



## Book Review

***The Feminine Subject.*** By Susan Hekman, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014, 228 pp. \$64.95 hardcover.

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Mary Caputi  
California State University

The question of woman's subjectivity lays at the heart of feminist analysis, yet it represents anything but a settled issue. Efforts at grappling with woman's personhood in Western culture have spawned numerous debates in feminist scholarship, contributing to the scope and the richness of feminist theory now integral to the canon of Western political thought. Susan Hekman's *The Feminine Subject* offers an authoritative approach to this topic and can be characterized as both intellectual history and as theoretical investigation. With commendable lucidity, Hekman explores the myriad ways in which the question of feminine subjectivity has evolved since Simone de Beauvoir's seminal *The Second Sex* appeared in 1949, a text that underscores the negative, incidental quality of woman's subjectivity: woman as Other.

Using simple language, Hekman draws on an impressive trove of scholarly knowledge to analyze the divisive, even fractious debates on this issue that make up the landscape of feminist theory. Consequently, she illustrates how a wide array of voices and at times conflicting positions affirm gender's status as a critical category. Her assertion that feminine subjectivity represents a "mangle," a decidedly heterogeneous experience built on the subject's ultimate impossibility, thus reveals itself as a boon. The impossible quality of woman's subjectivity derives both from its starting point of otherness — a being whose place of origin paradoxically depends on others — and from the lack of consensus among scholars as to how to theorize woman's lived experience.

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The book's six chapters begin with and consistently refer back to de Beauvoir's recognition that Western philosophy traditionally fails to accommodate feminine subjectivity. Because "woman" for so long designated a lack, a negativity whose elliptical meanings derive only from relationships with others, feminist analysis begins with a conundrum: how to write about woman's experience when her existence is deemed incidental, merely relative to the lives of others. Yet this intersubjective dimension of feminine subjectivity in no way invalidates feminism's purpose, Hekman maintains, but spawns numerous conversations that treat subjectivity's antithesis, heterogeneity, plurality, interconnection, and intersectionality. The hindrance thus proves a help, for how can there be a definitive account of something so prone to renegotiation? Why should there be? Hekman's aim is never to arrive at a totalized theory of female subjectivity — "authoritative" pronouncements are the trappings of masculinist discourse — but to demonstrate the value in treating this topic as an unfolding question that is ever in process, ever under consideration and open to new possibilities. "Woman is not defined by one thing," Hekman avers, "but by the confluence of elements that constitute her place in society" (14).

As a comprehensive piece of feminist intellectual history, *The Feminine Subject* proves useful in its overview of the leading feminist positions on the topic of woman's personhood. Hekman skillfully surveys the arguments and authors that have deeply impacted the intellectual landscape of this field while teasing out the most salient, problematic arguments. She thus considers such topics as the antihumanist, psychoanalytic contributions of French feminism, the relational self grounded in object relations theory, liberal and Marxist readings of the subject, intersectionality, the importance of race and ethnicity, and the intellectual inroads proffered by Judith Butler's performativity. Her analysis oscillates between broad informative overview — for example, what characterizes French feminism? — and close scrutiny of specific authors and questions — for example, what is Julia Kristeva's "chora"? Hekman's careful approach to this complicated history renders the book a unique, useful tool for upper division students of feminist theory as well as graduate students and seasoned scholars. Indeed, the breadth of analysis, depth of knowledge, and honed acuity that she turns on the field's central questions make this text a useful source for all students of feminism.

Certain theorists capture Hekman's imagination more than others. She remains unflinching, for instance, in her admiration for Carol Gilligan, whose defense of the feminine "voice" as an alternative moral register

has brought her criticism and even made her a polarizing figure. Hekman applauds Gilligan's widely read challenge to traditional theories of moral development, theories that favor the masculinist penchant for abstraction, universal standards, and focus on justice over the more "feminine" ethic of care. Jettisoning complaints that this stance displays traditional, essentializing approaches to gender, Hekman argues that "Gilligan . . . is continuing in the tradition of Beauvoir by exploring how woman is made rather than born" (58). Honoring the ethic of care associated with femininity thus emerges as a challenge to masculine hegemony, one that puts justice and fairness into conversation with care and subsequently queries masculinity's claims to autonomy. It counters the hubris of scientific "neutrality" by highlighting context and relationship, thereby offering "a radically different perspective on moral development" (61).

For Hekman the intersubjective, interconnected aspect of all human experience as encapsulated in Gilligan's feminine voice emerges as one of feminism's strongest suits. Not only does it keep us honest and down-to-earth, it also undermines the potential hubris that sustains claims to self-sufficiency. Although *The Feminine Subject* presents a battery of arguments that often stand in disagreement, its treatment of this theme consequently highlights the points of overlap that join such divergent positions as French feminism, intersectionality, racial theorizing, and performativity, for all concur on the subject's fluid heterogeneity and reliance on cultural context. "[S]ubjects are situated . . . and necessarily connected to other subjects" (20).

Hekman's insistence on the "mangle" thus underscores the ever-emergent quality of the feminine subject and keeps the focus on process rather than on a supposedly settled, completed outcome. It directs our attention toward woman's subjectivity as something whose evolution, like its masculine counterpart, demands a constantly revised, ever-vigilant intellectual framework that morphs and adopts as the situation demands. The "mangle" may well invoke a disorganized entity whose energies know no set of governing laws or guiding principles, but doesn't human subjectivity answer to that description? Hekman illustrates with graceful aplomb how such an invocation keeps feminist scholarship rigorous, exciting, and philosophically deep.

*Mary Caputi is Professor of Political Science at California State University, Long Beach, CA: [Mary.Caputi@csulb.edu](mailto:Mary.Caputi@csulb.edu)*