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## *Écriture féminine* and the female language of Lady Gaga

Adam Sorice

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While Lady Gaga is often acknowledged for her outlandish visual style and elaborate performative identity, the lyricism of the popular singer-songwriter's music represents a similarly controversial ideology in linguistic terms. Reinterpreting the French feminist concept of *écriture féminine* or 'writing in the feminine',<sup>1</sup> this essay contextualises Gaga's music as demonstrative of an anarchic, female language that challenges both the phallogocentric constraints of linguistic expression and wider patriarchal culture. Gaga's utilisation of *écriture féminine* also expands the theoretical notion of revolutionary gendered language beyond the hypothetical constraints of literary theory and into public, popular discourse, granting a real-world viability and practicality to the term. This essay distinguishes itself as one of the first (if not the first) literary academic studies of Lady Gaga's music, positioning her work within a feminist understanding of anarchic gender expression and cultural change through the use of chaotic linguistic forms.

Developed by feminist writer Hélène Cixous and outlined in her 1975 essay 'The Laugh of the Medusa', the literary concept of *écriture féminine* represents both a creative exploration of female identity and a resistance against patriarchal forms of self-expression. The term, described by Martin Gray as a form of writing 'in which the sexual, psychic and physical identity of the female gender is given a voice',<sup>2</sup> represents a conceptual form of the female voice which seeks to subvert the intellectual and emotional boundaries of gender-biased language, understood by French feminist theory as being oppressive to the capabilities of feminine expression.

Despite often being viewed as a predominantly theoretical or even idealistic concept,<sup>3</sup> *écriture féminine* has the capability to affect tangible cultural change through real world applications. This essay will identify the expressive limitations of patriarchal language and discuss the ways in which Cixous' *écriture féminine* claims to counteract them. It will then offer a close-reading of the work of popular singer-songwriter Lady Gaga under these principles to support the argument for the definitive power of *écriture féminine* as a form of feminist expression.

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<sup>1</sup> A. Bray, *Hélène Cixous: Writing and Sexual Difference* (Basingstoke, 2004), 3.

<sup>2</sup> M. Gray, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms: Second Edition* (Harlow, 1992), 97.

<sup>3</sup> A. R. Jones, 'Writing the body: Towards an understanding of l'écriture féminine' (1981) in J. Newton and D. Rosenfelt (eds.), *Feminist Criticism and Social Change: Sex, Class and Race in Literature and Culture* (London, 1985), 91.

Cixous' central argument behind the necessity of *écriture féminine* is that language is not only constricted by a series of principles controlled by men but that these principles have also actively sought to curtail female cultural expression. Contextualising the female act of writing as 'taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus',<sup>4</sup> Cixous interprets pre-existing language under a Lacanian ideology of patriarchal dominance via the symbolic order, a philosophical framework of understanding that denies women a voice of their own.<sup>5</sup>

This male domination of language, Ann Jones argues, 'is another means through which man objectifies the world, reduces it to his terms, speaks in place of everything and everyone else – including women'.<sup>6</sup> Patriarchal discourse not only restricts linguistic diversity but actively misrepresents social and cultural constructs and reinterprets them within its own ideology, specifically in the case of women and female identity. Cixous' *écriture féminine* seeks to develop a representative language of expression through which women can not only share their views but challenge the supremacy of patriarchal language and the cultural contexts it claims as its own.

This marginalised nature of *écriture féminine*, illustrative of women's cultural subjugation in the patriarchal interpretation of society, is integral to the form's pluralistic relationship with dominant discourses. It seeks to create a multiplicity of languages rather than attempting to attain expressive dominance; rejecting the very linguistic oppression it is subject to. Susan Sellers argues, 'since a feminine subject position refuses to appropriate or annihilate the other's difference in order to construct the self in a (masculine) position of mastery, Cixous suggests that a feminine writing will bring into existence alternative forms of relation, perception and expression'.<sup>7</sup> *Écriture féminine* has creative possibilities through the broadening of creative forms of expression for both men and women and expanding available creative discourses for all forms of cultural communication.

The very nature of this multiplicity gives women's writing the opportunity to contrast the logocentric nature of patriarchal language by revelling in an evasion of semiological scrutiny. Outlining the concept's principles, Cixous argues that *écriture féminine* 'can never be theorized, enclosed, coded',<sup>8</sup> adopting the feminine mystique 'discovered' by psychoanalysts

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<sup>4</sup> H. Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1975) trans. K. Cohen and P. Cohen in V.B. Leitch *et al.* (eds.), *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism: Second Edition* (London, 2010), 1947.

<sup>5</sup> R. Appignanesi *et al.*, *Postmodernism for Beginners* (Cambridge, 1995), 92-93.

<sup>6</sup> Jones, 'Writing the body', 87.

<sup>7</sup> S. Sellers, *The Hélène Cixous Reader* (London, 1994), xxix.

<sup>8</sup> Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', 1949.

such as Freud and mapping it onto its own linguistic forms of ambiguous signification.<sup>9</sup> The aim of this systematic evasiveness is to conceptualise an ‘impregnable language’ for women, to take the power that patriarchal discourses have used to expel women and use it to create dynamic social and linguistic change via the destruction of ‘classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes’.<sup>10</sup> This use of deconstructed language to, in turn, deconstruct culture itself is the ambition of *écriture féminine*, challenging mainstream patriarchal discourses and repurposing them as subversive feminist texts of agency.

This is the ideology of *écriture féminine*, but can concrete examples of the form be found in practice? Jones critiques the logistical issues of women’s writing providing benefits beyond the individual due to the technical and hierarchical difficulties of publication and circulation.<sup>11</sup> This foreshadows similar concerns from Caitlin Moran regarding pro-feminist punk fanzines and their inaccessibility for oblivious teenage girls in the 1990s.<sup>12</sup> However, could pop music, one of the twenty-first century’s most mainstream and pervasive forms of cultural expression, already have its own form of *écriture féminine*?

While it may receive little academic attention, popular music offers a uniquely insightful perspective into the artistic identity of its creators, as exemplified by John Steinbeck’s belief that ‘you can learn more about people by listening to their songs than any other way’.<sup>13</sup> Pop music’s revelatory abilities appear to have made it the ideal method of expression for female artists, who enjoy a commercial dominance over men unparalleled in the fields of literature, art and film. These artists have taken the form’s confessional nature and transformed it into a culture of scandalous gender revelations and empowering anthems, spanning a pro-feminist spectrum from Aretha Franklin’s ‘Respect’ to Beyoncé’s ‘Single Ladies’.

Further developing the idea of pop music as a gender-expressive narrative, Susan Butruille argues that the process of feminine music is innately anti-patriarchal in its evasion of tangible certainty, noting that ‘when women have sung about the truths in their own lives, they have conveyed no definite images of themselves. Rather, they have sung about events and feelings that were important to them’.<sup>14</sup> The textual instability created by women within music appears to carry many of the hallmarks of the semiologically unstable *écriture féminine*. This signals

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<sup>9</sup> V. B. Leitch *et al.* (eds.), *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism: Second Edition* (London, 2010), 1944, n.4.

<sup>10</sup> Cixous, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, 1952.

<sup>11</sup> Jones, ‘Writing the body’, 97.

<sup>12</sup> C. Moran, *How to be a Woman* (London, 2011), 140-141.

<sup>13</sup> J. Greenway, *American Folksongs of Protest* (New York, 1970), vii.

<sup>14</sup> S. G. Butruille *et al.*, ‘Women in American Popular Song’, in L. P. Stewart and S. Ting-Toomey (eds.), *Communication, Gender and Sex Roles in Diverse Interaction Contexts* (New Jersey, 1987), 183.

the possibility of a uniquely female language within pop music, free of the phallogocentric restrictions of the gendered voice and representing a powerful cultural form through which the diversity of feminine experience in new linguistic directions can be explored.

Mirroring this proliferation of uniquely female forms of expression within popular culture, *The New York Times* has celebrated Lady Gaga, the globally successful singer-songwriter, for her expansion of the scope of creative identity within recent pop music.<sup>15</sup> Feminist writers such as J. Jack Halberstam and Caitlin Moran have also celebrated her cultural impact, noting that Gaga represents ‘a loud voice for different arrangements of gender, sexuality, visibility and desire’<sup>16</sup> and that ‘as a cultural icon, she does an incredible service for woman: after all, it will be hard to oppress a generation who’ve been brought up on pop stars with fire coming out of their tits’.<sup>17</sup> If Gaga’s cultural influence has opened up new creative possibilities within both the realm of pop music identity and feminist empowerment, perhaps her music could offer similar potential to the development of the ‘impregnable’ female language envisioned by Cixous.

Cixous’ vision for a rebellious and passionate female voice to develop from *écriture féminine* shares many similarities with Lady Gaga’s work, particularly in her aggressively deconstructive theories of language development. Motioning for a female linguistic emancipation, Cixous writes:

If woman has always functioned “within” the discourse of man [...] it is time for her to dislocate this “within”, to explode it, turn it around, and seize it; to make it hers, containing it, taking it in her own mouth, biting that tongue with her very own teeth to invent for herself a language to get inside of.<sup>18</sup>

Within this impassioned manifesto we can note both an active reclaiming of patriarchal-controlled discourses, represented in the metaphor of the tongue, and their violent deconstruction into methods of feminine expression. Simultaneously there is a very palpable sexual element to Cixous’ writing, the liberation of the female identity and the fulfilling of its sexual appetite through violent physical interaction. The creation of this new, potently feminine language appears to prioritise sexual conflict and raw expression over the restrictive and uniform male language that this new form of communication has ‘exploded’ free from. Many of these themes of anarchic language development can be found in Gaga’s early work and specifically her breakout hit ‘Poker Face’. The song, which achieved worldwide success,

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<sup>15</sup> J. Caramanica, ‘Girl Pop’s Lady Gaga Makeover’ (2010) in *The New York Times*, 21 July.

<sup>16</sup> J. Jack, Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal* (Boston, 2012), xii.

<sup>17</sup> C. Moran, ‘Come Party with Gaga’ in *Moranthology* (London, 2012), 118.

<sup>18</sup> Cixous, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, 1953.

not only considers issues of gender miscommunication but also deconstructs conventional language in order to emphasise the song's rebellious themes. These ideas manifest most clearly in the chorus:

Can't read my, can't read my  
No he can't read my poker face  
(She has got me like nobody)

P-P-P-Poker face, P-P-Poker Face <sup>19</sup>

Not only does 'Poker Face' depict a narrative of female communicative superiority (Gaga is depicted as maintaining a dominance of power over her male lover through her construction of an impenetrable emotional facade), but it also seeks to celebrate an alternative form of expression in its prioritisation of charade over certainty in a discourse of gendered elusiveness. The linguistic dominance of Gaga's Machiavellian persona is expressed in the male voice's subservient echo, admitting her allure. It is also expressed through the alliterative 'P-P-P-Poker Face', a deconstructive interpretation repurposing conventionally male discourses and playfully reconstructing the words into a language of female autonomy. The repetitious, stuttering dimension of the phrase not only fulfils Cixous' designs of a female language that 'sweeps away syntax' <sup>20</sup> but simultaneously creates an effect of multiplicity; innumerable Gagas speak together in feminist unity. Furthermore, the singer's shuddering syllables evoke an empowered female volatility, developing notions of vocal or mental instability.

The deconstruction of conventional language into anarchic feminine forms is a key textual effect across much of Gaga's work. For example, Gaga's writing frequently features the use of the singer's own name as an identifying linguistic signifier, first featuring in 'Eh, Eh (Nothing Else I Can Say)' as the deconstructed form, 'Gaah, Gaah'.<sup>21</sup> By positioning her own deconstructed persona within the text, Gaga simultaneously becomes part of the feminine language she uses and actively destabilises surrounding language in similarly destructive ways, rendering her identity as deconstructionist agency within this chaotic form of language. The musical phrase has since gone on to feature in many of Gaga's key works but its most iconic usage is undoubtedly within the introduction of 'Bad Romance', the lead single from her EP *The Fame Monster*:

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<sup>19</sup> Lady Gaga, 'Poker Face', Track 4 from *The Fame*, written by S. Germanotta and N. Khayat, produced by N. Khayat, (California, 2008), 1.04-1.16.

<sup>20</sup> Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', 1952.

<sup>21</sup> Lady Gaga, 'Eh, Eh (Nothing Else I Can Say)', Track 5, from *The Fame*, written by S. Germanotta and M. Kierszenbaum, produced by M. Kierszenbaum, (California, 2008), 0.09-0.11.

Rah, Rah, Ah, Ah Ahh  
Roma, Roma, Ma  
Ga Ga, Oh La Laa  
Want your bad romance<sup>22</sup>

The extension of Gaga's deconstruction of language within 'Bad Romance' sees conventional vocabulary teased apart by the emotional impulses of the song's love affair and reborn as an aggressive, animalistic snarl of desire. The word choice in particular is key: Gaga's reimagining of the word 'romance' as a quintessentially "monstrous" term reflects the destructive nature of heterosexual desire, a desire that can tear apart an individual in a similar fashion as Gaga has deconstructed patriarchal language and its autonomous cultural power over women.

The patriarchal nature of romance is a key concern for Gaga, contextualised within the song 'Scheiße' as 'love is objectified by what men say is right'.<sup>23</sup> This evocative reinterpretation of the term not only creates a discourse of volatile female expression but positions it as a creative force; Gaga's female language has the ability to refashion what has been destroyed by male aggression in new, subversive forms. This creative element becomes a core theme of the song. Gaga yearns in the chorus 'I want your love and I want your revenge / You and me could write a bad romance.'<sup>24</sup> By turning the jealousy and passion of her lover into a compelling narrative, Gaga positions the modern female voice as productive of Sellers' 'alternative forms of relation, perception and expression'<sup>25</sup>, deriving new forms of gender narrative from conventional patriarchal social narratives.

Gaga's realisation of the chaotic elements of anti-patriarchal language comes to the fore in 'Scheiße', a linguistically disordered feminist club anthem. The song begins with Gaga asserting, 'I don't speak German but I can if you like...'<sup>26</sup> This compromising statement has insinuations of wishing to conform to patriarchal linguistic dominance and female subservience. However, Gaga inverts the sentiment of her declaration by juxtaposing it with an animalistic scream of emancipation before proceeding to rap in a faux-German nonsense language. She transforms her surrender to the patriarchal command of language into an impassioned rebellion against linguistic control:

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<sup>22</sup> Lady Gaga, 'Bad Romance', Track 1 from *The Fame Monster*, written by S. Germanotta and N. Khayat, produced by N. Khayat, co-produced by S. Germanotta, (California, 2009), 0.17-0.25.

<sup>23</sup> Lady Gaga, 'Scheiße', Track 7, from *Born This Way*, written and produced by S. Germanotta and N. Khayat, (California, 2011), 1.53-1.57.

<sup>24</sup> Lady Gaga, 'Bad Romance', 1.13-1.20.

<sup>25</sup> Sewers, *The Hélène Cixous Reader*, xxix.

<sup>26</sup> Lady Gaga, 'Scheiße', 0.00-0.03.

Ich schleiban austa be clair  
es kumpent madre monstère,  
aus-be aus-can-be flaugen  
begun be uske but-bair

Ich schleiban austa be clair  
es kumpent ouste monstère  
aus-be aus-can flaugen  
fräulein uske-be clair<sup>27</sup>

While Gaga's language does initially appear to mimic German to the uninitiated speaker, the song's true chaotic nature seeks to challenge conventional language with its jarring, alien nature and baffling lexicon. Gaga's contextualisation of the verses as German, however dubious such a claim may be, positions them as of a language with real world relationality. It also implies that this language is the product of a radical *écriture féminine* deconstruction of patriarchal linguistic form. Gaga's unique language represents the counter-cultural outcome of a reinterpretation of mainstream discourses. Abandoning the very 'reason' that has blighted language, according to Cixous, 'Scheiße' is a text that finds significance within epistemological impenetrability.

However, despite its relatively meaningless and anti-contextual content, the avant-garde language does maintain tenuous connections to phallogocentric discourses. A balance can be found between anarchic feminine expression and meaningful semiological relevance. Gaga achieves this through the inclusion of reimagined foreign vocabulary within her specifically female discourse. She weaves her own identity into the text once again with the phrase 'Madre monstère', a linguistic corruption of her moniker amongst fans. Gaga's "Mother Monster" sobriquet intriguingly contextualises the feminist linguistic aims of 'Scheiße', mirroring Cixous' violent destruction of patriarchal discourses and their empowered reimagining as a uniquely female language. It appears to represent both the maternally creative and aggressively destructive dimensions of femininity.

Progressing into a more conventional style of language, 'Scheiße' proceeds to chart the narrative of the feminine courtship and feminist rejection of male dominance. Gaga first attempts to acquire the acceptance of patriarchy by promising 'I'll take you out tonight, do whatever you like / Scheiße be mine'<sup>28</sup>, before demanding her emotional autonomy in the chorus as she yearns 'I wish I could be strong without the Scheiße, yeah.'<sup>29</sup> This contextualisation of male control, as both literally 'shit' and belonging to the German

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 0.03-0.18. (Translation replicated from album booklet.)

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 0.47-0.53.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.21-1.25.



discourse Gaga has already parodied in feminist revolt, develops a relational validity between Gaga's search for a feminine language of expression and her desire to be free from the social and sexual tyranny imposed by patriarchal structures.

The song's second verse represents Gaga's acquisition of a feminine intellectual autonomy as she encourages other women to find empowerment through their physical femininity, urging them to 'express your woman kind, fight for your rights'.<sup>30</sup> The celebration of feminist liberation and feminine identity through both language and body reaches its climax at the pre-chorus. Gaga overthrows patriarchal dominance in her declaration that 'if you're a strong female, you don't need permission'.<sup>31</sup> The independent woman who is able to eschew patriarchal social convention and exist within her own principles through a reacquisition of female autonomy appears to embody the revolutionary ambitions of Cixous' *écriture féminine*. She represents both a universality and positivity to feminist emancipation that offers meaningful change through a deconstructionist reinterpretation of patriarchal dominance. Gaga once again relates this cultural shift of female identity back to language, arguing in 'Judas':

In the most biblical sense,  
I am beyond repentance  
Fame, hooker, prostitute,  
Wench vomits her mind  
But in the cultural sense,  
I just speak in future tense  
Judas kiss me if offended  
*Or wear ear condoms next time*<sup>32</sup>

Gaga contextualises her modern female voice as representative of a burgeoning feminist emancipation, confirming her uniquely female language and the essence of *écriture féminine* as crucial elements in the future of female identity. Equally, she acknowledges its incompatibility with both historical and contemporary patriarchal structures, citing its opposition to the misogynistic discourse of Christianity and its attempts to discredit the authority of female voices within society. Finally, Gaga inverts the sovereignty of male sexual desire by encouraging Judas to appreciate her physical sexuality if he disagrees with her ideas. She suggests he wear 'ear condoms' if he does not wish to hear her language. Gaga's utilisation of sexual pragmatics once again draws into question the relationship between female language and feminine sexuality. The request to use sexual protection

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.04-2.09.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.12-2.16.

<sup>32</sup> Lady Gaga, 'Judas', Track 4, from *Born This Way*, written and produced by S. Germanotta and N. Khayat, (California, 2011), 2.55-3.10.

typically used to avoid pregnancy or contamination implies that there is both a virulent and productive dimension to female language. Just as Cixous argued, ‘her language does not contain, it carries; it does not hold back, it makes possible’,<sup>33</sup> Gaga’s feminine discourse holds the potential not only to revolutionise female identity within its own personal application but to impregnate or infect others with its revelatory nature, forcing Judas into retreat as he recoils from Gaga’s culturally polemical *écriture féminine*.

Gaga’s rebellious, sexually forceful female language employs many of the ideological principles outlined by Cixous in her envisioning of a uniquely feminine discourse: *écriture féminine*. Through its aggressive deconstruction of patriarchal discourses and questioning of male cultural dominance, Gaga’s music seeks to develop a new language of feminist emancipation, identity expression and cultural change through the use of chaotic linguistic forms. The real-world benefits of such experimentation appear obvious due to Gaga’s continued commercial and cultural success, allowing her to continue to produce work within a uniquely female language that aims to ‘establish a point of view [...] from which phallogocentric concepts and controls can be seen through and taken apart, not only in theory, but also in practice.’<sup>34</sup> The social and cultural destabilisation represented by *écriture féminine* has always been possible, it has simply required access to the appropriate mainstream discourse, such as pop music, to actively deconstruct it and reimagine within its radical feminist image. Luckily, *écriture féminine* appears to have found a woman gaga enough to try.

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<sup>33</sup> H. Cixous, quoted in Jones, ‘Writing the body’, 90.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

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