for female infidelity, what was seen as a threat to the hierarchal structure of the family (Goldberg-Moses, 1984), that is mirrored in both Judaic and French society. While Tirtza is condemned to a very literal death, women in nineteenth-century France faced the risk of symbolic death to varying degrees and violence under the precarious state of the French divorce law, under which, despite its abolishment in 1816, men could petition for legal separation on account of female adultery, but women could only initiate on the same grounds if her husband’s mistress were found to be living in the home (McBride, 1992). Under these circumstances, a French woman under the charge of infidelity could be punished not only in the potential loss of her children, assets, and status in her community, but also in the severe lack of safeguards in a society that does not condone nor facilitate female independence. Both systems, the French and the Jewish, relied on the institution of marriage as the most effective and reliable system of containing a woman’s sexuality and controlling the terms of reproduction, each privileging themselves as enforcing and upholding “the justice of the laws” (Foa, 1833, p. 134) that keep women trapped inside the walls that limit their freedom and control who has access to their bodies. What Foa’s tale suggests is that the Jewish woman bears a similar set of circumstances to her confinement as the French woman.

One of the strongest uniting themes that Foa offers throughout her texts is the young woman’s pre-determined fate as a victim of marriage. In a later example of Foa’s main works of Jewish fiction, a story set in eighteenth-century Paris, “La Juive: histoire des temps de la régence,” she presents a young woman, Midiane, betrothed by her oppressive father, one “delighted to reproduce his traits or those of his neighbor in the child of his wife” (Foa, 1835, p. 5), to a man whom she does not love, the close friend of the Christian man whom she is forbidden to marry in the laws of her own religion. This delight that the father experiences in arranging the marriage of his only daughter comes at the anticipation of completing the duty valorized by his paternal authority, passing on his most valuable possession to the man of his choosing in order to see its value increase by the production of offspring bearing his traits. It is in this framing of the act of betrothal that one can see clearly what is really being negotiated in the transaction inherent within the traditional marital agreement. Her body and its reproductive potential are bought and put in service to the man in ownership of it.
Once Midiane has arrived at this knowledge that she is trapped, condemned by the tradition that awaits her body to fulfill it, all she can do is speak out against it and hope to inspire empathy from those around her who may rise to support her in her decision. André, the man whom she wishes to marry, listens to the content of her suffering and lends a voice of reason in the confrontations with her father to try to dissolve the marriage. In this confrontation, Schaoul announces, “my daughter, a barrier has been raised: who looks beyond it is crazy, who crosses over it is a fool” (Foa, 1835, p. 292), to which André interjects and responds, “—But this barrier, who raised it?” (Foa, 1835, p. 292). The walls that she is challenging, the walls that keep her “shut away, hidden” (Foa, 1835, p. 142) in her home and the walls that marriage erects in their place, are deliberately put in place to imprison her to the life and ideas that are decidedly to the benefit of the patriarchal system that demands them. The plot that has been laid out up to this point is far from unique, as can be seen in its repetition across various stories in Foa’s work and throughout other genres of literature. Foa deploys the figure of the Jewish woman as a vehicle for illustrating the universality of these situations of female suffering. What Foa’s tales achieve is taking scenes of the young Jewish woman’s life, either ancient or modern depending on the story, painting them in all of their religious particularity, only to flip them on their head and offer to her French audience very distinct through-lines that can be connected and understood through a non-Jewish lens.

In the case of Hélène Cixous, whose relationship to Judaism posed its own set of obstacles, as well as having an exceedingly complex lineage, her work takes on the task of revising the conflicting definition she inherits as part of her experience as a French-Jewish woman at the convergence of several unstable national identities. Throughout what has been referred to as her “Algerian works” (Everett, 2017), it can be seen how Cixous’s political consciousness was forcefully awakened in these formative years where she witnessed, as a female Jewish body at once on the inside and outside of both groups, the control and manipulation of the two populations, the Muslim and the Jewish, pinned in opposition so as to be more vulnerable to internal dissolution and siege by France. In the decades preceding these works, the cause of women, what she herself has identified as her first cause (Cixous and Assouline, 2022), had been amply engaged with throughout her literary œuvre and finds a cohesive place in this Algerian text as a strikingly nuanced attack on the control of women’s bodies within this network of competing national interests and identities. In her figurative return
to Algeria through these specific memories, Cixous invokes the pain of her own experience of exclusion, reenforced by the fences surrounding their home, to contemplate other bodies who stood as similar threats to the purity of the communities around her.

One of the principal scenes through which Cixous registers the circumstances of her separation from Algeria and, accordingly, the conditions which preemptively apply to Jewish women’s bodies, is through “The Clinic,” “the extraordinary mill” (Cixous, 2000, p. 13), “from which several hundred newborns were born each year” (Cixous, 2000, p. 14) “to the Algerian day” (Cixous, 2000, p. 13). Following the death of her father, George Cixous, in 1948, Cixous’s mother, Eve Klein, began performing births as a mid-wife to support her family. When reflecting on her mother at this point in her life, the observations that she notes propose the image of a body occupied on all fronts. In the most immediate sense, there is the level of the French occupation of Algeria, and the subsequent Vichy occupation of France, then there is the looming thought of the Nazi occupation of her native country of Germany. Despite her protestations – “I have always been international” (Cixous, 2000, p. 148) – the fact of her occupying a Jewish body had permanently stigmatized and isolated her from the community, a condition that would be passed on to her own children who, despite being born in Algeria, were not considered to be Algerian. From this we can understand the “stubborn miscarriage” (Cixous, 2000, p. 132) as a failed one, a metaphorical one, in the sense that it was not completed; she asserts her right to be born in Algeria. Through her writing, Cixous strikes back against the attempt to control what comes out of women’s bodies through assigned meanings and identities by affirming her own multiple, non-exclusive identity.

Cixous’s story touches on this conflict associated with women’s bodies, but it is later in her mother’s story that she is brought much closer to it. In order to avoid the burgeoning war of Independence, Cixous leaves Algeria in 1955 to attend university in France. Her mother remained there until 1971, when, in an incident Cixous describes in her Rêveries, she is caught performing illegal abortions in a make-shift Clinic in an apartment building. She and the other mid-wives were arrested and shortly expelled to France. A career that had been made out of necessity had become her life’s work, a line of work where, as Cixous notes, “it is not only the birth that counts” (Cixous, 2000, p. 149), meaning that she believed it to be just as important to provide other options to facilitate a woman in her choice of what will come out of her body and when. In taking on this role, she had disrupted the living mechanism through which a state or a
religious system could monitor what bodies come in and out of a country: “She was so well implanted in the large uterus that only a violent abortive maneuver could have caused her dislodgement” (Cixous, 2000, p. 14). In her proximity to the suffering female body, Eve Klein undoubtedly felt a responsibility to intervene and to help create a way for women to regain control, and for that she was punished and promptly evacuated from the social body.

Cixous reflects on this living body of Algeria through their maid named Aïcha, who for her was “the only Algeria I was ever able to touch” (Cixous, 2000, p. 121), for to be held in her embrace was to “hold on to her country for a brief moment” (Cixous, 2000, p. 12) without shame or repulsion for her apparent malady. Cixous recovers this memory and is reminded of her suicide after the birth of her last child. “All that a woman can be and all that can be a woman is Aïcha” (Cixous, 2000, p. 124), she muses, “a woman all mapped out, firm [ferme], knocked up year after year, each year a girl forever abandoned to an unknown husband” (Cixous, 2000, pp. 129-130). The woman who for her had felt like her own form of belonging to Algeria did not even belong there as such herself, having been reduced to the status of an object of property whose painful and debilitating responsibility was to endlessly reproduce. Cixous confesses that her family had never known Aïcha’s real name, which she later learned was Messaouda, but she does not allow her to die anonymously. In sharing her story, having explored the particular circumstances of her own living in a Jewish body, Cixous opens a space for the consideration of other women, other bodies, who suffer at the hands of similar oppressive forces.

This story opens itself up to a deeper discussion of the roles and meanings that are forced onto women’s bodies when they are mobilized in service of the aims of the larger social bodies. Young women are ushered into marriages, given the responsibility to have children, raise them with certain values and knowledge of tradition, and put them on the directed path that will lead to the advancement of their society. Marriage controls these terms of reproduction, but in this specific context, marriage can also be the means through which women are expended to the benefit of the state, becoming in their positions of useful submission the political tools that manufacture and deliver the ideologies that promote the hatred and division that Cixous experienced so deeply living in Algeria as a Jewish woman. When she remarks, “for me the City of Algiers is a successful forgery and cheating, a giant, colorful eggcup in the shape of a hen incubating war eggs” (Cixous, 2000, p. 50), it is the women like Aïcha who incubate these “war
eggs,” forced to carry the children who will carry on the tradition of an entrenched, internal suffering.

In each of their works, Eugénie Foa and Hélène Cixous take the subject of Jewish women’s bodies, bodies notably marked by exclusion, and use them as a discursive method of intervention into the broader questioning of women’s designated roles in the patriarchal, identity-driven systems of marriage and reproduction. Their stories serve to illustrate the ways in which female bodies are manipulated and utilized to implement the arbitrary distinctions that promote feelings of difference and separation between communities. By offering these alternative narratives, Foa and Cixous provide themselves and those they implicitly implore to follow their example the opportunity to resist the limited space afforded to them within the larger cultural narrative and the means of affirming and taking control of their own identity. The walls that structure and implement alterity are only as strong as the belief that sustains them.

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