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Robinson Crusoe in the Family: Feminist Economics and Lost in Space

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ROBINSON CRUSOE IN THE FAMILY:
FEMINIST ECONOMICS AND LOST IN SPACE

ABSTRACT
The use of the figure of Robinson Crusoe as an exemplar of rational economic man may be viewed as of no significance whatsoever, or as very significant in the creation of the meaning of the economic agent. This paper discusses two alternative views of feminist economists. Some feminist economists can be understood to be arguing for the situating of Crusoe within a family context in order to more fully represent the economic reality of both men and women. Others suggest that adding representations of women and families without examining the underlying significance and functioning of Crusoe as a self-made man may misrepresent women in the same way as their exclusion or absence from economic representations. A reading of a modern ‘Family Robinson’ story is used to discuss these views.

KEYWORDS
Economic man, Robinson Crusoe, family, story-telling, feminist poststructuralism
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The figure of Robinson Crusoe, the hero of the Daniel Defoe ([1719] 1945) novel of 1719, has long been used as a concrete exemplar of rational economic man in order to teach students important microeconomic concepts such as opportunity cost, the efficient allocation of resources to achieve given ends, the production possibility frontier, and consumption versus investments which raise future consumption possibilities. Friday may be brought into the economic model when voluntary welfare-increasing exchanges between individuals and/or countries are discussed, but as a recent textbook has shown, Friday is unnecessary when Crusoe can operate schizophrenically as the buyer and seller of his own labor and output (see Varian 1999). Furthermore, the figure of Robinson Crusoe is evoked as the representative agent in the exposition of theories such as real business cycle theory (Plosser 1989).

Views on the use of this literary figure in economics vary. Non-feminist economists who believe that neoclassical economics is a science in the traditional sense see a sharp distinction between economics and literature. Therefore the use of this metaphor of rational economic man is seen as illuminating of the truths of neoclassical economics through a concrete example. These truths of neoclassical economics are viewed as independent of the sex of the economic agent, and hence it is simply happenstance that Robinson Crusoe is a man. An alternative view of the use of the figure of Robinson Crusoe is that it is in fact productive of meaning, such as, for example, the whiteness, the masculinity or the universal applicability of the neoclassical economic agent. This latter understanding of the figure of Robinson Crusoe, that is, as a pedagogical device which actively produces and supports a certain kind of subjectivity for the economic agent, has been the subject of at least five papers by economists,
including feminist economists, in the recent past. Stephen Hymer ([1971] 1980) reads the Defoe novel as a Marxist parable in which Crusoe the slave-owner emerges represents the colonizing force of capital which subordinates the labor of Friday and others to its profit-making imperative, and argued that neoclassical economics constructs the story as one of harmonious interests and mutually-beneficial trade by ignoring its themes of violence and alienation. Michael White (1982) showed that it is a misreading of the Defoe novel which enables economists to use Crusoe as an exemplar of the economic agent. On White’s reading of the novel, Crusoe was an exemplar of irrational economic behavior, and hence the figure used in economics is more a product of the discipline’s own imagination than of the novel. Gillian Hewitson (1994, 1999: ch. 5) used feminist poststructuralist insights in her reading of the Defoe novel as a story of the fragility of white masculinity which develops and sustains its identity upon a denial of subjectivity to feminine and feminized others. She argues that Crusoe is able to function as an exemplar of neoclassical economics precisely because he is a figure of the independent and self-made man (and not ‘person’), but in so doing denies the significance of sexual difference. Ulla Grapard’s (1995) feminist reading of the story of Robinson Crusoe reveals Crusoe’s reliance upon the invisible work of others, and, in particular, women. This particular gendered ‘story-world’ takes as the norm a masculine perspective which is replicated by neoclassical economics (on economists’ story-worlds, see also Strassmann and Polanyi 1995). Brian Cooper (1997) discussed two early nineteenth century examples of the situating of Crusoe within a family – those of Harriet Martineau and Jane Haldiman Marcet.
Feminist economists who concur with their neoclassical colleagues that economics is a science would similarly argue for the traditional division between economics and literature, and hence view metaphors as useful though unproductive of new meaning. However, they may object to the pedagogical use of Robinson Crusoe on the grounds that it is illuminating of a limited version of economic reality. Specifically, it may be viewed as illuminating of economic truths about men’s experiences, but completely silent on women’s economic experiences. Alternatively, the Crusoe device may be seen as illuminating of the experience of an economic agent of either gender, but limited because of its failure to situate that economic agent within a social and familial context. A solution to this problem might be to situate Crusoe in a family scenario so that both the genders, and their family interrelationships, are more realistically represented.

Although many feminist economists, only some of whom maintain that economics is a descriptive and predictive science, have not explicitly commented on the Crusoe or ‘Family Robinson’ stories, they nevertheless reveal their desire for realistic representations, or explicit representations of both women and men as economic agents. A sample example of this desire is given by Frances Woolley, who argues in favor of those bargaining models which treat men and women symmetrically, replacing the gendered assumption that households are headed by a benevolent dictator, and which therefore “incorporate women’s, as well as men’s, views of reality”, fully satisfy the scientific requirements of neoclassical economics (1999: 331).

The work of other feminist economists, such as Hewitson (1994, 1999) and Grapard (1995), suggest that the addition of women to economic representations, although a better scenario than one which explicitly excludes women as economic actors,
may be problematic if the representations of women are added as if they are men. That is, if the exclusion of women supports certain meanings within economics as these authors argue with respect to the use of Robinson Crusoe, specifically, that economic actors are masculine or self-made men, then adding women imposes this model upon women and covers over the exclusion from the discourse of alternative representations.

This, of course, is the dilemma of feminism: how can women be represented within masculinist discourses in ways which do not subsume them to a masculine model of subjectivity? The motivation for this paper is to shed some light on this dilemma in the context of feminist economics. The differences between these two broad feminist economic approaches to the questions of representation and masculinity in neoclassical economics are explored using a modern ‘Family Robinson’ story. Specifically, I examine the extent to which feminist economists who seek to disregard the productive work of the metaphor of Robinson Crusoe might, and should, accept these alternative representations of gender and so-called economic reality. That is, what do modern stories of the Family Robinson add to the story of the lone man Robinson, and is this sufficient? There have been three well-known expositions of the Robinson family in the post-war period. These are the 1960 Walt Disney film version of the book, *Swiss Family Robinson* (Wyss [1813] 1963), a science fiction version of the same family story, *Lost in Space*, originally conceived as “The Swiss Family Robinson in Space” and screened on US televisions from 1965 to 1968, and the 1998 film version also entitled *Lost in Space*, with my focus being on the latter version of the story.

The plots of these post-war Robinson family stories are virtually identical, and follow the same pattern as the original Defoe ([1719] 1945) novel. In broad-brush terms,
the stories are as follows: the hero/family embarks on a journey and becomes lost, finding himself or themselves alone in some unknown environment; he/they face many trials and tribulations in his/their struggle for survival, with the primary protagonist being some form of uncivilized nature, such as deserted islands, wild or unknown beasts, cannibals, and pirates; other characters enter the scene, either as people who are rescued or as necessary accompaniments to the journey; and finally the hero/family in one way or another is able to overcome the geographical limitations which have been imposed on him/them by the opening up of a choice as to whether to leave or stay in the new home.

The book behind the Disney version of *Swiss Family Robinson* was written by Johann Wyss, a Swiss pastor who began the book as a series of bedtime stories for his four sons. Wyss’s story is one of a Swiss family of father, mother, and four sons, who are on their way to Port Jackson, Australia, when they are shipwrecked and forced to survive the various dramas of life on a desert island, albeit sustained to an astounding degree by articles rescued from the ship. The Disney film version of this story is different from the book in several ways. One son is dropped and the oldest son is older, so that he is clearly a sexually mature young man. The film version also draws more obviously upon the Defoe novel *Robinson Crusoe*, with pirates being added to take the place of cannibals, and a sea-captain and his grand-daughter, who is initially disguised as a cabin-boy, taking the place of the rescued Friday, with a Disney-style romance between the two young people thereby effected. The TV program *Lost in Space* is also centered on the nuclear family, with a cast of characters somewhat different from that of the *Swiss Family Robinson*. Again there are three children, but now only the youngest is a boy, around 10 years old, while the two daughters are around 13 and 20 years old. The elder
daughter is engaged to the pilot of the ship, Don West, who is second-in-command. In addition to West, the family is accompanied by the weak-willed, ‘lilly-livered’ Dr Smith and the human-like protector, Robot.

Given the aims of feminist economics, it seems reasonable to suggest that no feminist economist would accept the replacement of the Crusoe metaphor with the Wyss story or either of the two 1960s versions of the Family Robinson. Although there are variations in cast of characters and geographical location, in each of the 1960s versions the adult woman is represented as the 1950s and 1960s stereotypical mother and housewife in a nuclear family. She is the housekeeper, the carer of the children, the keeper of moral values and the person who is concerned with reproduction issues. She is technically incompetent though able to undertake simple tasks in response to directives given by men. She is completely disassociated from the ‘masculine’ activities of hunting, building, discovering, and fighting off wild beasts. Her thrills lie in the safe return of her loved ones from their adventures and in aspects of life which go on within homes: cooking, serving, caring, activities associated with making the tree-house abode or spaceship into a home, and generally ensuring survival in purely 1950s stereotypical feminine ways.

The 1998 movie *Lost in Space* is a modern version of the Family Robinson story. Having the same cast of characters as its TV predecessor, it represents the genders and associated activities and characteristics very differently. As a pedagogical device, it comes closer to satisfying the feminist economic desire for representations of both men and women in social, familial and work contexts, and, furthermore, representations of women’s equality with men in these contexts. However, there are also explicitly
represented aspects of the film which such feminist economists would probably not be as happy to endorse. The remainder of this paper is devoted to a broad outline of the plot of the film, followed by an analysis of (i) the ways in which the film remedies a feminist neoclassical economist’s concerns about the use of Robinson Crusoe; (ii) the continuing concerns which such a feminist economist would have with the direct use of this version of the Robinson family in teaching economics; and (iii) an alternative reading of the film which shows that even if the problems in the representation of economic agents situated within families were to be eliminated, the story of the Robinson family continues to construct the subject of neoclassical economics as masculine.

Lost in Space (1998) is set in the year 2058. The Robinson family set off to save humankind by building a ‘hypergate’ to the planet Alpha Prime which will enable humans to leave Earth, capable now of sustaining life for only two more decades, and colonize Alpha Prime. Instead of being frozen for ten years before reaching their destination and fulfilling their task, the cast of characters is brought sharply back to normal functioning within a matter of minutes of takeoff by the Robot, who has been reprogrammed by the evil Dr Smith to kill the Robinson family and hence destroy the mission. Once the Robot is settled down, the crew find themselves dangerously close to, and heading straight into, the sun. Damage to the spaceship sustained in the furor forces them to engage the ‘hyperdrive’ which, since there is no hypergate, means that they could end up anywhere within the 98% of the as-yet uncharted universe. There is a high probability that they will become lost in space! Indeed, this prediction comes to pass, and the family faces a series of threats, including those arising when they explore a ‘ghost-ship’ which harbors thousands of mechanical baby spiders, as well as time travels both
backwards and forwards, before safely returning to Earth to begin once more on their quest to save humankind.

Although students are not required to read the Defoe novel in order to comprehend the neoclassical principles which the figure of Robinson Crusoe (and sometimes Friday) is used to teach, they would certainly enjoy a viewing of this modern action-packed adventure movie. In terms of its functioning as a pedagogical device for teaching microeconomic principles, all those which are taught through the metaphor of Robinson Crusoe can be found, and specifically, opportunity cost, calculations of costs and benefits at the margin, the efficient use of scarce resources, including time, to achieve given ends, the efficiency of a division of labor and welfare-maximizing trades can all be seen in the film, with, arguably, the additional benefit of economic agents being represented as both masculine and feminine as well as being situated within families and other social contexts. I turn now to an analysis of these issues.

(i) The ways in which the film remedies feminist neoclassical economist concerns about the use of Robinson Crusoe

The primary concern of many feminist economists is to represent women as the equals of men, and to show that economic activity cannot be viewed outside familial and social relationships. These concerns are allayed by the film. Although there is a sexual division of labor, it takes a slightly different form to the early stereotypical versions in which, firstly, women do most of the housework and caring for children and men do very little around the home, and, secondly, there is considerable occupational differentiation on the basis of sex in the labor market. Gender differences are significant in the film, but some aspects of traditional gender characterizations are turned on their head, so that, for
example, the women are competent scientists vital to the success of the project, and the brawny Don West is portrayed, at least initially, as manly but brainless. Indeed, everyone but West is scientifically competent – though West is a war-hero and a competent pilot – with the younger daughter of approximately 13 years of age being very well-versed in the technology of the day and able to operate certain functions of the spaceship single-handedly, and the 10-year old boy conceiving of a time machine and able to reconstruct the semi-destroyed Robot from bits and pieces lying about the ship. The problematic work/family interface is eliminated through the deployment of the whole family on the project and the simultaneous work/domestic life location (although it is clear that this combination is not the norm for 2058). The ‘bedroom scene’ consists of Professor Robinson helping Dr Robinson, his wife, make up the bed. Although the Professor’s absences from home before the launch date and his lack of attention to his children have, according to the younger daughter, caused marital fights, the married couple are not overtly represented as existing within a combative or hierarchical relationship, and seem to operate more as a partnership of equals. There is much in this film to satisfy a feminist economist seeking to replace Robinson Crusoe with a family of gendered Robinsons.

(ii) Concerns which a scientifically-minded feminist economist would have with the LIS Family Robinson

The way in which gender is explicitly represented is often simultaneously subversive of, and supportive of, the current gender stereotypes which feminist economists are seeking to change. For example, the sexual division of labor continues to construct aspects of traditional gender roles. Apart from a single exception, the women do not actually leave the spaceship to investigate other vessels or ‘strange lands’, but are,
on the other hand, in charge of the ship until the men’s return. As well as their technical competency being recognized in this way, the women also undertake the stereotypically masculine, physically-demanding maintenance work on the outside of the ship, requiring them to be as expert with tools and their understanding of the ship’s needs as the men. However, this could also be seen as the women being responsible for the relatively menial chores or ‘housework’ while the men undertake the managerial functions of exploration and life/death decision-making. Moreover, in an early scene of the film, set in the domestic home of the Robinson’s, Dr Robinson the mother specifically denounces stereotypical femininity while also supporting it: her sharp response to her husband’s implying that he has been busily occupied with preparations for the launch while she hasn’t really had much to do, is that she hasn’t “been throwing tupperware parties”, she has had to pack for the trip, whereupon her husband concedes that she has also had to revise the ‘Life Sciences Protocols’.

Parenting issues also both reinforce and undermine traditional gender roles, despite Dr Robinson the mother’s scientific qualifications and full-time employment in the spaceship-labor-market. It is she who functions to maintain family connections, and specifically, the father/son bond, by repeatedly pointing out to Professor Robinson that he must listen more to his young son Will. Indeed, we are informed in the first five minutes of the film that Will is brilliant though “starved of attention”, presumably by his father. Professor Robinson replies, at least until he sees the effects of his fatherly failings on his son as a grown man, that there will be time enough for that later – at the moment he has the much greater and more important concern of creating a future for all children. However, it was also Professor Robinson who insisted that the children be allowed on the
voyage so that the family would not be separated, indicating his concern with his very own, as distinct from all, children. But the overall impression of the Professor is that, although a caring father, and at least until the end of the film when he learns better, he must constantly forgo dealings with the minutiae of family issues in order to be able to get on with the more significant ‘big picture’ tasks. Nevertheless, after traveling forward in time to see that his son was able to create the time machine he talked of as a child, Professor Robinson finally learns the value of being a father to his own individual son, rather than to the amorphous ‘all children’, and indeed, all humankind. However, ironically, in becoming the good father to his son, we know that he simultaneously becomes the savior of humankind (this point is elucidated in (iii) below).

Parental control is also wielded by Dr Robinson the mother as she manages the testosterone-driven man-to-man confrontations between Professor Robinson and Don West about who is the real commander/patriarch of the spaceship. As these confrontations increasingly threaten to disrupt the smooth operation of the ship, Dr Robinson threatens to have them both declared incompetent by Dr Judy Robinson and to take over the command of the ship herself, upon which the men strike a truce. She thus re-establishes order, but it is a patriarchal order in both of the intermingled spheres of work and domesticity. One man is deemed commander of the ship (the Professor, unless military emergencies arise), and hence an appropriate work hierarchy is maintained. But as well, one man, her husband, is put in charge, and hence the conventional domestic hierarchy is reinforced. Her threat to take over is simply a strategy to get the ‘boys to make friends’: in her words to herself, “Isn’t détente wonderful”.
There is also ambiguity in the combination of work and family life. Many if not all feminist economists want to see caring and nurturing by both mothers and fathers to be recognized as valuable, and that is certainly true of the film. However, many feminist economists do not want the nurturing mother to be solely represented in terms of her interest in domestic affairs, although this may be the choice of some women, so that women’s representation as workers in the paid labor market is also important. Again, this occurs in the film. However, the competent and workaholic scientist daughter Judy seems to have no maternal feelings, though she approves of the affectionate and fatherly attention which Don West displays toward the friendly alien ‘child’. So we may have on the one hand a mother who works, and on the other hand, a working woman who foregoes maternity in order to pursue her career. Furthermore, the very integration of work and family, which is the basis of many demands by liberal feminists, such as those for on-site childcare and parental leave, means that the domestic sphere has virtually disappeared, although caring is still present, implying, like Judy’s attitude to maternity, that in order to gain equality women must become like men while men basically remain the same.

(iii) An alternative reading of the film

There are various representations of femininity in LIS. In SFR, the domestic life of the family takes the traditional form and hence femininity is constructed in opposition to the masculinity of the Robinson men and boys. In LIS, on the other hand, women are in many ways seemingly ‘equal’ to men, and there is no clear and separate domestic sphere to which the women are allocated. This is because the LIS film is centered on the quest to establish the hyperlink, and hence set primarily within the spaceship where domestic and
work lives are not clearly differentiated. Furthermore, the film’s resolution involves not the fulfillment of that quest and the re-establishment of ‘normal’ domestic life as it appeared briefly in the first few minutes of the film (when Dr Robinson the mother is packing for the journey) but a resumption of the quest, better equipped with paternal insights from the future.³

Barbara Creed (1993) has analyzed the ways in which the “monstrous-feminine” or female monster appears in horror films.⁴ She may take the form of the amoral primeval mother, vampire, witch, woman as monstrous womb, woman as bleeding wound, woman as possessed body, the castrating mother, woman as beautiful but deadly killer, aged psychopath, the monstrous girl-boy, woman as non-human animal, woman as life-in-death, or woman as the deadly *femme castratrice* (1993: 1). In each case, it is masculine identity which is threatened by feminine monstrosity. Monstrosity is primarily figured as feminine in *LIS* through representations of abject, or matter such as slime or unnatural sacs of eggs which construct humanness and masculine subjectivity through a binary structure of A/not-A; through motherhood and the threat to separate identity constituted by vaginal cavities; and through the *vagina dentata*, which threatens to castrate and kill men. Although there are many scenes of feminine monstrosity in *LIS*, I use Creed’s delineation and analysis of the monstrous-feminine to examine the most significant of these and to suggest that the film, despite its obvious measure of liberal equality of the sexes, constructs femininity in opposition to masculinity in typically phallocentric fashion.⁵ In short, man’s identity is self-present, and woman can be understood only in relation to that identity. Moreover, as castrated in relation to him, she is a constant threat
to man’s identity and hence her reproduction and sexuality must be vigorously constrained.

The scenes in which the monstrous feminine is most clearly delineated are those associated with the discovery, inspection and later implications of a strange vessel or ghost-ship which turns out to be full of alien spiders. The initial encounter with the monstrous feminine is the vulval shape of the docking bays of the strange craft, ensuring that the audience is on the edge of its seat as it anticipates the difficulties to come in escaping this engulfing mother. Next, on entering the vessel, the search crew, made up of all the men as well as the Robot and Dr Robinson the daughter, hear a dripping of blue slime, “like the drip drip drip of blood” in Dr Smith’s words. This blue slime is also metaphorically linked to feminine abject (menstrual blood) via television advertisement representations of menstrual blood as blue. Furthermore, should we be left in any doubt, the blue slime is oozing from egg sacs which are attached to the walls of the cavernous, vaginal, tunnels of the ghost-ship. As we watch, these pulsating, oozing egg sacs burst open with baby metallic spiders, which splatter the blue slime on everything as they burst apart when fired upon. Abject is literally everywhere! A further skin-crawling, and significant, aspect of the spiders is that they ravenously consume, with their vagina dentata mouths, their own dead and injured.

Dr Smith is the character upon whom the spiders have most effect. Throughout the film, Smith declares himself to be evil, and had sensed and foretold of the danger of what seemed initially to be a deserted ghost-ship harboring no life-forms with the portentous phrase “Evil knows evil”. In evacuating the ghost-ship, Dr Smith receives a scratch from a spider baby. This scratch causes Smith’s ultimate transformation into a
giant, pregnant spider with an enormous vagina dentata mouth filled with rows and rows of sharp teeth. Indeed, it is surprising that he is still recognizable. Smith’s plan is to colonize Earth with his monstrous issue. His demise is ensured when Professor Robinson slices open the body cavity holding the baby spiders, which proceed to devour their ‘mother’, Dr Smith. The evil Dr Smith’s ultimate form is of monstrous femininity, and it was this which destroyed him. He was pregnant with a ‘new world’ on Earth, but was destroyed by his own unnatural progeny. In destroying the danger posed by the evil Dr Smith’s feminine monstrosity, Professor Robinson is able to reassert paternal as opposed to maternal leadership as the appropriate vehicle for colonization and the heralder of new civilizations (just as Mr Robinson prepared for his Governorship of the new colony in SFR).6

In conclusion, some feminist economists may object to the use of Robinson Crusoe as a teaching device because of the absence of social and familial networks and implications, and hence the absence of gender in this story of a self-made man. However, the contemporary Family Robinson stories discussed in this paper are also deeply problematic, as, like the original Crusoe, they tell stories of masculine self-identity and feminine otherness or exclusion from an independent identity, and of femininity as a threat to masculine identity and endeavors. Hence, they maintain the neoclassical production of subjectivity, that is, in short, the masculinity of the economic agent. In the Swiss Family Robinson book and film, as well as in the TV version of Lost in Space, the father and sons experience all the action, while mother watches on. In terms of the explicit representation of gender, this role of the mother as carer and nurturer is important. However, the feminist economists seeking a family replacement for Crusoe
could not be completely happy with this, as gender is represented only in this stereotypical, patriarchal, or ‘New Home Economics’ manner. Thus, gender must be represented in the liberal sense of equality, and the film *Lost in Space* is better placed in this respect, since women are clearly valued crew members within the spaceship labor force and are as good as men in other ways too, with no explicit limitations on their freedoms as women. However, without questioning the underlying A/not-A structure of sexual difference which ‘liberal patriarchy’ and neoclassical economics itself is based upon, this version too should, but may not, fail to meet the expectations of scientifically-minded feminist economists. The discussion of the ways in which sexual difference is produced as phallocentric was used to argue that this most recent of the Family Robinsons *should* fail to meet those expectations. Similarly, feminist economists must be ever-vigilant to the possibility that women’s incorporation into economic representations is as potentially as problematic as their exclusion.

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NOTES

1 The book was initially published by the second son in 1813, and was translated into English within the year by William Godwin. Its first French translator edited the text liberally, changing the ending and adding several episodes, including the boa constrictor episode in which the donkey is swallowed whole. An English editor also made alterations, and by 1849 the authoritative English version had come into existence (Becker 1947: 11-12).

2 The theme of colonization is one which is present in the Defoe novel and in all the subsequent family versions of the novel, but it is not a theme examined in this paper (see Wiegman 1989; Grapard 1995; Hewitson 1999: ch. 5).

3 Due to various time travels in the movie, Professor Robinson is able to become the better father, or the one who takes time out of his busy schedule to listen to his son’s technological ideas. While the father/son relationship is in fact pivotal to the whole film, the father/daughter relationships, of which there are two, require only a couple of off-hand remarks.

4 Creed uses the phrase ‘monstrous-feminine’ in preference to ‘female monster’ to avoid the implication that the analysis of femininity as monstrous is a simple reversal of that of the male monster, since the “reasons why the monstrous-feminine horrifies her audience are quite different from the reasons why the male monster horrifies his audience” (1993: 3).

5 On phallocentrism, see Grosz (1989: ch. 4).
There are a number of well-known binary oppositions which support these less obvious constructions of sexual difference in traditional phallocentric terms, such as the head/heart = mind/body = science/emotion = reason/desire opposition.

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