

***Eve Escapes: Ruins and Life.* Hélène Cixous. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. Cambridge UK and Malden, MA: Polity, 2012. Pp. 208. \$59.95 (hard-cover) \$19.95 (paperback).**

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The concept of “writing the body” has long been an essential element of Hélène Cixous’s work. Founder and former director of the Center for Women’s Studies at University Paris VIII, Cixous is a central figure within contemporary feminist discourse. Her seminal essay “The Laugh of the Medusa,” published in 1975, revolutionized the study of women’s writing by striving to give voice to the desires, rhythms, and impulses of the female body. In *Eve Escapes*, it is the aging body of the mother that provides inspiration for a reflection on the process of growing old. This is the fourth of Cixous’s novels to be translated into English within the last four years, all of which narrate a daughter’s relationship with her elderly mother as she approaches her tenth decade. It has been a common characteristic of Cixous’s earlier work to depict the mother’s aging with a painful sense of foreboding. In *Eve Escapes*, however, Cixous seems able to move away from a tone of mourning towards a view of death as a beginning rather than an end.

This novel celebrates the mother’s remarkable longevity as she journeys towards a “New Life” (1). Its thematic concerns question the connection between writing and the passing of time, the change of perspective that old age brings, the threat of separation, and the transitions that take place between the roles of mother and daughter. The narrator—whose voice resembles that of Cixous—venerates the character of Eve as mother, midwife, storyteller, and survivor. Yet as she marvels at Eve’s incredible existence, she also accepts that her mortal body is a prison from which she will soon escape.

The narrative begins with a vision of Eve in which her daughter describes the beginning of another era in their relationship: “It is thus the New Life which I see”—“Its aged face where eternal youth shines” (1). This juxtaposition of elderliness and “eternal youth” epitomizes Cixous’s attempt to see old age as a time of liberating possibility. The beginning of Eve’s “New Life” is signaled by her transformation into the likeness of her own mother, Omi. The woman the narrator sees before her is no longer Eve, but rather Eve “translated” into Omi (4). This suggestion that the transformative effects of old age represent a sort of translation is a curiously literary way of describing a physical phenomenon. Yet considering Cixous’s longstanding desire to bring the body into writing, it seems like an apt perspective for her to take on the aging process. The opening passages of the novel provide insight into how this process involves a “kind of alteration” in which the narrator begins to recognize her own face in that of her mother, as if she were looking into the future and seeing a vision of how she herself will appear in old age (5). These descriptions are full of typically Cixousian examples of paronomasia which play on the name Omi as an anagram of moi. The novel’s first pages thus emphasize the transformation—rather than the deterioration—of the body

in old age by depicting it as a site of fluctuating identities, memories, and temporalities.

The vacillation between representations of mother and daughter in the novel is further illustrated by the parallel which Cixous draws between her relationship with Eve and the tale of Cimon and Pero. This classical fable tells the story of a devoted daughter who feeds her elderly father with her own breast milk to save him from starvation in prison. However, the meaning of this parallel is complicated by the way Cixous transposes the father-daughter relationship in the fable onto the mother-daughter relationship in her narrative. This suggests a shift in gender roles through which Eve comes to embody the aged and imprisoned father, whilst the narrator plays the part of both mother and daughter. As the narrator describes:

[S]he looks at me with delight while I look at her with delight ... like a young mother looks at her baby who looks at her blissfully, the one nourishing the other with light, in such a way that from the two faces emanates the double radiance that is called beauty ... in that moment ... we were the unexpected and absolutely unquestionable double of the couple Cimon and Pero, linked by supreme milk. (12)

Whilst leaving several questions about the sexual dynamics of this fable unanswered, Cixous's deliberate confusing of the figures of *mère* and *père* suggests the liberation from strict gender identities that old age can bring.

Ever-present in the narrative is also the notion of redemptive maternal love, symbolized by the "supreme milk" which has the ability to nourish the giver as well as the receiver (12). As the narrator tries to nourish her elderly mother, she is also nourished in return: "You are my milk!" she cries (75). The roles of Cimon and Pero are therefore reversed as it is now the daughter's turn to "suckle" from her aged parent (57). The act of suckling recalls numerous scenes from Cixous's other works in which mother's milk appears as white ink; a sign of the creativity that flows from the female body in the form of *écriture féminine*. Cixous's allusion to Cimon and Pero—as a representation of "absolute and limitless maternity"—may thus be seen as one of the most compelling and significant depictions of mother's milk within her writing (76).

Eve Escapes is an important text within Cixous's oeuvre not only for the way in which it resonates with the themes and motifs of her earlier work. What is most interesting about this novel is its use of female bodily imagery to create a new vision of a woman who represents the beauty of old age. Cixous repeatedly associates the advent of Eve's "New Life" with the image of flowers coming into bloom. The most poetic descriptions of the mother in the narrative are those in which her white hair and flushed cheeks are likened to the color of magnolias and roses. The power of this text therefore lies in its ability to challenge pessimistic assumptions about aging by demonstrating that the experience of approaching death may in fact be understood as one of beginnings, blossomings, and ultimately rebirth.