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## INTRODUCTION FOR HELENE CIXOUS

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Françoise Lionnet

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University of California, Los Angeles*

It is a great honor and a great privilege to welcome Hélène Cixous to our department of French and Francophone Studies as the keynote speaker for our Graduate Student Conference on Crime and Punishment, a theme inspired by her oeuvre and by her love of literature. In a wonderful short piece entitled “Obstétriques cruelles,” Hélène Cixous writes: “Tout commence par un vol. Tout auteur est un voleur” (*Autodafe*, 2000): all writers are thieves—whether it is Augustine stealing pears in Algeria, Jean-Jacques Rousseau coveting apples, Stendhal stealing kisses fresh as fruit, Jacques Derrida caught in the act of stealing grapes and then figs and thus inaugurating a poetics of sexual difference, or women writers appropriating language to nourish their souls... like Cixous herself who is a *voleuse*, a *voleuse de langue*, one who reminds us beautifully that the inaugural scene of writing is that of the forbidden and of its transgression.

In her most recent book, *Manhattan*, published in 2002 by Galilée—a book that has quickly become one of my favorite in all her oeuvre, along with *Photos de racines* (des Femmes, 1994)—she describes how literature has always been the most sublime, the grandest of affairs for her, the only one that can make her laugh in the midst of chaos and torment: “La littérature a toujours été pour moi la plus sublime et grande des affaires la seule a me faire rire au milieu du tourment.” Reading *Manhattan* will make you laugh and cry. It is a vibrant and moving book that dissects the mysteries of love and passion, of literature and a certain form of madness that Cixous calls *la foli[e]littérature*.

For those who have read Cixous since the 1970s, laughter and madness are of course associated with what is without doubt her best known and most anthologized piece in this country: “The Laugh of the Medusa”. But, as she will tell you, feminist studies’ fixation on this piece has been a bit of a curse for her. The bibliography of her prolific writings (whether categorized as Essays, Fiction, Theatre, Philosophy, Criticism, or Autobiography) spans four decades and is 20 pages long. She has received many awards, including the Prix Médicis for *Dedans* in 1969, and she has been translated into more than 12 languages. She is a scholar and a teacher who defended two doctoral theses in 1968, one on James Joyce, and one on the American poet Robinson Jeffers. In fact, Cixous’s first trip to Southern California in the 1960s was to do research in the Robinson Jeffers archive at Occidental College. In 1968, she was the youngest scholar to receive the *Doctorat d’État* in France, and she has since received many honorary doctorates. She was one of the founding members with Gerard Genette and Tzvetan Todorov of the prestigious journal *Poétique*, and a founder of the progressive University of Paris VIII – Vincennes, where she helped recruit some the most innovative French intellectuals of the last century, from Michel Butor to Gilles Deleuze and Lucette Finas. Her collaborations with Ariane Mnouchkine and Jacques Derrida are well known, as is her engagement with social issues in France and abroad. Since the mid-90s, she has redoubled her efforts against censorship and repression, especially in Algeria, Bosnia, and Afghanistan, and is a member of the International Parliament of Writers. She is an inspiration to scholars

everywhere who question orthodoxies and hierarchies and who fight for the freedom to write, to speak one's mind in the face of power, and to struggle for peace and justice in a world where war is always being fought somewhere.

Above all, Hélène Cixous is a meticulous reader of texts who takes us into the meaning-making process of language. In "The Devil Without Confessing Him," she leads us once again deep into the territory of literature, the only one, for her, that can truly make us free to reclaim, re-word, and re-imagine the truths of the heart and the hungers of the mind.

# CRIME AND PUNISHMENT IN LITERATURE AND THE ARTS



*Paroles Gelées*

UCLA French Studies

**SPECIAL ISSUE**

Volume 20.2

Spring 2003

Selected Proceedings from  
the UCLA Department of French & Francophone Studies  
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