abolish the opposition of inside and outside. However, because that union can take place only within the *choric* enclosure, Kristeva’s fantasy still revolves around the image of interiority.

The fact that the maternal voice should provide the focal point for two such powerful fantasies of retreat from the auditory aura as those “dreamed” by Rosolato and Kristeva does not mean that it does not itself figure centrally within that aura. As I have already had frequent occasion to stress, the mother performs a crucial role during the subject’s early history. She is traditionally the first language teacher, commentator, and storyteller—the one who first organizes the world linguistically for the child, and first presents it to the Other. The maternal voice also plays a crucial part during the mirror stage, defining and interpreting the reflected image, and “fitting” it to the child. Finally, it provides the acoustic mirror in which the child first hears “itself.” The maternal voice is thus complexly bound up in that drama which “decisively projects the formation of the individual into history,” and whose “internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation.”

Indeed, it would seem to be the maternal rather than the paternal voice that initially constitutes the auditory sphere for most children, although it is clearly the latter which comes to predominate within the superego.

The theoretical and cinematic equation of the maternal voice with “pure” sonorosity must therefore be understood not as an extension of its intrinsic nature, or of its acoustic function, but as part of a larger cultural disavowal of the mother’s role both as an agent of discourse and a model for linguistic (as well as visual) identification. The characterization of the mother’s voice as babble or noise is also, as I have been at pains to establish, one of the primary mechanisms through which the male subject seeks both to recover an imaginary infantile plenitude, and to exorcise himself from the “afterbirth” of perceptual and semiotic insufficiency. Last but not least, that characterization contradicts the notion of exteriority which is implied by the metaphors of enclosure with which it is frequently linked—metaphors such as “envelope,” “cobweb,” or “bath”—and facilitates the alignment of femininity with an unpleasurable and disempowering interiority.

[4]

THE FANTASY OF THE MATERNAL VOICE:

FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY AND

THE NEGATIVE OEDIPUS COMPLEX

Fantasy has indeed no other sign, no other way to imagine that the speaker is capable of reaching the Mother, and thus, of unsettling its own limits. And, as long as there is language-symbolism-paternity, there will never be any other way to represent, to objectify, and to explain this unsettling of the symbolic stratum, this nature/culture threshold, this instilling of the subjectless biological program into the very body of a symbolizing subject, this event called motherhood.

In the preceding chapter, I commented upon the paranoiac and compensatory forms which the maternal voice at times assumes for the male subject within classic cinema and recent film and psychoanalytic theory. In this chapter, I will be much more concerned with the uses to which female subjectivity has recently put the fantasy of the sonorous envelope. The primary theoretical and cinematic texts I will assemble for that purpose—Kristeva’s “Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini,” “Place Names,” and “Stabat Mater,” on the one hand, and Altman’s *Three Women* and Mulvey and Wollen’s *Riddles of the Sphinx*, on the other—all derive from the mid-seventies, having been produced within a year or two of each other. These texts mark a distinct historical moment, the moment at which feminism first intersected decisively with alternative cinema, film theory, and psychoanalytic theory. What I will be calling the “choric fantasy” may perhaps best be understood as the product of that intersection.

Within Kristeva’s writing, the image of the child wrapped in the sonorous envelope of the maternal voice is not only a fantasy about pre-Oedipal existence, the entry into language, and the inauguration of subjectivity; it is also a fantasy about biological “beginnings,” intra-uterine life, and what she calls the “homosexual-maternal facet.” The
primary term with which she conceptualizes that fantasy is, of course, the _chora_, a word she borrows from Plato, who uses it to designate "an unnameable, improbable, hybrid [receptacle], anterior to naming, to the One, to the father, and consequently, maternally connoted."

The concept of the _chora _is an expansive one within Kristeva's corpus, functioning at times as a synonym for "semitic disposition," "signification," and "geno-text," and at other times as a signifier for a moment prior to the mirror stage and the symbolic. However, a remarkable conflation occurs each time the _chora _is sighted, regularizing what might otherwise remain heterogeneous and disparate "views": the mother is either fused or confused with her infant, and in the process comes both to be and to inhabit the _chora_. Although this fantasy, like Chion's, forces the maternal voice to the inside of the sonorous envelope, its motives are much more mixed. On the one hand, this transaction clearly speaks to the desire to put a maximum distance between the mother and the symbolic order, a desire that is in no way threatening to sexual difference as it is presently constituted. However, the _choric_ fantasy is also predicated upon Kristeva's desire to be "shifted, traversed, made negative, and brought to jouissance" rather than upon the "symbolic, structuring, regimenting, protective, historicizing thesis" that governs Chion's fantasy. Finally, Kristeva's account of the maternal voice speaks to an erotic desire which is completely assimilable to heterosexuality, and which functions in some very profound way as the libidinal basis of feminism. I will briefly review what I see as Kristeva's three primary definitions of the _chora _before exploring its status as a fantasy.

In what is perhaps her most familiar formulation of the _chora_, Kristeva associates it both with the mother and with the prehistory of the subject, referring it simultaneously to the primordial role played by the mother's voice, face, and breast, and to the psychic and libidinal conditions of early infantile life. As she explains it, the _chora_ refers equally to mother and infant because it is put in place through a creative collaboration, a collaboration which is synonymous with anacrisis: the infant invokes the mother as a source of warmth, nourishment, and bodily care by means of various vocal and muscular spasms, and the mother's answering sounds and gestures weave a provisional enclosure around the child. That enclosure provides the child with its first, inchoate impressions of space, and with its initial glimmerings of otherness, thereby paving the way for the mirror stage and the entry into language. However, the _chora_ is more an image of unity than one of archaic differentiation; prior to absence and an economy of the object, it figures the oneness of mother and child.

The Fantasy of the Maternal Voice

According to the terms of this particular definition, the infant inhabits the interior of the _chora_, and (as in Chion's account) that interiority implies perceptual immaturity and discursive incapacity. However, whereas metaphors of entrapment abound in _La voix au cinéma_, Kristeva's account of life at the center of the maternal container is at times euphoric, and at other times tempered by anxiety. In "Place Names," she suggests not only that the infant solicits the anacrisis enclosure, but that it finds within that enclosure a "riant (laughing) spaciousness." Here the _chora _clearly functions as a utopian figure for the primordial integration of mother and child. (As I will indicate later in this discussion, pregnancy is the ultimate prototype for this figure.) Elsewhere, though, the nondifferentiation of mother and child is seen as a "chaos" which must be "abjected." Kristeva identifies the _chora _not only with infantile existence and maternal care, but with what she calls the "semitic disposition" of the drives, a disposition which is the effect of familial and social pressure upon the child's body:

Discrete quantities of energy move through the body of the subject who is not yet constituted as such and, in the course of his development, they are arranged according to the various constraints imposed on this body—always already involved in a semiotic process—by family and social structures. In this way the drives, which are "energy" charges as well as "psychical" marks, articulate what we call a _chora_: a nonexpressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated.

According to the logic of this definition, the _chora _is situated inside the subject, in the guise of a libidinal economy. However, because the mother's body "mediates the symbolic law organizing social relations," becoming "the ordering principle of the semiotic _chora_," it would perhaps be more precise to speak of the latter as the subject's internalization of the mother in the guise of a "mobile receptacle" or provisional enclosure.

This account of the _chora _thus extends its function well beyond the infantile scene, giving it a longevity equal to the life of the subject. The oral and anal drives assume a privileged place within this durable libidinal economy, making it simultaneously assimilatory and distructurive. However, it is ultimately the death drive, most "instinctual" of the drives, that predominates within the semiotic disposition, and which governs it according to a profound negativity. The _chora _is consequently the "place" where the subject is both generated and annihilated, the site where it both assumes a pulsional or rhythmic consistency and is dissolved as a psychic or social coherence.
THE ACOUSTIC MIRROR

In attempting to distinguish the Lacanian imaginary from the Kristevian semiotic or chora, Jane Gallop suggests that whereas the former is "conservative and comforting, tends toward closure, and is disrupted by the symbolic," the latter is "revolutionary, breaks closure, and disrupts the symbolic." It seems to me that this is correct only up to a point; not only do the labile dualities of the imaginary threaten to undo the stability of the symbolic fully as much as the father or any other third term works to triangulate all imaginary dualities, but (as the preceding discussion indicates) the semiotic has a claustral as well as an interruptive dimension. The chora both encloses the newborn infant in the envelope formed by the mother’s voice, warmth, and gestures (an envelope which can be “opened” only through the letter knife of castration), and poses a fundamental challenge to representation and signification. It is crucial that we grasp the paradoxical status which Kristeva confers upon what she alternately calls the “semiotic” and the “chora,” a paradox which cannot be resolved by parceling out its discrepant functions between those two signifiers.

The confusion clears somewhat when one realizes that Kristeva’s theoretical model hinges upon a double temporality, affording a very different “take” on the chora depending upon whether it is the pre-Oedipal child or the adult subject who is under discussion. In the first of these instances, the chora is itself the condition or regime under siege from the symbolic, the unity which must be ruptured if identity is to be found. In the second it is the force that assails language and meaning, the negativity that threatens to collapse both the je and the moi. However, the contradictions inherent in Kristeva’s account of the chora can never be entirely ironed out, since they are the discursive marks of a profound psychic ambivalence.

Kristeva’s third definition of the chora is offered in the context of a general discussion of place names, a discussion which conceptualizes subjectivity as a spatial series in which each term is superimposed upon the preceding one, much like a palimpsest. That series begins with the chora, continues with the child’s apprehension of space (presumably at the mirror stage), and his or her initial experiments with demonstrative and localizing utterances, and concludes with the accession to subject-predication. As the child proceeds through this series, s/he not only acquires a clearer and clearer understanding of spatial relations, but increases his or her psychic distance from the chora.

So far this summary seems unremarkable. However, Kristeva goes on to draw some rather startling conclusions from it, asserting that "the entry into syntax constitutes a first victory over the mother, a still uncertain distancing of the mother, by the simple fact of naming,” and that "naming, always originating in a place... is a replacement for what the speaker perceives as an archaic mother—a more or less victorious confrontation, never finished, with her" (p. 291). It is understandable, at least from within a Lacanian paradigm, why language would work to separate the child from the mother, or, for that matter, the child from the world of objects. What is less explicable is why Kristeva would have recourse at this juncture to a twice-repeated military metaphor—why she would conceive of the child’s linguistic mastery as a “victory” over the mother. The only obvious triumph would seem to be that which the child “wins” over its previous perceptual and discursive incapacity, or, to deploy the terms used by Freud in Beyond the Pleasure Principle and invoked by Kristeva in Revolution in Poetic Language and elsewhere, over the drives or the semiotic disposition. Are we to understand the mother as somehow representing these vanquished forces, as an agency antipathetic to language and identity? The answer is apparently yes. What occurs here is more than a little reminiscent of what happens to the maternal voice in La voix au cinéma: once again the child’s discursive exteriority—its emergence from the maternal enclosure—can be established only by placing the mother herself inside that enclosure, by relegating her to the interior of the chora, or—what is the same thing—by stripping her of all linguistic capabilities.

(This is perhaps the moment at which to note that Kristeva’s writing is characterized by a massive disavowal of the tutelary role the mother classically assumes with respect to the child’s linguistic education—of her function as language teacher, commentator, storyteller. This disavowal is quite marked in “Place Names,” which discusses the child’s entry into language in great detail, but it is even more pronounced in Histoires d’amour. In “Freud and Love: Treatment and Its Discontents,” a chapter from that later book, Kristeva insists that it is the father’s rather than the mother’s speech which the child first incorporates, and that sonorous or acoustic identification occurs in relation to the paternal rather than the maternal voice. This negation of the mother’s discursive role is part of a larger refusal to assign the female subject a viable place within the symbolic, a point which Ann Rosalind Jones has recently made with considerable force.)

However, what distinguishes Kristeva’s formulation from Chion’s is that the chora and the archaic mother continue to live on within the subject, no matter how linguistically proficient it becomes. The chora remains one of the permanent “scenes” of subjectivity, not so much superseded as covered over and denied by succeeding spatial develop-
ments. Kristeva is also far more willing to conceive of the subject finding itself once again within the chora, and far more divided about what such an eventuality would entail.

It is, I would argue, precisely as an extension of the rhetorical flourish with which Kristeva characterizes the child’s linguistic accomplishments as a “victory” over the mother, and thereby relegates her to the interior of the chora, that she has consistently associated the semiotic with the maternal, and thereby conflated the latter with whatever muddies the clear waters of rational discourse. Significantly, however, Kristeva has been obliged to look rather far afield in her search for these ostensible “feminine” irruptions, passing over all the varied texts to have ever been inscribed with a female signature in favor of the (male) avant-garde. Thus, we learn that although the symbolic attempts to negate the chora, the maternal substratum of subjectivity surfaces in carnivalesque, surrealist, psychotic, and “poetic” language. It is also, according to Kristeva, an inevitable feature of even the most normative speech patterns, manifesting itself through rhythm, intonation, and gesture. However, the chora is most fully showcased within infantile language, which permits the adult subject to hear what has not been fully rationalized within its own discourse, and which thereby provides it with a privileged access to the archaic mother. Once again the maternal voice is theoretically conflated with the voice of infancy, but here, at least, there can be no doubt that the sounds for which Kristeva is listening in fact issue from only one of those voices.

Kristeva makes a curious recommendation in “Place Names”: she proposes that if we wish to gain access to the chora, we should not only listen to infantile language, but do so with a “maternal attentiveness.” She adds emphasis to her recommendation by pointing out that recent child psychology has enacted a shift from a “paternal, Freudian attentiveness to a maternal attention,” and so in doing this she closely identifies the figure of the analyst with that of the mother. However, a remarkable passage follows close upon the heels of this recommendation, contradicting and undercutting it. What makes this passage all the more puzzling is that it comes as an apparent extension of the argument about psychoanalysis and the mother, but drastically alters the terms of the discussion. Because it represents one of the “nodal points” of Kristeva’s fantasy of the maternal voice, I will quote from it at length:

For a woman, the arrival of a child breaks the auto-erotic circle of pregnancy...and brings about what, for a woman, is the difficult account of a relationship with an other: with an “object” and with love. Is it not true that...in order...to have access to the symbolic-theretic level, which requires castration and object, she must tear herself from the daughter-mother symbiosis, renounce the undifferentiated community of women and recognize the father at the same time as the symbolic?...It is precisely the child that, for a mother...constitutes an access (excess) toward the Other....The mother of a son (henceforth the generic “infant” no longer exists) is a being confronted with a being for him. The mother of a daughter replays in reverse the encounter with her own mother: differentiation or leveling of beings, glimpses of oneness or paranoid primary identification phantasized as primordial substance....

From this point on, for the mother...the child is an analyzer. He releases the hysteric woman’s anguish, often hidden, denied or deferred in its paranoid course, directing it toward others or toward the array of consumer goods. It is an anguish that brings the mother to grips with castration...18

Suddenly, without any explanation, the mother has been moved from the position of the analyst to that of the analysand. Her condition, moreover, mimics that of the newborn child: locked in a symbiotic embrace with her own mother as well as with her progeny, she remains stubbornly beyond the structuring reach of castration and difference, oblivious both to the possibility of object relations and to the governing role of the phallus. Even more startling, the infant has been abruptly elevated to the position of the analyst, and is now posited as the only one capable of leading the mother into the individuating light of the symbolic. The two protagonists of the pre-Oedipal drama would seem once again to have traded places; it is the mother who inhabits the chora, and the infant who points the way beyond.

I would like to reclaim the position of analyst for the female voice by suggesting that this passage affords several points of hermeneutic entry into the Kristevian fantasy. To begin with, its opening sentence summons one of the organizing images of Polytlogue, the book from which “Place Names” and “Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini” derive, and in so doing it makes explicit what I would argue is always the implicit subtext of the chora. It summons, that is, the “auto-erotic circle of pregnancy,” an image which permits Kristeva to conceptualize the mother both as a receptacle and as the inhabitant of that receptacle—as simultaneously the container and its contents. Moreover, enclosure within that circle is synonymous with nondifferentiation, objectless libido, and meaninglessness, just as it is within the chora.

The similarities between Kristeva’s account of pregnancy and her account of the chora are even more strikingly suggested in a passage
from “Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini.” The passage in question turns upon the word enceinte, with its double meaning of “a protective wall” and “a pregnant woman,” and it once again situates the mother inside an enclosure like the one she herself provides. It thus effects an even more extreme displacement than that enacted elsewhere with respect to the chora, locating the mother where the fetus in fact belongs—inside the womb. Having negotiated this transfer, Kristeva manages once again to identify motherhood with a force that resists difference and signification:

[The mother] is within an enceinte separating her from the world of everyone else. Enclosed in this “elsewhere,” an enceinte woman loses communal meaning, which suddenly appears to her worthless, absurd, or at best, comic—a surface agitation severed from its impossible foundations. Oriental nothingness probably better sums up what, in the eyes of a Westerner, can only be regression.  

Kristeva’s choric fantasy would thus seem to be informed by the desire to return the mother to the enceinte. However, the image of the “autoerotic circle of pregnancy” is obscured by several as yet unanswered questions. Who forms that circle, and who else occupies it? What is the desire behind Kristeva’s desire to enclose the mother within the womb?

The passage which I quoted from “Place Names” a few pages ago provides us with a second point of hermeneutic entry into Kristeva’s choric fantasy when it asserts the primacy of gender over “generic” infancy—when it tells us that “the mother of a son [. . .] is a being confronted with a being for him.” But that “the daughter of a mother replays in reverse the encounter with her own mother.” Sexual difference clearly plays an important part here. At first glance, Kristeva’s emphasis upon gender works primarily to disenfranchise the daughter—to align the male child with the symbolic order and the paternal legacy, while dooming the daughter to “primordial oneness or paranoid identification phantasmatised as primordial substance.” It also helps to establish the son’s exclusive access to the position of analyst, and in so doing it reenacts the discursive gesture whereby Kristeva divests the mother of her psychoanalytic laurels.

However, I would ultimately argue for a rather different reading of this sexual bifurcation. It seems to me that Kristeva’s unconscious desires are ultimately as fully engaged by the scenario of regression as they are by that of symbolic progression, and that what seems to be the son’s phallic investiture should also be understood as his exclusion from the privileged site of the chora. The key to such a reading is the phrase “replays in reverse” (“refait à rebours”). That phrase aptly summarizes what Kristeva does when she substitutes the mother for the (male) infant in the account she offers of the pre-Oedipal scene, and makes her the protagonist of his story. It also crystallizes Kristeva’s preoccupation with origins, a preoccupation which is at the very heart of the choric fantasy. Finally, and most important, “replays in reverse” describes an action which takes place entirely between women. It affords us a fleeting glimpse of an intimate relationship between a mother, her own mother, and her daughter, a relationship predicated upon regression, return, and replication. Kristeva negotiates this privileged (re)union by ejecting the son from the chora, and placing the mother inside.

If we penetrate the Kristevian fantasy at a third point of entry, we eventually stumble upon the same homosexual-maternal scene, although the path leading there is strewn with greater obstacles. That point of entry is indicated by the sentence that reads: “[Is it not true that in order] to have access to the symbolic-thetic level, which requires castration and object, [the mother] must tear herself from the daughter-mother symbiosis, renounce the undifferentiated community of women, and recognize the father at the same time as the symbolic?” (“[N’est-il pas vrai] que pour accéder à cet Un toujours altéré, à l’instance symbolique-thétique qui exige castration et objet, [la mère] doit s’arracher à la symbiose fille-mère, renoncer à la communauté indifférenciée des femmes et reconnaître, en même temps que le symbolique, le père?”) No answer follows, but as with all rhetorical questions, one is implied.

Let us look at the question more closely. It actually begins in the preceding sentence, with the words: “Is it not true?” These words are (to say the least) ambiguous, susceptible through only slight rearrangement to a completely different reading—to a reading, that is, that flatly denies rather than affirms the validity of what follows. The ambiguity is compounded by the very fact that a sentence as crucial as this one is to any understanding of Kristeva’s own relation to the chora should be posed as a question admitting of a negative as well as a positive answer. This rhetorical hesitation attests to the psychic division that structures the speaker’s relation to what she calls the “semiotic.” The words “Is it not true” preface a “reality” to which she cannot entirely accede, although she pays lip service to it: the “reality” of castration, the phallus, and the (existing) symbolic order.

To what end, then, is this “reality” invoked? I will attempt to answer this query in a moment. First, however, I want to note that Kristeva’s rhetorical question actually contains two different questions. One of these questions turns upon cause and effect—upon the issue of what woman must do in order to have “access to the symbolic-thetic level.” The other question pivots rather upon the issue of compulsion. It reads: “[Is it not true that the mother] must tear herself from the
daughter-mother symbiosis, renounce the undifferentiated community of women, and recognize the father at the same time as the symbolic? It is around this second question, I would maintain, a question which remains hidden within the larger structure of the sentence, that all the ambiguity crystallizes.

What would seem to be at work here is a curious negation of the desire to negate—a denial of the desire to repudiate the force of the symbolic imperative, of the "must" that tears daughter from mother, and which subordinates both to the law of the father. Verneinung or negation, as Freud tells us, simultaneously acknowledges and disowns what has been repressed.\textsuperscript{20} It is a "procedure whereby the subject, while formulating one of his wishes, thoughts or feelings which has been repressed hitherto, contrives, by disowning it, to continue to defend himself against it."\textsuperscript{21} This is precisely what happens in the text under discussion, which simultaneously states and conceals that desire which is at the center of the Kristevian fantasy—the desire to fuse the daughter with the mother, and the mother with her own mother. "Is it not true" corrects and covers over the parapraxis which is on the tip of Kristeva's tongue, the parapraxis which would have read: "It is not true." That desire surfaces not only in the insistence with which Kristeva here and elsewhere confines the mother to the chora, but in the four elided words with which the sentence begins.

The desire for the corporeal union of mother and daughter is also inscribed into the text of "Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini," but it wears a different set of disguises there. It reveals itself first in an astonishing description of childbirth, a description which stresses what Kristeva calls the "nonsymbolic, nonmaternal causality" of motherhood:

> The body of [the] mother is always the same Master-Mother of instinctual drive, a ruler over psychosis, a subject of biology, but also, one toward which women aspire all the more passionately simply because it lacks a penis: that body cannot penetrate her as can a man when possessing his wife. By giving birth, the woman enters into contact with her own mother; she becomes, she is her own mother. She thus actualizes the homosexual facet [le versant homosexuel] of motherhood, through which a woman is simultaneously closer to her own instinctual memory, more open to her own psychosis, and consequently, more regatory of the social, symbolic bond.\textsuperscript{22}

This passage offers another striking example of denial. Although Kristeva goes so far here as to acknowledge the homosexual basis of the union she seeks with the mother, she also repeatedly denies that "homosexual" means "homosexual." To begin with, she tells us that the daughter rejoins the mother only as a mother herself, and hence through the implied mediation of both a father and an infant. (More...

---

\textbf{The Fantasy of the Maternal Voice}

Over, as I will attempt to show in a moment, within the manifest text of "Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini," that infant is emphatically male.) Second, Kristeva disavows the erotic nature of the mother/daughter union by attributing it to the "eternal return of the life-death biological cycle" (p. 239). Finally, Kristeva splits the mother into two—into the generix, who blindly participates in the instinctual experience of procreation, and into the speaking subject, who remains elsewhere altogether. She insists that it is the former rather than the latter who rejoins her own mother.

The eroticism which this passage denies is extravagantly displayed elsewhere in the essay, when Kristeva deals with Bellini. The desire which cannot be openly expressed with regard to the daughter is displaced onto the son, producing this wish-fulfilling summary of a cluster of paintings from the early 1460s:

> The mother's hands remain at the center of the painting[,] bringing its miniature drama to a head. Although still possessive, they now shift toward the child's buttocks (Madonna and Child, New Haven; Madonna and Child, Corner Museum) or rest on his sexual member (National Gallery, Washington; Brera). (P. 254)

The libidinal bases of Kristeva's analysis become even more evident once one has examined the two paintings with which she illustrates it. As Mary Jacobus points out, there is little in the Corner Madonna to account for the sexual drama which Kristeva finds there:

> The Correr Madonna ... gazes abstractedly away from her child, while her hands half hold, half display his body. Once more the child grips her thumb, but (it seems to me, at any rate) almost casually, as the palm of one hand cradles his buttock. The other hand, spread across the baby's chest, ritualizes the gesture of holding into one of merest indication. Kristeva writes of the mother's hands holding their object tightly; yet the pair—mother and child—could be seen as folded loosely together in a formalized pattern which emphasizes, not her grip, but the interlacing of hands and legs, the repeated folds of sleeve and veil, the wrinkles and curls of mother's and child's hair.\textsuperscript{23}

There is a similar discordance between the New Haven Madonna and the reading Kristeva provides of it.

However, even here the dream of the erotic union of mother and child is shrouded in disavowal. Kristeva emphasizes that Bellini's "real" mother was both lost and dead, and that even her imaginary counterpart is absent from sexuality ("Her characterless gaze fleeting under her downcast eyes, her nonetheless definite pleasure, unshakeable in its intimacy, and her cheeks radiating peace, all constitute a strange modesty"). She also goes to extreme and contradictory lengths to disavow the child's desire for fusion with the mother, attributing the physical
contact between them first to the “symbiotic clinging syndrome,” and then to the mother’s predatory gestures, from which the child attempts to extricate himself (“The climax of this series is the Madonna and Child in Bergamo, a spotlight thrown on a dramatic narrative. Aggressive hands prod the stomach and penis of the frightened baby, who, alone of all his peers, frees himself violently, taking his mother’s hands along on his body” [p. 254]).

The reader is no doubt wondering what has become of the maternal voice, to which there has been no explicit reference for a number of pages. It is no coincidence that this voice should have thus dropped from theoretical view, or that its eclipse should have occurred at the precise moment that I began looking closely at the passage from “Place Names” which inverts the relative positions of mother and child. By relegating the mother to the interior of the chorą' womb, Kristeva reduces her to silence. “Place Names” enforces the connection between motherhood and muteness when it suggests that “to reach the threshold of repression by means of the identification with motherhood” is “no longer [to] hear words or meanings; not even sounds” (p. 249). Kristeva’s insistence upon the split nature of motherhood leads to much the same result, since in the final analysis it is always the mother-as-genetrix rather than the mother-as-speaking-subject who commands her interest.

Of course, if the mother is mute, she is also irrecoverable (or recoverable for the daughter only when she herself enters into childbirth); once her voice has been silenced, it can no longer help to weave the anachistic enclosure which figures her union with the child. Kristeva’s maternal fantasy is thus grounded in a fundamental impossibility: the mother cannot simultaneously be and inhabit the chorą, at least not once childbirth has taken place. This impossibility can be resolved only by finding someone else to speak for the mother. It will come as no surprise to the student of Kristeva that this “someone else” is the artist. In “Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini”—as in Revolution in Poetic Language, Powers of Horror, and elsewhere in Polylogue—Kristeva attributes to that figure the faculty of speaking for the mother, of providing her with a voice:

At the intersection of sign and rhythm, of representation and light, of the symbolic and the semiotic, the artist speaks from a place where the mother is not, where she knows not. He delineates what, in her, is a body

sentation and interplay of differences, the artist lodges into language, and through his identification with the mother . . . [traverses] both sign and object . . . At the place where it obscuresly succeeds with the maternal body, every artist tries his hand, but rarely with equal success. (P. 242)

These are all conspicuously male names, a point that is not without significance. I would argue that the artist is necessarily male for Kristeva, and that this imperative proceeds at least in part from the same unconscious “logic” that motivates her to focus her erotic attention upon the male child in Bellini’s paintings. The insistently masculine identity of the artist permits Kristeva to articulate her desire for the mother under the cover of heterosexuality, or of a preoccupation with male homosexuality. However, the insistent return of the figure of the male artist also speaks to the tremendous anxiety which accompanies Kristeva’s chorą fantasy, an anxiety which has much to do with her own status as a speaking subject, and which helps to explain her ambivalent relationship with feminism.

One cannot fail to remark upon the glaring discrepancy between Kristeva’s description of “femininity” and her own discursive mode—to notice how little her voice functions as a vehicle for the semiotic, and how emphatically she speaks from a position of linguistic and epistemological authority, a position she herself identifies with the father. How are we to account for the distance that separates Kristeva’s enunciatice from her theoretical preoccupations, her discourse from the dream that sustains it? Her highly rationalized language must be understood at least in part, it seems to me, as a defense against her desire for union with the mother, since within the terms of her own analysis that union would necessarily mean the collapse of her subjectivity and the loss of her voice. There is clearly a second anxiety at work here, as well. Despite Kristeva’s own assertions to the contrary, she consistently equates woman with the mother, and the mother with what she calls the “genetrix.” Woman-as-speaking-subject is finally nowhere to be found in texts such as Revolution in Poetic Language or Polylogue. For Kristeva, to speak is thus necessarily to occupy a “male” position; even the maternal voice can be heard only through the male voice.

Kristeva guards against the first of these threats by approaching the mother only through the protective agency of the father (or the son, in the case of Leonardo and Bellini); by substituting “poetic language” for “biological ciphering.” She guards against the second by speaking about the chorą or the semiotic only from a position deep within the symbolic. There is a passage from Revolution in Poetic Language in which Kristeva quite openly musters these defenses, situating herself emphatically on the side of castration, language, and the thetic, and replacing the chorą
The subject must be firmly posited by castration so that the drive assists against the thetic will not give way to fantasy or to psychosis but will instead lead to a “second-degree thetic,” i.e., a resumption of the functioning characteristic of the semiotic chorus within the signifying device of language. This is precisely what artistic practices, and notably poetic language, demonstrate. (P. 50)

There is, of course, one text in which Kristeva frankly acknowledges her own maternal yearnings, and which seems to draw attention to the divisions which structure her authorial subjectivity—“Stabat Mater,” or “Hérethique de l’amour.”35 That text splits the page into two columns of print, one of which comments upon the Christian cult of the Virgin Mary, and the need for a new discourse of motherhood, and the other of which offers a much more informal and apparently stream-of-consciousness record of its author’s personal experiences with maternity. However, although the left-hand column at time approximates the “whirl of words” which Polylogue associates with the chorus, it moves increasingly in the direction of grammatical propriety and subject-predication. It also enacts a drift toward theory, coming more and more to resemble its symbolic counterpart.

It strikes me with some force, moreover, that while Kristeva speals in a very self-implicating way about maternal jouissance, what she really celebrating is the mother’s relationship to a male child. As I tend to demonstrate earlier in this chapter, that relationship is not part of the choré fantasy. It is characterized in “Stabat Mater,” as in “Place Names,” as an interaction capable of breaking the “auto-erotic circle of pregnancy,” and leading the mother into the thetic phase. Unlike the relationship of mother and daughter, that between mother and son is predicated on separation and loss:

There is this... abyss that opens up between the body and what has been its inside: there is the abyss between the mother and the child. What connection is there between myself, or even more unassumingly between my body and its internal graft and fold, which, once the umbilical cord has been severed, is an inaccessible other? My body and... him. No connection. Nothing to do with it. And this, as early as the first gestures, cries, steps, long before its personality has become my opponent.26

Although Kristeva goes on immediately to insist that her remarks obtain to the female as well as the male infant (“The child, whether he or she, is irremediably an other”), she intimates elsewhere in “Stabat Mater” that mothers and daughters recognize their mutual differences only with the greatest difficulty. The passage I have in mind, which is once again taken from the left column, describes what it calls “the community of women” in terms that are startlingly reminiscent of the enanțe or chora, that “place” where otherness, language, and identity slip imperceptibly away:

Women doubtless reproduce among themselves the strange gamut of forgotten body relationships with their mothers. Complicity in the unspoken, connivance of the inexpressible, of a wink, a tone of voice, a gesture, a tinge, a scent. We are in it, set free of our identification papers and names, on an ocean of preciousness, a computerization of the unnameable. No communication between individuals but connections between atoms, molecules, wisps of words, droplets of sentences. The community of women is a community of dolphins. (Pp. 180–81)

Despite the impression it conveys of being the most “confessional” of the three essays Kristeva devotes to motherhood, this text in fact goes to great pains to erase all traces of choré desire, and to erect a panoply of symbolic defenses. It even manages to entrust the most manifestly maternal of its two voices with various disclaimers of mother love and love for the mother (“Belief in the mother is rooted in fear, fascinated with a weakness—the weakness of language” [p. 175]; “concerning that stage of my childhood, scented, warm, soft to the touch, I have only a spatial memory... Almost no voice in her placid presence. Except, perhaps, and more belatedly, the echo of quarrels; her exasperation, her being fed up, her hatred” [p. 180]). However, most astonishing of all—at least for those who have taken Kristeva at her (earlier) word—about halfway through “Stabat Mater,” the left column gives utterance to a desire that can only be seen to derive from the heart of dominant culture, a desire which runs counter to everything that Kristeva has ever had to say about the operations of signification, the semiotic, or poetic language:

The impossibility of being without repeated legitimation (without books, man, family). Impossibility—pressing possibility—of “transgression.”

Either repression in which I hand the other what I want from others. Or this squalling of the void, open wound in my heart, which allows me to be only in purgatory.

I yearn for the Law. (Pp. 174–75)

Filled with incredulity as I read and reread this passage for the first time, I turned to a 1974 interview with Kristeva, looking for a very different passage I seemed to remember. I found what I was seeking:

If women have a role to play... it is only in assuming a negative function: reject everything finite, definite, structured, loaded with meaning, in the existing state of society. Such an attitude places women on the side of the explosion of social codes: with revolutionary moments.27
processes Kristeva earlier associated with the semiotic disposition and the regime of the mother. This newly reformulated primary narcissism is reminiscent of the chorik relationship in other ways, as well. For instance, it is based on “archaic replication” rather than imitation, much as “Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini” envisages the homosexual-maternal axis operating. “Freud and Love” also describes the child’s psychic intercourse with the pre-Oedipal father as a “primary fusion, communion, unification,” a description which would apply equally well to the desire at the center of the chorik fantasy. The pre-Oedipal father would thus seem to have supplanted the mother altogether. All that remains to the latter within the more recent scheme is to satisfy the child’s needs, and to refer to it the paternal third party.

Kristeva maintains that because the child’s identification with the imaginary father takes place prior to sexual differentiation, that father is “the same as both parents” (p. 244), by which she seems to mean that unlike secondary identification, primary identification is not en-gendering. However, her account of primary narcissism is itself permeated with sexual difference, and the scenario she outlines conforms closely in certain key respects to Lacan’s account of the Oedipus complex. In the former situation, as in the latter, it is incumbent upon the mother to reveal herself as incomplete and lacking, and to direct her desire beyond the child to the father/phallus. The child will then follow the path traced by her desire, and either incorporate the phallus (primary narcissism) or aspire to have the phallus (Oedipus complex). In both cases the child thereby comes to exist “within the signifier of the [paternal] Other” (p. 253).

It is thus the mother who is once again obliged to assume the sole responsibility of representing castration, a detail whose sexually differentiating consequences are too familiar to require further elaboration. It is also the father with whom both male and female child must align themselves as the necessary condition of subjectivity. This situation is exactly symmetrical to that whereby the female spectator is asked to identify first and foremost with the generally masculine point of view through which the images, sounds, and narrative events of a film are given as intelligible, and only secondarily with the subject-position designated for her by a female character; or with the linguistic rule which dictates that the noun man and the third-person male pronoun be understood as referring to the entire human race, but the noun woman and the third-person female pronoun be understood as referring only to the “second sex.” In each of these three instances, male subjectivity is established as the norm, and female subjectivity as the deviation, a
situation which does much to ensure the perpetuation of a phallocentric symbolic order.

Granted, there are certain divergences between Kristeva’s reconceived primary narcissism and the classic Oedipus complex. Whereas the latter is regulated according to the difference between having or not having the phallus, a difference which is determined along strictly gender lines, the crucial question in the former is whether one is or is not the phallus, a question whose answer depends upon whether primary identification has taken place, not upon gender (p. 262). Kristeva also insists that primary narcissism, unlike the Oedipus complex, occurs outside either mediation or desire. (I feel impelled to note here that this is a highly contentious claim, since the mother’s desire is crucial to the activation of primary identification, and since she could therefore plausibly be said to play a mediating role.) Finally, primary narcissism occurs at a moment prior to the coherent “objectification” of the other, and hence before the child could be said to be a subject.

However, the ostensibly earlier event leads so inexorably into the later one that it would be difficult to establish the point at which one ends and the other begins. Indeed, one of the chief functions of primary narcissism would seem to be the guarantee it places upon proper Oedipalization; Kristeva writes that it entails “the subject’s entry into [the] disposition . . . of an ulterior, unavoidable Oedipal destiny” (p. 261).

Furthermore, the end result in both cases is to wrest from the mother any claim to primacy, and to install the phallus within the psyche as the absolutely privileged term. These aims could even be said to be better achieved by primary narcissism than by the Oedipus complex, since it makes the father the first love object (p. 252), gives him a privileged position within the imaginary as well as the symbolic, and establishes him as the agency that confirms and shapes identity from the very outset. The mother, on the other hand, is now not only separated from the child at the moment of the latter’s entry into language, but jeotisoned at the very moment at which the child accedes to its first identification, well before the mirror stage. Irretrievably so, one might add, since her abjection is made the necessary precondition for language, is presented as that which alone creates the gap separating sign from referent, and signifies from signified (p. 242).

Kristeva’s new paradigm becomes even more troubling to the feminist reader when she discovers the way in which it dispenses with the maternal voice. Ironically, given its foreclosure upon the mother, “Freud and Love” maps out as central a place for acoustic identifications in the early history of the subject as I have attempted to do in this book. Kristeva argues there that primary narcissism “should not be conceived as simply visual, but as a representation activating various facilitations corresponding to the sonorous ones,” both because of their “precocious appearance in the domain of neuro-psychological maturation” and because of their “dominant function in speech” (p. 256). Elsewhere in the same essay, Kristeva suggests that primary narcissism may even give the voice priority over the image:

The ideal identification with the symbolic upheld by the Other . . . activates speech more than image. Doesn’t the signifying voice, in the final analysis, shape the visible; hence fantasy? (P. 253)

However, she insists that this founding identification aligns the child with the father rather than with the mother, thereby making the paternal voice the acoustic mirror in which it first hears itself. Kristeva is obliged to admit at one juncture that this claim flies in the face not only of previous psychoanalytic theory, but of clinical evidence (“We know that, empirically, the first affections, the first imitations, the first vocalizations as well as directed to the mother” [p. 245]). But she explains away this difficulty by pointing out that all identifications, including the primary one, are symbolic, and therefore (by virtue of the one-to-one relation she has consistently maintained between the father and the symbolic) necessarily paternal. She suggests, that is, that the child only seems to be directing his or her imitations and vocalizations to the mother; they are, in fact, directed to the father through her. Not only is language acquisition now completely under paternal jurisdiction, but Kristeva makes no mention in “Freud and Love” of the semiotic disposition, which seems to have fallen by the wayside.

What a writing out of the maternal! The thoroughness with which Kristeva goes about this discursive erasure can surely be explained only as a defensive mechanism, a way of safeguarding herself against the libidinal hold the mother exercises over much of her earlier writing. I would indeed go so far as to suggest that there is a direct relation between the complexity of the paternal fortification system and the intensity of the desire it gainsays. For Kristeva to have felt the need to double up in this way on the Oedipus complex—to install the father within the pre-Oedipal scene, thereby guaranteeing that everything that happens within the development of subjectivity has a phallic imprimatur—the tug of the maternal must be strong indeed.

The mother who is the object of Kristeva’s unconscious desire, and against whom she enlists the protective resources of the father, is not. I listen to add, the same as the one about whom she speaks in “Place Names,” “Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini,” and “Stabat Mater.” Those textual citations are what might be called “miscopie-
THE ACOUSTIC MIRROR

The fantasy of the maternal voice

One gets the impression that the simple Oedipus complex is by no means its commonest form, but rather represents a simplification or schematization which, to be sure, is often enough justified for practical purposes. Closer study usually discloses the more complete Oedipus complex, which is twofold, positive and negative, and is due to the bisexuality originally present in children: that is to say, a boy has not merely an ambivalent attitude towards his father and an affectionate object-choice towards his mother, but at the same time he also behaves like a girl and displays an affectionate feminine attitude to his father and a corresponding jealousy and hostility towards his mother.

It is to be regretted that Freud does not immediately spell out the consequences of this extremely interesting theoretical premise for the female subject as he does for his masculine counterpart. One is inclined to account for this elision by assuming it to be another instance of Freud’s “indifference,” as Luce Irigaray would say. However, when the reader turns for further clarification to “Female Sexuality” and “Femininity,” she finds a curious erasure at work. The first of these essays hesitates both at the beginning and at the end between the concept of the negative Oedipus complex and a new category, to which it otherwise gives preference—the category of the “pre-Oedipal.” By 1933, when Freud completed “Femininity,” the latter had completely supplanted the former, and it has since then passed into general usage as the preferred paradigm by which to account for the little girl’s erotic investment in the mother.

I intend nevertheless to hold Freud to his much earlier formulation and to attempt to demonstrate that “the pre-Oedipal phase” has improperly replaced “the negative Oedipus complex” as the appropriate rubric with which to designate what, in the early history of the female subject, conventionally precedes her desire for the father. Both “Female Sexuality” and “Femininity” alert the careful reader to this impropriety.

To begin with, in each of those essays Freud stresses the continuity rather than (as might be expected) the discontinuity between the little girl’s identification with her mother and her love for her father. In “Female subsequent phase [adds scarcely] any new feature to her erotic life,“31 while in “Femininity” he adds that “almost everything that we find later in her relation to her father [is] already present in this earlier attachment and [is] transferred subsequently on to her father.”32 Second, in the earlier of those essays, Freud remarks upon the extremely lengthy duration of the little girl’s erotic attachment to her mother, commenting that in a number of the cases with which he was familiar, it had lasted into the fourth year, and in one case even into the fifth—well into that period normally assumed to coincide with the Oedipus complex (p. 226). Finally (and most crucially), Freud acknowledges uncovering seduction fantasies in which the girl’s seducer was the mother rather than the father. However, this admission is no sooner made than qualified, as Freud attempts to ground fantasy in fact: “Here . . . the phantasy touches the ground of reality, for it was really the mother who by her activities over the child’s bodily hygiene inevitably stimulated, and perhaps even roused for the first time, pleasurable sensations in her genitals.”33

It was, of course, precisely through the fantasy of paternal seduction that Freud discovered the positive Oedipus complex. To be more exact, it was through his realization that what many of his female patients remembered as an actual seduction was, in fact, a psychic construction that Freud “stumbled” upon the daughter’s desire for the father.34 Thereafter the fantasy of paternal seduction became a definitive symptom of the positive Oedipus complex. Why this sudden retreat in the last of Freud’s essays on female sexuality back from facticity, this abrupt refusal to read the fantasy of maternal seduction as an equally unequivocal signifier of the negative Oedipus complex? Because the stakes, as we will see, are of monumental proportions.

Near the conclusion of “Female Sexuality,” Freud cites with surprising approval a 1927 essay by Jeanne Lampl-de Groot which recapitulates everything he himself has said about the girl’s pre-Oedipal passion for the mother, but which attributes that passion quite definitively to the negative Oedipus complex. However, Lampl-de Groot’s essay makes it clear that more is at issue here than a terminological difference of opinion. To insist upon the Oedipal bases of the little girl’s attachment to the mother is to force a complete reconceptualization of the female Oedipus complex, which can now be seen to replicate the male version in its early stages:

[The little girl], too, takes as her first object-love the mother who feeds and tends her. She, too, retains the same object as she passes through the pregenital phases of libidinal evolution. She, too, enters upon the phallic stage of libido development. . . . We may suppose that in the psychic realm outside the little girl [this] development has brought her to the point of an attitude similar
manner: that is to say, that girls as well as boys, when they reach the phallic stage enter into the Oedipus situation, i.e., that which for the girl is negative. She wants to conquer the mother for herself and to get rid of the father.34

To restate the girl's libidinal investment in the mother firmly within the Oedipus complex is also to force a serious reconsideration of the role which is played by the castration crisis. We recall that Freud presents this crisis as the mechanism by means of which the male subject is made to exit from the Oedipus complex, but the female subject to enter it. However, once the mother is included within the general equation, the castration crisis becomes the impetus whereby the little girl enters only into the positive Oedipus complex, and not the Oedipus complex tout court.

However, I do not mean to suggest that castration has no inaugural part to play with respect to the female subject's negative Oedipus complex—or, for that matter, with the male subject's positive one. In both cases, it seems to me, desire for the mother is initiated only through symbolic castration, i.e., only through the entry into language. It is, after all, impossible for either subject to enter into desire until linguistic immersion, since it is only through the consolidation of the signifier that the lack necessary to desire's functioning is opened up, and that the object as such both comes into view and slips beyond the subject's reach.

I would also argue that symbolic castration leads not just to desire, but to desire specifically for the mother, at least within the classic familial paradigm. It entails, after all, not merely that "fading" of the subject's "being" so movingly described by Lacan (the loss, as it were, of the subject's very life), but that separation from the mother upon which Kristeva places such emphasis. Those traumas are so complexly imbricated as to be virtually synonymous (it is surely no accident, for instance, that Freud's fort-da anecdote has been used as an allegory for both35 and to give to the latter, as to the former, all the force of major surgery. What other object than the mother, either for the girl or for the boy, could initially assume the status of that "all" which has been sacrificed to meaning? Or, to put the case in more strictly Lacanian terms, of the one for whom the child wishes to be all-in-all?36

What I am in effect suggesting is that access to language marks not only the eclipse of the real, and the child's division from the mother, but the inception of the Oedipus complex for both boy and girl.37 The crisis of dismemberment to which Freud so insistently returns thus plays a different role in female subjectivity from the one he attributes to it. It is both a delayed reflection of symbolic castration, as I suggested in chap-

ter 1, and a crucial element within that system of sexual differentiation by means of which woman is made to assume the burden of male lack as well as her own. It accomplishes this end not merely by defining the female body as the site of anatomical insufficiency, and the female voice as the site of discursive impotence, but by propelling the girl into the positive Oedipus complex.

The female subject is thus split, in some profound way, between two irreconcilable desires, desires which persist in her unconscious long after the Oedipus complex has ostensibly run its course. (According to Freud, there is no real terminus to the girl's positive Oedipus complex,39 and his account of patients who moved all their lives back and forth between love for the father and love for the mother40 indicates that this holds equally true for the negative version.) I say "irreconcilable" because within the present symbolic order, desire for the mother can never be anything but a contradiction of the daughter's much more normative and normalizing desire for the father. It is not only that within Freud's paradigm these two desires cancel each other out,41 but that whereas the latter is a libidinal investment in the phallus, and hence in the symbolic order, the former is a libidinal investment in everything which that order disvalues.

My insistence upon the Oedipus complex as the mediating agency between the daughter and her love for the mother may appear at first glance as treacherous a betrayal of feminism as Kristeva's installment of the father within the domain of primary narcissism. Certainly my theoretical paradigm closes off the pre-Oedipal domain both as an arena for resistance to the symbolic and as an erotic refuge. It also brings the homosexual axis of mother and daughter fully within symbolic castration and lack, and so renders it incapable of leading to any full and final satisfaction even if the incest taboo could be surmounted. However, to impute the daughter's erotic investment in the mother to the pre-Oedipal phase is to suggest that female sexuality precedes language and symbolic structuration—to give it, in other words, an essential content. It is also to align woman in an extremely problematic way with categories such as "nature" and "the imaginary," and to render her relation to language highly unstable. Finally, insofar as the relationship of mother and daughter is understood to stand outside signification, it must also be understood to stand outside desire, and so to exercise little influence over psychic life.

To situate the daughter's passion for the mother within the Oedipus complex, on the other hand, as I think we are obliged to do, is to make it an effect of language and loss, and so to contextualize both it and the sexuality it implies firmly within the symbolic. It is also to bring it within
desire, and hence psychic “reality.” Finally, and most important, it is not to foreclose upon what might be called a “libidinal politics,” but to make it possible to speak for the first time about a genuinely oppositional desire—to speak about a desire which challenges dominance from within representation and meaning, rather than from the place of a mutely resistant biology or sexual “essence.” Once we have recognized that unconscious desire is far from monolithic—that it is divided between at least two very different fantasmatc scenes—then it becomes possible to think of all sorts of discursive and relational strategies for activating the fantasmatc scene which corresponds to maternal desire, one which the symbolic does its best to cordon off and render inactive by denying it representational support.

The psychic division I have just described is clearly what is responsible for the very palpable tensions that collection around all the maternal categories in Kristeva’s work. What figures there as the “chora,” the “semiotic,” “significance,” or the “geno-text” is quite simply the textual eruption of the unconscious desire that anchors her to the symbolic of Oedipal mother. The negativity which Kristeva feels impelled to associate with all of these concepts is in the final analysis the negativity of the negative Oedipus complex, not the trace of some more primordial union of mother and child; it is the negativity, in other words, of a desire which is at odds with the phallus and the law of the father. The pre-Oedipal tableau comes into play only as an after-the-fact construction that permits the subject who has already entered into language and desire to dream of maternal unity and phenornenal plenitude. It is a regressive fantasy, that is, through which the female subject pursues both the Oedipal mother and the wholeness lost to her through symbolic castration. As can be seen in texts such as Revolution of Poetic Language and Polylogue, the homosexual component within this fantasy poses a powerful threat to the father, the phallus, and the operations of dominant meaning, but not, I would argue, to meaning per se.

As I suggested a moment ago, the daughter’s unconscious desire for the mother does not enjoy the same kind of broadly based representational support that sustains her unconscious desire for the father. It is perhaps for this reason that Kristeva believes the homosexual-maternal facet of female subjectivity to be beyond representation, and indeed to threaten its very continuation. However, she also tends to literalize the choric fantasy, reading it as an accurate account both of the pre-Oedipal period and of the mother who exercises such a hold upon her own libido. As a result, she is simply incapable of imagining that the mother can have any place within the symbolic, or that the daughter can maintain a relation to language while pursuing her unconscious desire for the mother. But these problems are endemic to Kristeva’s version of the choric fantasy, it seems to me, not to the desire that fuels it, or even the fantasy itself, which is capable of assuming other forms.

Before turning to some films that occupy the same discursive space as “Place Names” and “Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini,” I want to draw a few tentative conclusions about Kristeva’s relation to feminism. What seems to me to be the most important thing about that work is the way in which the negativity of the negative Oedipus complex surfaces there, albeit in disguised and misrecognized forms. Feminism can’t really manage without the negativity, which is an indispensable weapon not only against the name, meaning, and law of the father, but against the female subject’s unconscious investment in those things. Moreover, without it feminism threatens to settle into its own complacencies, and to subscribe to its own fictions of identity.

We may also need the positivity of the chora, its promise of a female “ensemble.” It, in fact, represents one of the governing fantasies of feminism, a powerful image both of women’s unity and of their at times necessary separation. I would even go so far as to argue that without activating the homosexual-maternal fantasmatc, feminism would be impossible—that it needs the libidinal resources of the negative Oedipus complex. However, it is imperative that we recognize the unconscious mother for who she is, the Oedipal rather than the pre-Oedipal mother. As Kristeva herself says in “Women’s Time,” an essay which reads at times like an inadvertent auto-criticism, the utopia of an “archaic, full, total englobing mother with no frustration, no separation, with no break-producing symbolism (with no castration, in other words),” may indeed represent “an unbelievable force for subversion in the modern world! [But], at the same time, what playing with fire!”

Furthermore, because Kristeva’s account of the choric fantasy excludes both mother and daughter from language, it makes it difficult to imagine them participating in the articulation of new discourses, and so keeps their social disruption from being meaningful, in the strictest sense of that word. It also conceives of the maternal challenge in extremely deterministic ways, and it grounds that determinism in biology. Equally troubling, it conceptualizes the integration of mother and daughter in exclusively regressive terms, as a backward journey. In order for the choric fantasy to function as an effective political implement, it must point forward as well as backward—accommodate transformation as well as return.

Finally, it may be as crucial for feminism to come to terms with symbolic castration and division as to find ways of bringing women together—to confront the gap that separates the subject not only from
pre-Oedipality and the phenomenal order, but from other subjects, no matter how ostensibly “similar,” and—not least—the various manifestations of its “self.” Kristeva herself speaks eloquently about this project in “Women’s Time,” in a passage that quietly and unobtrusively displaces the concept of negativity from the pre-Oedipal register to the symbolic register, thereby bringing it more theoretically in line with the negative Oedipus complex that fuels it. The passage in question calls upon feminism to interiorize “the founding separation of the socio-symbolic contract” so as to introduce “its cutting edge into the very interior of every identity[,] whether subjective, sexual, [or] ideological” (p. 210). This is perhaps the point at which to note that Kristeva knows how to read motherhood as an emblem not only of unity, but of its opposite—of the “radical ordeal of the splitting of the subject.”43 She has recourse to the image of motherhood as division in “Women’s Time,” where she uses it both as a way of anticipating the passage I cited a moment ago, and as a repudiation of the image of motherhood as plenitude. The juxtaposition vividly dramatizes the compensatory role which the latter image is asked to play with respect to the former. It makes clear, in other words, that the choric fantasy attests to nothing so much as the entry into language and the negative Oedipus complex:

Redoubling up of the body, separation and coexistence of the self and of another, of nature and consciousness, of physiology and speech. This fundamental challenge to identity is then accompanied by a fantasy of totality—narcissistic completeness—a sort of instituted, socialized, natural psychosis. (P. 206)

Robert Altman’s Three Women and Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen’s Riddles of the Sphinx, the first released in 1977 and the second in 1976, inhabit the same fantasmatism as Kristeva’s writings on the chora, with which they are roughly contemporaneous (Polylogue was also published in 1977, although individual essays appeared somewhat earlier). There is another point of intersection between these texts, which is that each is at least to some degree the product of feminism. This is, of course, manifestly the case with Riddles of the Sphinx, which foregrounds its concern with feminism at every turn, and where point of view is always so sharp—and so theoretically—focused. It is perhaps less apparent with Three Women, where the “tale” seems to lack a teller—where, in Metz’s words, the discours is concealed behind the histoire.44 However, although that latter film is certainly not a feminist text, its preoccupation with what Kristeva calls the “homosexual-maternal facet” makes it, too, finally unassimilable to the Hollywood system, which is centered on the father, the phallus, the law, and the male version of the sonorous envelope fantasy. Not surprisingly, both films also deviate from that system’s formal paradigm, although once again that deviation is much more marked in the case of Riddles.

Three Women reads almost like a dramatization of “Place Names” and “Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini.” It shows the female subject to have a tenuous hold upon identity and social exchange—so much so that she easily slips outside the symbolic altogether. It defines that subject primarily through the three women of the title—Milly (Shelly Duvall), Willy (Janice Rule), and Pinky (Sissy Spacek), each of whom has a troubled relationship to language, and highly permeable subjective boundaries.

Milly talks incessantly, in an unconscious parody of dominant discourse; her speech consists almost entirely of citations from advertising and popular women’s magazines. No one but Pinky ever pays the slightest attention to what she says, which increasingly over the course of the film assumes the status of cultural “noise” or babble. Although Milly’s verbal patter seems ineffective as an agency of communication, it is shown to serve an important phatic function in the sanatorium where she works. As she slowly moves the elderly patients through the warm water of the therapeutic pools, she wraps them in the sonorous blanket of her voice; indeed, the film establishes a metaphoric connection between Milly’s voice and the curative waters. There is also a strongly implied metaphorical connection between the elderly patients and small children. The former, like the latter, are helpless to perform the most rudimentary actions by themselves, and must be led by the hand when they walk. Speech flows past them, leaving only a ripple of comprehension in its wake. Milly closely approximates Kristeva’s “mother-as-speaking-subject”; she is inside language, but only marginally so, and her discursive standing is radically jeopardized by every tug on the umbilical cord.

Willy more closely resembles Kristeva’s genetrix. Not only is she hugely pregnant, but she is completely absorbed in her pregnancy; she is the very prototype of the mother enclosed in the enceinte, the mother who is simultaneously container and contained. Willy also remains wordless for most of the film. She breaks her silence only on three occasions—once to scream for help when she finds Pinky floating face downward in the swimming pool, once to fashion the obligatory cries of childbirth, and once (at the very end of the film) to remark: “I just had a lovely dream. I wish I could remember it.” All three sets of sounds attest to her inability to manipulate language.
Willy performs another important role—one which Kristeva associates with the mother, but which she nevertheless reserves for the male subject. She functions, that is, as an artist, obsessively drawing primitive figures on the floors of swimming pools. These submerged, underwater figures form a kind of genotext to the film’s phenotext; half-human, half-animal, frozen in postures of sexual aggression and submission, they pose an arcaic and antiperspectival challenge both to “realist” representation and to the civilizing sublimations of the symbolic. They also foreground Willy’s privileged relation to the drives.

If Willy and Milly embody aspects of the prototypical mother, Pinky represents the prototypical daughter. She has the clothing, the gestures, and the undefined features of a child. She burps noisily and with enthusiasm after gulping down a glass of beer, blows bubbles through the straw in her milk, and spits shrimp cocktail down the front of her pink smocked dress. Like a very young girl, she derives her only sense of identity from Milly, appropriating her robe, her bed, her name, and her social security number. Pinky also attempts to burrow deep inside Milly’s voice; like the geriatric patients, she “bathes” in that voice at the beginning of the film, and is before long echoing its aphorisms and turns of phrase, making it the acoustic mirror in which she hears herself. She spends her evenings futilely delving into Milly’s diary, which she ultimately claims as her own. These appropriations and penetrations all attest to a powerful desire to fuse with the mother—the desire which, as I have indicated, is also the motive force behind Kristeva’s choric fantasy.

When Pinky’s dyadic union with Milly is shattered by the entry of Edgar, Willy’s philandering husband, her desire finds an even more extreme expression. She dives from a second-story balcony into the apartment swimming pool, aiming both her gaze and her body at the pregnant belly of one of Willy’s underwater figures. In so doing, she substitutes the wordless enclosure of Willy’s womb for the unwelcoming receptacle of Milly’s voice. Significantly, it is Willy who rescues Pinky from the pool, and who in so doing gives life to her once again.

Ultimately, Altman’s three women are united in the act of childbirth. When Willy goes into labor, Milly assists, and Pinky watches transfixed by the spectacle of motherhood. This scene is immediately preceded by the dream in which Pinky’s image merges with those of Willy and Milly, a dream which prompts her to seek actual refuge in Milly’s bed. It is followed by the concluding scene of the film, which shows Milly, Willy, and Pinky acting out the respective roles of mother, grandmother, and daughter. Childbirth is thus emphatically associated with precisely that three-generational relay described by Kristeva, whereby “the mother of a daughter replays in reverse the encounter with her own mother,” and in so doing actualizes the homosexual dimension of motherhood. As in “Place Names” and “Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini,” there is no room within the choric enclosure for the male child, who is stillborn. Pinky immediately takes his place, assuming the status anticipated by her name.

The exclusion of the male child from the enceinte is part of a larger repudiation of the symbolic. Edgar is dismissed by all three women at the moment that Willy goes into labor, and is never seen again. (There is an oblique reference near the end of the film to his death, presumably at the hands of the women.) The doctor never appears to help Willy deliver her child (he is, indeed, never summoned). The isolated house in which Willy, Milly, and Pinky establish their domestic economy at the film’s conclusion emphasizes their distance from the social order, as does the dreamlike quality of their few gestures and words. The final shot of the film, which lingers on a pile of abandoned tires, suggests that in so retreating, the three women have reduced Edgar’s phallic regime to the status of trash or waste. In so doing, it reiterates the fantasmatic argument that the homosexual facet of motherhood makes a woman “closer to her instinctual memory, more open to her own psychosis, and consequently, more negatory of the social symbolic bond.”

In Three Women, as in Polycleon, the choric fantasy is elaborated in emphatically regressive terms, as a threefold “return”: to the grand-mother/mother/child enceinte of which Kristeva speaks, which is itself what might be called a “double replay,” to the drives, and to an implied matrarchy. Once again that fantasy works to subvert the symbolic, but not to transform it. Moreover, by weakening the relation between the female subject and language, it leaves her without the signifying resources either to imagine or to effect change. Finally, Three Women encourages us once again to confuse the Oedipal mother with either the pre-Oedipal mother or the “Master-Mother of instinctual drive,” thereby eliding altogether that negative desire from which feminism derives its libidinal resources. The choric fantasy assumes much more complexly political forms in the last of my texts, to which I now turn.

Whereas the choric fantasy surfaces only in fairly oblique ways in Kristeva’s work, and is always met there by a powerful counterforce, it could reasonably be said to be the organizing principle of Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen’s Riddles of the Sphinx. That fantasy manifests itself at the level of the film’s articulation as well as at the level of its fiction, determining the kinds of shots that are used in the lengthy middle
section, the unusual voice-over that accompanies five of those shots, and the overall narrative progression. At issue once again is desire for the mother, a desire which turns in some fundamental way upon the recovery of a lost maternal voice. However, what makes this particular "telling" of the choric fantasy so compelling are the displacements to which it subjects its central image. Although the chorus is initially configured as a sonorous envelope enclosing the infant daughter, it is subsequently moved out of the pre-Oedipal scene, and installed at various sites within the symbolic. Riddles also differs from the other texts with which I have grouped it in entrusting the mother with a wide variety of discursive functions, ranging from "lalangue" to the language of psychoanalysis.

Like "Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini" and Tim Women, Riddles links the maternal voice to an archaic moment in the history of civilization and subjectivity. That linkage occurs primarily through the figure of the Sphinx, to whom the film obsessively returns and who occupies the position of what is technically a voice-over but is described in the script as a "voice-off." (I will consequently refer to it henceforth by the second of those apppellations.) "Laura"s" opening commentary associates the Sphinx with "motherhood as mystery," and with "resistance to patriarchy," thereby installing it as a kind of mythic mother. The close identification of the voice with Louise in pans 1-3 further consolidates the connection between those two figures.

Before discussing the specific uses to which it is put, I want to emphasize that the voice of the Sphinx/mother enjoys a complex conceptual status. To begin with, it comes as answer to a quite extraordinary solicitation—to a solicitation which takes the form of a series of zooms into and extreme close-ups of the mouth of the Egyptian Sphinx (or, to be more precise, of some found footage of the Egyptian Sphinx) which have the quality of a knock on a closed door. Second, "Laura" (as Mulvey is designated within the film) characterizes it as an "imaginary narrator," suggesting that it is an overtly fantastmatic voice. It in fact "belongs" to no character in the main diegesis, and can be traced back only to the most denaturalized of images in the theoretical prologue—to the images, that is, of the Sphinx, which are so many generations away from the original footage that they openly proclaim their status as photographs. The voice of the Sphinx/mother consequently escapes that anatomical destiny to which classic cinema holds its female characters, and upon which Kristeva places such a premium: it is denatured and ultimately disembodied. At the same time, it never assumes the privileged and transcendental qualities of a traditional voice-over, or even the much more limited powers of a traditional voice-off. It is more (as the film itself suggests) a voice "apart," in both senses of that word—a voice which asserts its independence from the classic system, and which is somehow a part of what it narrates.

This voice assumes a distinctly choric role during the first three of the thirteen shots that constitute the film's center. It weaves Louise (Dina Stabb) and her child, Anna (Rhiannon Tise), within a nest of repetitive and incantatory sounds, whose progress is as slow and circular as that of the tightly framed camera ("If only I hadn't minded, I used to say, but I did mind very much, I minded more than I could ever have dared. Mind the door. Mind the glass. Mind the fire. Mind the child. I never minded the warmth. I minded the need. It was needed to have minded, I used to say, but it was needed to have minded more than very much?"). In so doing, it seems to speak to Louise's condition as much as to that of her child—to their imaginary confusion and interpenetration, and to the resulting breakdown in subject/object delimitation. (As with the other texts I have grouped together here, Riddles reads the pre-Oedipal scene through Louise rather than through her daughter, and in fact tends—at least in the beginning—to project the former into the latter's position. I will have more to say about this below.) Here, as elsewhere in the film, the panning camera provides the visual analogue of the choric voice, tracing (as it were) the spatial boundaries of the sonorous envelope.

The voice-off disappears during the next five shots, and the camera breaks free from its domestic moorings, pivoting around a series of increasingly public places—a day-care center, a telephone switchboard office, an institutional cafeteria, a traffic roundabout, an indoor shopping center. The framing becomes much wider, and in shot 7 the camera travels in a circle as well as pans 360 degrees, following an almost unreadable itinerary. These are the formal indications of a psychic opening out, of Louise's and Anna's emergence from what the film characterizes as an imaginary dyad into the world of the symbolic. Significantly, it isn't the father who precipitates this rupture (he is, in fact, powerless to intrude), but the exigencies of work, Louise's practical concerns about day-care, and—most important—her new friendship with Maxine (Merdelle Jordin).

However, the voice of the Sphinx/mother resurfaces in shot 9, where it poses a series of unanswered questions about the politics of motherhood. Its discourse is still circular (the questions it asks form what is described as "a linked ring, each raising the next until they [lead] the argument back to its original departure"). But like the camera framing, that circle has become wider. The choros is no longer synonymous with the claustral enclosure of the maternal embrace, but has expanded to include the entirety of women. Moreover, far from
foreclosing upon the social, the maternal voice now establishes motherhood as a point of crucial intersection between politics and subjectivity, economics and the family, personal history and a collective future. The questions it asks lead back into memory and “out into society”:

Should women demand special working conditions for mothers? Can a child-care campaign attack anything fundamental to women’s oppression? Should women’s struggle be concentrated on economic issues? . . . Could there be a social revolution in which women do not play the leading role? How does women’s struggle relate to class struggle? Is patriarchy the main enemy for women? Does the oppression of women work on the unconscious as well as on the conscious? What would the politics of the unconscious be like? How necessary is being-a-mother to women, in reality, in imagination?

What I am trying to suggest is that the chor a in effect becomes the subjective, economic, social, and political “space” of feminism: the enceinte is transformed into an all-inclusive “community of women,” and (pace Kristeva) its inhabitants don’t communicate like dolphins.

Shot 10 shows us that community in miniature, while at the same time indicating the psychic terrain upon which it is based. Louise sits with Maxine in her mother’s garden while Anna and her grandmother build a bonfire. The cast of characters constitutes the by now familiar ménage à trois of the homosexual-maternal facet—mother, grandmother, and child—but Maxine’s inclusion complicates the libidinal dynamics. She introduces otherness into what would otherwise escape difference and desire. She is the third term that separates Anna from Louise, thereby making it possible for the former to invest erotically in the latter. Maxine is also, at least within the terms of this reading, the trace of Louise’s negative Oedipus complex, in much the same way that a photographic negative might be said to be a trace of its positive—she’s both a black figure in the otherwise white tableau, and the object of Louise’s desire. Finally, Maxine is the crucial (racial) other with respect to the “establishment” of feminism, the signifier of what it all too easily forgets and excludes. The maternal voice is both interiorized in this shot and entrusted to Louise’s mother, whose only intermittently audible monologue swathes the scene in a somber haze akin to the smoke of the bonfire she is building.

In shot 11, the maternal voice undergoes yet another permutation. Banished from its former (imaginary) narrative position, it nevertheless returns as a narrator, this time of a film (and tape) within the film. The camera pans around Chris’s editing room as he, Louise, and Maxine look at a documentary on the Post Partum Document, ICA 1976. Mary Kelly’s disembodied voice speaks “over” these assorted images, from a point which is interior with respect to the shot but exterior with

The Fantasy of the Maternal Voice respect to Chris’s film and tape. Its status thus transgresses the binary opposition which serves to distinguish male from female voice within classic cinema, a transgression which is magnified by Kelly’s claim to theoretical authority. (Despite its diegetic status, it is the only voice to speak with such authority in the thirteen-shot sequence, and it is rivaled only by “Laura’s” voice within Riddles as a whole.)

What further distinguishes Kelly’s voice-over from other voices in the film, as well as those produced by Hollywood, is that she speaks theoretically about her own experience of motherhood—that her access to maternity is mediated through psychoanalysis, and does not issue directly from the body. This maternal voice, in other words, in no way approximates a “biological ciphering,” nor does it issue out of what Mulvey elsewhere describes as “the half light of the imaginary.”47 What is surprising and rather disappointing, however, is Kelly’s own tendency to reenact in her account that curious slippage by means of which childhood language somehow comes to be characterized as maternal language, and the mother is projected into the position of the one for whom boundaries are by no means firm:

The diaries in this document are based on recorded conversations between mother and child (that is, myself and my son) at the crucial moment of his entry into nursery school. The conversations took place at weekly intervals between September 7th and November 26th 1975. They came to a “natural” end with his/my adjustment to school. There also occurs at this moment a kind of “splitting” of the mother/child dyadic unit which is evident in my references in the diaries, to the father’s presence and in my son’s use of pronouns (significantly “I”) in his conversations and of implied diagrams (for example, concentric markings and circles) in his “drawings.” The marking process is regulated by the nursery routine, so that almost daily finished “works” are presented by the children to their mothers. Consequently, these markings become the logical terrain on which to map out the “signification” of the maternal discourse [my emphasis].

As this passage would indicate, with its invocation of the “mother/child dyadic unity” and its attention to “concentric markings and circles,” the chor a figures centrally in what Kelly has to say about motherhood. Significantly, however, she focuses upon its rupture rather than upon its constitution or maintenance—upon the emergence of the infant subject out of the maternal enclosure, and its transition from imaginary to symbolic. The same could be said of the entire middle section of the film, which moves Louise and Anna very quickly out of the home and into a series of social spaces. The realm of the imaginary is “revisited” in shot 12, but only from a position of fully constituted subjectivity.

Despite superficial appearances to the contrary, Riddles does not privilege the pre-Oedipal scene. Its concern is rather with forgotten or
censored details within the Oedipal narrative—with semic and proaletic elements which might permit that story to be told rather differently than it usually is. The detail upon which the film predicates its transformative intervention is, of course, the Sphinx, who not only is left out of that abbreviated version of the story which circulates most widely (that version which derives its coherence from psychoanalysis), but who in Sophocles’ account remains emphatically outside the city gates. Riddles is thus, as Teresa de Lauretis would say, “an interruption of the triple track by which narrative, meaning, and pleasure are constructed from [Oedipus’s] point of view”—a film which is “narrative and Oedipal with a vengeance.”

As I have already attempted to show, Riddles conflates the Sphinx with the mother, reading the former’s exclusion from Thebes as a metaphor of the latter’s isolation from power and privilege. Similarly, the frequent excision of the Sphinx from the Oedipal narrative represents for the film a telling image of all the ways in which the mother is denied cultural recognition. However, “Laura” goes on in her opening remarks to suggest that the Sphinx/mother also poses a serious challenge to the system that seeks to exclude and censor her—that what the symbolic order defines negatively is capable of returning as negativity:

The Sphinx is outside the city gates, she challenges the culture of the city, with its order of kinship and its order of knowledge, a culture and a political system which assign women a subordinate place.

To the patriarchy, the Sphinx as woman is a threat and a riddle.

The question which poses itself with a certain insistence at this point is: In what guise does the Sphinx/mother return, and in what does her negativity inhere?

The conclusion of the theoretical prologue restates a point made only a moment or two earlier in the film, but it does so with a significant difference. Initially, “Laura” says: “The [Oedipus] myth confirms women’s sense of exclusion and suppression.” Later she puts it this way: “We live in a society ruled by the father, in which the place of the mother is suppressed.” She suggests, that is, that it is not merely women themselves who have been forgotten and denied, but the position the mother occupies. Riddles does not specify here what this position might be, but I do not think it would be unfaithful to the spirit of the film to gloss the puzzling sentence in this way: “We live in a society ruled by the father, in which the psychic place of the mother is suppressed,” a suppression which in the case of the female subject entails the repression of her desire for the mother. Certainly the last shot of the middle

section points in the direction of such an explanation, as I will attempt to show in a moment.

By focusing less on desire than on identification, shot 12 provides yet another account of what the psychic “place of the mother” might be. The camera pans around a room full of mirrors, while Maxine applies make-up to her face, and Louise reads aloud from the transcript of one of Maxine’s dreams. The room is presumably in Maxine and Louise’s apartment, and so reprises the chorionic spaces of the first three shots. Louise’s voice provides the acoustic equivalent, wrapping the two women in a blanket of largely mystifying sounds. The proliferation of reflections indicates that we are deep within the imaginary, and draws our attention to two crucial psychic doublings—that of Louise with Maxine (at a certain point the dream becomes common property, their regressive journey a joint one), and that of Maxine and Louise with a shared mother. Shot 12 thus serves as an important reminder of the crucial role played by the mother in both the visual and the acoustic mirror stages (if I may be permitted to coin a phrase) and of the central place of the maternal image within the constitution of female subjectivity.

In Maxine’s dream, identification with the mother leads to an immediate disinvestment from the father, and to an eruption of negativity within the symbolic order over which he presides:

I realized that it was Ash Wednesday and I thought that I must be my mother, although I knew she was dead. I had a feeling of jubilation and in a very loud voice I ordered that all my father’s property should be sold by auction. All the women threw away their combs and shouted, “Bravo! Well done!” They unstrapped all the sheep and knocked the helmets and military caps off the soldiers. I don’t remember much more except that I was dancing on the deck of a ship, in front of a sheet of canvas or sailcloth.

But identity is not determined by the imaginary alone. It is imperative that Maxine and Louise’s psychic journey lead forward as well as backward, and that they not remain stranded in the (reconstructed) shora. Consequently, at the precise moment that Louise finishes speaking these words, the reflections of the camera and cinematographer are caught in one of the many mirrors, introducing the critical third term, and returning the viewer (and, by implication, Maxine and Louise) definitively to the symbolic. Significantly, though, the cinematographer is a woman, intimating that the social order to which we return is not the same as the one we left.

Once again, then, Riddles indicates that the third term need not necessarily be phallic: the female cinematographer reprises the role earlier played by Maxine, separating mother from daughter without
requiring that the mother assume the status of the abject. In both situations the distance necessary to desire is opened up without the mediation of the father, suggesting the potential symbolic adequacy of the negative Oedipus complex. This drama will be enacted yet again, albeit more obliquely, in the final shot of the thirteen-shot sequence. Before turning to that shot, I want to point out that identification with the mother can assume the subversive form it takes in Maxine’s dream only if the negative Oedipus complex is activated at the same time, and if the maternal position is thereby rendered desirable. Incorporation of the maternal image is, after all, an indispensable component of conventional female subjectivity, and it has very different effects there. The crucial distinction which must be made between these two identificatory instances is that in one case the image of the mother is erotically invested, and in the other case it is eroticly disinvested. (I will return to this point in the next chapter.)

The last time we hear the maternal voice-off within the middle section of Riddles is in shot 13, in which Louise and Anna visit the Egyptian Room of the British Museum. This is the juncture at which the film insists most strenuously upon the fantastic nature of the Sphinx’s voice, tracing that voice to the interior of a thrice-framed text. It also begins with a statement about the discursive status of memory—a statement which radically qualifies the recollections that follow, making it impossible for us to read them as the simple recovery of earlier events. “She remembered reading somewhere a passage from a book which she could no longer trace, words which had struck her at the time, and which she now tried to reconstruct.”

For the listener who hears these words for the first time, the third-person female pronoun seems to refer to Louise, who in the preceding shot is shown reading the transcript of Maxine’s dream, and puzzling out its meaning. However, in the same speech the voice-off associates the pronoun she with memories which we know to belong more appropriately to Anna, because we have been shown the events from which they seem to derive in a fragmentary and elusive way earlier in the thirteen-shot sequence:

She remembered how, when she had been very small, her mother had lifted her up to carry her on her hip, and how she had hovered round the cot while she fell asleep. She remembered her feeling of triumph when her father left the house and the sudden presentiment of separation which followed. . . . And she remembered one morning coming into her mother’s room and finding her mother’s friend sleeping next to her mother, and she suddenly understood something she realized her mother had tried to explain and she felt a surge of panic, as if she’d been left behind and lost. She thought her mother would be angry, but she smiled, and, when she got out of bed, she noticed the shape of the arch of her foot and her heel and the

At this point in the film, then, a quite remarkable temporal and referential shift takes place: the listener is suddenly asked to understand the act of remembering childhood events to which the voice-off refers as taking place not in the present, but rather at an unspecified moment in Anna’s future.

The memories which we are thus encouraged to impute to an adult Anna dramatize the entry into the Oedipus complex. They begin with images evocative of pre-Oedipal closeness and boundary confusion (the daughter grafted to the mother’s hip, the mother part of the daughter’s environment as the latter goes to sleep), and lead on to Anna’s recollection of her father’s departure, an event which gives her a “presentment of separation,” but which is finally powerless to rupture the chora. What does finally manage to tear Anna away from the maternal body is a primal scene of sorts, in which she enters her mother’s bedroom and finds her in bed with a friend (presumably Maxine). This event not only severs the pre-Oedipal umbilical cord, it also produces a profound sense of loss, thereby inaugurating desire. (There is also an unspecified linguistic intervention here, the intrusion of the language—and desire—of the mother-as-Other.) Significantly, it is only after this “castration” that the maternal body becomes eroticized, as indicated by the aroused description of Louise’s arched foot and calf. What Anna thus recollects at some indeterminate point in the future is a series of images that speak, perhaps fantastically, but with no less consequence for her psychic life, to the inception of what I have been theorizing as the negative Oedipus complex. This mnemonic cluster is pivotal to what happens in the rest of the shot, as well as to the organization of Riddles as a (divided) whole.

The other act of memory to which the maternal voice refers—what involving the passage from an unknown book—also undergoes a revision between the first and subsequent viewings of Riddles, becoming something which it is impossible to attribute exclusively to either Louise or Anna, and which is therefore temporally unlocatable; it becomes, in other words, a recollection/construction which is shared across time. This set of memories also intersects with the temporal register represented by the glass-enclosed mummies, whose “enigmatic script” (according to the intertitles) reminds an unspecified “her” of a “forgotten history and the power of a different language”—the history and language of the Sphinx, who, as I have tried to demonstrate, is a metaphor for the Oedipal or symbolic mother. Indeed, pan 13 in its entirety must be understood as a “detour” through a series of Egyptian texts.

The recollections are anchored to the diegetic present, as well, since
image of Louise moving slowly through the Egyptian Room, her feet and calves conspicuously arched by the high heels she wears throughout the film. The innermost narrative of this shot—that involving the Greek Sphinx—introduces yet another time and place. The pan in its entirety is thus articulated around an almost inconceivably complex network of cultural, spatial, and temporal references.

If shot 13 is a “detour” through the “enigmatic script” of the mummies, the reading memories add several more stops to the semiotic excursion. The voice-off tells the story of Louise/Anna’s recollections, recollections which themselves contain—as a text-within-a-text—the story of the anonymous “she.” That story encloses in turn yet another text—a box inscribed with the words “Anatomy Is No Longer Destiny.” The box opens to reveal the enigmatic figure of the Sphinx (a text in her own right), who produces the final level of textuality—the words Capital, Delay, and Body:

“Inscribed on the lid of the box were the words: ‘Anatomy Is No Longer Destiny’ and inside, when she opened it, she found the figure of the Greek Sphinx with full breasts and feathery wings. She lifted it up out of the box to look at it more closely. As she did so, it seemed to her that its lips moved and it spoke a few phrases in a language which she could not understand except for three words which were repeated several times: ‘Capital,’ ‘Delay’ and ‘Body.’ She replaced it in the box and closed the lid. She could feel her heart beat. . . . She felt giddy with success, as though, after laboring daily to prevent a relapse into her pristine humanity, she had finally got what she wanted. She shuddered. Suddenly she heard a voice, very quiet, coming from the box, the voice of the Sphinx, growing louder, until she could hear it clearly, compellingly, and she knew that it had never been entirely silent and that she had heard it before, all her life, since she first understood that she was a girl!”

This part of the voice-off narration further destabilizes the pronoun she, which is now extended to include not only Louise and Anna, but an anonymous female character. Because of this pronominal slippage, the “she” who reads the inscription on the lid, opens the box, and listens to the Sphinx’s words, seems to include the first two characters as well as the third, and so to describe a condition that is somehow a part of female subjectivity rather than an isolated incident. This impression is reinforced when the voice-off reverts to the remembering “she,” and her attempts to recollect the details of the forgotten text. What had seemed a textual memory suddenly connects intimately with Anna’s infantile memories, and the distinction between the three women completely evaporates (“The rhythm of the sentence was not quite right and she felt sure there was some particular she had forgotten. . . . Could she have known the language which the Sphinx spoke? The more she tried to remember, the more she found her mind wandering, mislaying the thread of logical reconstruction and returning to images from her own childhood”).

However, even as it insists upon the commonality of this maternal legacy—a legacy which, I would argue, is precisely the negative Oedipus complex—Riddles is careful to stress its cultural basis. There could be no firmer denial of biological determinism than the assertion that “Anatomy Is No Longer Destiny,” especially when that assertion is buttressed by images of age-defying mummies. Even the immediately following acrobatic sequence, with its apparent “return” to the body, offers a demonstration not of corporeal laws and limits but of how to violate and exceed them. The acrobats are “bodies at work, expending their labor power upon its own material,” rather than upon the task of reproduction. They are also formally denatured, appearing to us first as grainy black-and-white figures, and then as optically printed two-color figures. Finally, they are bodies determined to reverse gravity—to fling themselves through the air. Riddles uses the dream of unity at the center of the choric fantasy to affirm the possibility of a female collectivity capable of transcending class, ethnic, cultural, geographical, and historical boundaries—a collectivity based not just upon the shared experience of exclusion, and a shared belief in the possibility of both articulating and transforming that experience through new forms of sexual, social, political, and artistic practice, but upon a primary and passionate desire for the mother.

The words the Sphinx utters—“Capital,” “Delay,” and “Body”—isolate the three terms around which female subjectivity has traditionally been organized. “Capital” designates that system of economic and social exchange which constructs women as consumers, and in which they themselves circulate as commodities and signs;49 that system which also, in the words of the film, “wants women to work, even toils them to, but denies facilities and oftentimes seems to be punishing them for leaving their proper place.” “Delay” is a synonym for the Oedipus complex, with its regime of deferral, displacement, and substitution. The point here is not, it seems to me, to opt for presence and immediacy—qualities which are antipathetic to all forms of desire—but to pit the negative version of the Oedipus complex against the positive and normalizing one. “Body” refers to that destiny to which classic cinema and the existing symbolic order have so insistently held the female subject—to the obligatory representation of male lack and male desire. It is primarily at the second and third of these junctures, as I have indicated, that Riddles makes its transformative intervention.

In the British Museum episode, as earlier in Louise’s story, the Sphinx functions as what is technically a voice-over, and hence as the
most fully exteriorized element within the shot that circumscribes that episode; it is, in other words, that textual component which most fully avoids visual localization and diegetic subordination. However, it is also represented as speaking from the most profoundly interior point of the narrative—from the inside of the small figure contained within the box, which is itself framed both by the passage from the obscure text and by Louise and Anna's recollections. The Sphinx's voice is thus simultaneously "on" and "off," "inside" and "outside," apart from the female subject and a part of her. These seeming paradoxes encourage the viewer/listener to conceptualize text and subject less in terms of closed compartments and privileged look-out points than in terms of a maze or labyrinth through which the voice travels. It is, indeed, precisely with the image of a maze puzzle that the film ends.

Riddles thus accomplishes what neither Polylogue nor Three Women is able to do: It opens up the choric enclosure to accommodate not just mother, daughter, and grandmother, but a community of women as broad and all-inclusive as feminism itself. Its highly evocative dramatization of what I have theorized as the negative Oedipus complex also does much to dispel the confusion which surrounds the homosexual-maternal scene both in Kristeva's writings and in Altman's film. Finally, it gives the maternal voice such a range of discursive functions as to shatter altogether the fiction of the mother's troubled relation to language.

Through its dislocation of voice from body, as well as the more general challenge it poses to Hollywood's sound regime, Riddles anticipates a number of the more recent experimental films I will be discussing in the penultimate chapter of this book—films which will enable me both to extend my investigation of the negative Oedipus complex in the direction of narcissism, and to suggest that there may be a close connection between melancholia and the positive Oedipus complex.

DISEMBODYING THE FEMALE V0ICE:
IRIGARAY, EXPERIMENTAL FEMINIST
CINEMA, AND FEMININITY

FOR A SURPRISINGLY large and diverse group of women theorists, feminist speech and writing revolve in some fundamental way around the female body. Annie Leclerc, for instance, has devoted an entire volume to the excorations and ecstasies of her biological body, giving rise in the process to what she calls "parole de femme." Helène Cixous has generated a plethora of essays and books which attempt to incorporate the female body, and thereby to become not so much texts as "sexts." In "This Sex Which Is Not One" and "When Our Lips Speak Together," Luce Irigaray dreams of a language capable of replicating the improper and nonordinary qualities of the female genitalia. Closer to home, Nancy Miller has repeatedly insisted, contra Barthes, that the sexual identity of an author's body does make a critical difference. And in two highly original essays in the same volume of Yale French Studies, Gayatri Spivak and Naomi Schor have argued for the primacy of the clitoris within feminist theory. Spivak defining it as the mark of "woman-in-excess," and Schor characterizing it as the detail par excellence.

Within that variety of feminist film practice which is characterized by a similar theoretical sophistication, on the other hand, the female voice is often shown to coexist with the female body only at the price of its own impoverishment and entrapment. Not surprisingly, therefore, it generally pulls away from any fixed locus within the image track, away from the constraints of synchronization. In Yvonne Rainer's Film about A Woman Who . . . and Bette Gordon's Empty Suitcases, for instance, the female voice is multiplied in such a way as to make it impossible to tie it down to a specific corporeal anchor. A disembodied female voice speaks 'over' the images of Patricia Gruben's Sifted Evidence, in relation to which it constantly shifts its position, while Yvonne Rainer's Journeys