

**FEMINIST  
PERSPECTIVES  
IN ARTISTIC PRODUCTIONS  
AND THEORIES OF ART**

**VI. EDITION**

2017

Author

**CHRISTINE BATTERSBY**

Title

**GENIUS AND CREATIVITY: REVISITING THE  
DEBATES**



**AZKUNA ZENTROA  
ALHÓNDIGA BILBAO**

Back in 1989, in *Gender and Genius*, I told the story of how I moved from being a young girl, forever reading books about the lives of the great composers, painters, writers and thinkers, to being a graduate student at University who worked on questions of aesthetics, but who failed to see how the question of sexual difference bears on the question of who gets counted as a genius—and who does not.<sup>1</sup> And I also describe how that gender-blindness suddenly fell away, once I started to examine the roots of our modern notion of genius, and uncovered the complex biases against women that have helped shaped modern understandings of human brilliance. Alas, women—and those from non-privileged racial and ethnic groupings—still find themselves all-too-frequently excluded from the “genius” category. These days, the debates about the cultural attainments of women carry on, even when the term “genius” is not explicitly used. Many of the same issues get displaced onto the language of “creativity” and “originality”, and other related terms which sound simply descriptive, but which incorporate within them the past history of assumptions about who is—and who is not—a “genius”.

All of the so-called “creative industries” conform to this model. In them, creativity and originality remain highly protected values which are selectively apportioned by an élite of critics, producers, directors, gallery owner, curators, journalists and other “creatives”. But these values are hardly ever treated in an entirely gender-neutral way—even though things have certainly improved in some areas of “creative labour” since I first started exploring this issue. Thus, things might still be difficult in many respects for women who paint, who draw, or who write novels or poetry; but things are even worse for women playwrights or composers, or for those who work in the fields of architecture, sculpture, popular and classical music, film, or in the computer and other digital arts.<sup>2</sup> Women are admired as great performers, but less often as truly creative founders of art traditions and artworks. And it is, above all, in popular culture that the notions of genius, of creativity and originality remain most potent, and seem often completely undisturbed by feminist insights.

In *Gender and Genius* I was concerned to address the problem of genius from a feminist perspective. But my work has been much criticised in certain quarters for not giving up on the notion of genius, and because I am interested in seeing how the concept of genius (which, of course, uses an elitist vocabulary) can be aligned with feminism (which is, at least in many of its forms, egalitarian in character). My simple response to my critics is to insist that it is simply not possible to banish a word and concept from everyday use—even though, I readily admit, this would be my preferred course of action. However much those in “the culture industries” might like to pretend that we live in an age which has moved “beyond” the concept of genius, in popular culture the notion of the genius still lives on. Thus, despite having written *Gender and Genius* back in the 1980s, I still receive emails thanking me for explaining something that still affects women (and men) today. And, interestingly, these “fan emails” do, these days, most often come from those working in popular music, in film or in the digital arts. As such, it still seems to me that what women need to be do is re-appropriate the concept of genius, not simply deconstruct it or eliminate it.

And here I should also add that my argument has often been misunderstood by those who suppose that, in *Gender and Genius*, I was putting forward a notion of genius that was based on biological essentialism. But that was never my claim. Deciding that a person is “male” or “female” has not always been done in an identical way in different cultures and at different points in history. We are not dealing here with straightforward biological “givens”, but instead with the categorisation of an embodied self, based on the way that that person’s body is perceived. This is different from decisions about what attributes, dispositions or qualities are “masculine” or “feminine”, since these refer to features that are, in our culture, more normally associated with male or female personality types or lifestyles, but which have no necessary link to that person’s assigned sex. The ways in which the female/male boundary is drawn has changed substantially since I wrote *Gender and Genius*, in particular with respect to our changing approach and openness to transgendered individuals. But that does not—yet—affect my basic point. What I argued in that book was that “genius” was described in terms that meant that the typical

---

<sup>1</sup> Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics*, London: The Women’s Press, 1989 and 1994.

<sup>2</sup> For a very recent example of some of the ways in which sexual discrimination in literature has improved in the last couple of years, at least in Ireland, see Anne Enright, “Diary”, *London Review of Books*, vol. 39, no. 18, 21 September 2017, pp. 33–35. Enright starts out by noting that, in 2015, the novelist Catherine Nichols found that she was eight and a half times more likely to get a manuscript looked at by a publisher if she changed her name to the male-sounding “George”. How long the improvements noted by Enright continue remains to be seen, since two years is not long enough to know that the improvement will last. See also Christine Battersby, “‘By a Woman Wrought’: Do We/Should We Still Care?”, in *Women and the Arts: Dialogues in Female Creativity*, ed. Diana V. Almeida, Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2013, pp.15-32.



genius was expected *both* to have the body and the developmental history of a *male*, *plus* supernormal characteristics (an excess of emotion, imagination, sensitivity and intuition) that are in our culture normally associated with *women*. Exhibitions showing female disadvantage in the arts, such as that staged by the Guerrilla Girls at the Whitechapel Gallery in London in 2016–2017, show that many of the same problems still remain. Women artists are still not making major inroads amongst the “geniuses” on display in the foremost European and American Art Museums.

Even if cultural snobs like to avoid the word “genius”, it does not take very long to track down usage of this term in present-day newspapers and books. Thus, in June 2017, the British newspaper, *The Daily Telegraph*, carried a story which was headlined, “Don’t call students ‘genius’ because word is associated with men”.<sup>3</sup> It focussed on some comments by Lucy Delap, a lecturer in British history at Cambridge University, who had argued that “words like ‘flair’, ‘brilliance’ and ‘genius’” are best avoided by those assessing student examination papers, because “Some of those words, in particular genius, have a very long intellectual history where it has long been associated with qualities culturally assumed to be male”. Consistent with its reputation for being a right-wing newspaper, comments on this article by the readers of *The Telegraph* were overwhelmingly hostile to the “pompous, preposterous, flatulent drivel” uttered by Lucy Delap.<sup>4</sup> One pseudonymous commentator even took the trouble to post a link to an article by the psychologist, Richard Lynn, which had been published in the *Daily Mail*—a more downmarket right-wing newspaper—seven years earlier.<sup>5</sup> Here Lynn purported to “prove” that adult women had less potential for genius than have males, claiming that “at the near-genius level (an IQ of 145), brilliant men outnumber brilliant women by 8 to one. That’s statistics, not sexism.”<sup>6</sup>

Those unfamiliar with the history of the term “genius” might be extremely puzzled that anybody might define genius in terms of the possession of a very high IQ. But if we look back at the history of writings on genius, we discover that there are at least five different traditions of defining this concept, and that the differing understandings of the term get muddled up. In addition, there are two dominant frameworks for thinking about creativity in western European and anglophone cultures, and these intersect with the five different perspectives on “genius”. In this paper, I will sketch in this history, and point to a few of the current debates. Some of the most recent developments link to ongoing scientific debates about the role of genetics in testing for genius, and whether there is a specific “genius gene”. I can only deal with this issue very briefly here, as I point to the emerging field of epigenetics. Instead, I will concentrate mainly on the complex history that links genius to models of creativity, and also to accounts of sexual difference and *procreativity*.

I will start by outlining the two dominant traditions of understanding creativity in European intellectual history. The first tradition derives from ancient Greece (via ancient Rome). The Greeks regarded a creator god or spirit as being like an architect who imposes “form”—i.e. a distinctive and formal pattern or structure—on unformed and chaotic material. The Greeks named this formative force *logos*: a term that is used frequently in the Greek Biblical texts. Most famously translated into English as “Word”—as in the opening verse of the Gospel of St John (“In the beginning was the Word”)—*logos* was also linked to early Greek understandings of reproduction, in particular to the shaping power that was supposed to be inherent in the male seed.<sup>7</sup> Ancient Greek philosophers and physicians believed that what females contribute to the reproductive process is matter (*hyle*), but matter was regarded as uncontained and disorderly until the procreative power of the male seed provided it with its distinctive identity or essence. Women’s bodies were regarded as colder and wetter—and hence less

<sup>3</sup> Camilla Turner, “Don’t call students ‘genius’ because word is associated with men, Cambridge lecturers told”, *The Daily Telegraph*, 12 June 2017, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/2017/06/12/cambridge-university-examiners-told-avoid-using-words-like-flair/> [accessed 19 July 2017]. The story originated in an interview with Lucy Delap on BBC Radio 4 on June 12 2017, and then featured on numerous news channels in the UK, in the USA and also in India. See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-40259449>, 13 June 2017, and <https://www.varsity.co.uk/news/13288>, 21 June 2017 [both accessed 17 July 2017].

<sup>4</sup> Comment by David Carpenter, *The Telegraph*, *loc. cit.*, posted 13 June 2017 [accessed 28 July 2017].

<sup>5</sup> Comment by “G W F Hegel”, *loc. cit.*, posted 13 June 2017 [accessed 28 July 2017].

<sup>6</sup> Richard Lynn, “Sorry, men ARE more brainy than women (and more stupid too!) It’s a simple scientific fact, says one of Britain’s top dons”, 8 May 2010, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-1274952/Men-ARE-brainy-women-says-scientist-Professor-Richard-Lynn.html> [accessed 17 July 2017].

<sup>7</sup> In New Testament Greek, there is another Greek term—*ktizō*, from *ktisis*—which is sometimes translated as “create”. However, “*ktizō*” is used among the Greeks to mean the foundation of a place, a city, or a colony, and does not mean creation out of nothing. *Ktisis* means “To make habitable to people, a place, region [or] Island” and, as such, is more like settlement or domestication than our modern notion of creation. Arnold Kennedy, “The Two Most Misapplied Verses in the New Testament”, [http://www.christianidentityministries.com/kennedy/Two\\_Misapplied\\_Verses.pdf](http://www.christianidentityministries.com/kennedy/Two_Misapplied_Verses.pdf) [accessed 27 November 2017].



perfect—than those of the men, with menstruation treated as evidence of women’s inability to refine blood and other bodily fluids to form active seed. The view that women lacked their own formative force at a biological level remained hugely influential in Europe until the eighteenth century, and beyond. And it was this model of a division of reproductive labour—male as the shaper/the female as shaped—that also fed into models of artistic production and scientific invention.<sup>8</sup>

There is no word in ancient Greek that is the equivalent to our notion of artistic creation. The closest term is “*poiein*” (“to make”), but this was primarily restricted to *poiesis* (poetry), and the poet was often treated as a kind of seer.<sup>9</sup> The other art forms were described in much more mundane terms, as crafts that involved the mere copying of objects, events or attributes. And the greatest artists were also seen as providing an imitation of the perfect forms, ideals or essences which underlie appearances, and that actual physical nature struggles to express.<sup>10</sup> As far as artistic creation is concerned, the Romans followed the Greeks in treating the artist as a craftsman who holds a mirror up to nature as well as to the underlying universals. On this model of creative labour, self-expression, originality and authenticity were not highly valued, and what mattered instead was “talent” or “giftedness” (in Latin, *ingenium*) and “ease” of execution. Part of the skill of the writer or artist involved distinguishing between essential and accidental qualities of persons or objects, and also between natural types or kinds. This is also true of neoclassicism: the view of artistic creation that dominated between the Renaissance and the mid-eighteenth century.<sup>11</sup> And this was tough for women, since on this model the creative power—like the procreative power—was supposed to originate in the males. Foggy clouds of vapours were supposed to rise up from women’s (cold and wet) wombs, and obstruct their view of the perfect forms concealed behind appearances. On the art-as-mirror model of creativity, women were dismissed as being like clouded looking-glasses: their *biological* reproductive functions interfered with the capacity for *spiritual* reproduction that the great artist requires.

The second model of creativity took hold in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century; but it has its roots in the Hebrew scriptures which were translated in ways that suggested God creates matter itself, as well as simply acting as an architect who shapes pre-existent matter. Thus there is a Hebrew word—*bārā*—which has been translated as “create” in this strong sense of creating something out of nothing.<sup>12</sup> In the Old Testament this term is applied only to the creations of Yahweh: the omnipotent God who is also called “I AM that I AM”. Yahweh is the creator of the universe: he creates every aspect of the material world, including light, the heavens and, in Exodus 3:13–14, it is even suggested that he creates himself through thinking himself into existence. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, numerous authors and artists appealed to the Old Testament formulations as they broke away from neoclassicism, and privileged a mode of artistic creation that privileged self-expression, originality, authenticity and, indeed, “genius”.

By the end of the eighteenth century the dominant metaphors for describing creation had begun to shift. For the neoclassicists, the ideal artist held a mirror up to nature; but the Romantics compared the artist or writer to a lamp which brings light into darkness in much the same way as God created light out of nothing.<sup>13</sup> Now what was required was a mind or spirit that illuminates the world in a unique and individualised way. Thus, for example, in Chapter XIII of *Biographia Literaria*, the English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge linked creation

<sup>8</sup> This is dealt with more fully in *Gender and Genius*, especially chapters 3 and 6. For the extension of this model into alchemy see also chapter 6 of Christine Battersby, *The Sublime, Terror and Human Difference*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> See Plato’s *Phaedrus* for the distinction between poetry and the other arts, especially 245A which describes lyric poetry as a mode of “possession or madness” that comes from the gods. See Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. R. Hackforth, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972, p. 57.

<sup>10</sup> The treatment of painting as imitation of objects that themselves imitate the perfect underlying forms of entities is argued at length in Book X of Plato’s *Republic* (595–605). However, here Socrates also argues that even poetry involves mere imitation, not true making. See, Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Desmond Lee, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1985, pp. 421–435.

<sup>11</sup> See M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* [1953], Oxford University Press, 1973.

<sup>12</sup> Debates about the proper translation of the term *bārā* continue to this day. Thus, some scholars have argued that what the Hebrew God does is assign functionality to certain powers or entities (such as light, darkness, the heavens, the earth, or creatures of the sea or land), rather than create matter out of nothing. See John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009, “Proposition 3”. Whatever the rights and wrongs of this argument, it is clear that it was the more general understanding of *bārā* as creating matter out of nothing that impacted on models of artistic creativity and on theories of genius.

<sup>13</sup> Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, ch. 3.



to the imagination, but made a distinction between two types of imagination: the primary (productive) imagination, and the distinctly inferior secondary imagination which he calls “fancy” or reproductive imagination. He says: “The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM.”<sup>14</sup> Numerous later writers and artists would echo Coleridge, including, in the visual arts, abstract expressionists such as Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman and Adolph Gottlieb. Together, they explicitly claim that the “world of imagination is fancy-free and violently opposed to common sense” as they also describe their own artistic practice as opening up the imagination in ways that force “the spectator to see the world our way—not their way”.<sup>15</sup>

Modernists, like the Romantics before them, tended to claim that the uniqueness of the genius’s individuality—his “I am”—is reflected in every facet of his artwork, and indeed throughout his whole *oeuvre*. I deliberately use the male pronoun here, since on the creating-something-out-of-nothing model of artistic endeavour, women artists and writers once again lost out. It was claimed that women’s *reproductive* physiology meant they were unable to develop the kind of individuality that artistic *production* required. Males, it seems, could transcend their biology; but women could not. Women artists were treated as lacking the kind of spiritual “I AM” that was deemed necessary for a distinctive body of work, for genius, or for an *oeuvre*.

I now want to move on to the five different understanding of the concept of genius that remain current today. For the first of the five senses, we need to go back once again to the ancient Romans, and to their system of religious observances. This is where we first come across the Latin word “*genius*”, as opposed to the Latin term for talent or defining character (*ingenium*) with which it was often confused in later texts on medicine, philosophy and also art. In ancient Rome, the male family clan was called the *gens*, and the *genius* was the divine aspect of maleness that was passed down from the *paterfamilias* to his male sons and heirs. The *genius* was also the spirit that watched over the lands of the male family clan. It was the *genius* who was honoured on the birthday of the *paterfamilias*, and it was the *Genius* of the Roman Emperor who was worshipped as a God, once Rome moved from being a Republic to become an Imperial State.<sup>16</sup>

We still have remnants of this ancient understanding of genius in contemporary art theory, and quite a few 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>-century artists, architects and urban planners continue to ground their practice on an appeal to the “*genius loci*” or “genius of place”.<sup>17</sup> There is, in principle, nothing wrong with this. However, traditionally, the *genius loci* was linked to lines of patrilineal inheritance, patrilocality and also to patriarchal power. Whenever theorists or artists rely on such a notion, they need to be peculiarly aware of its capacity to write out of history matrilineal lines of cultural inheritance. The tendency to link the “spirit of place” with the traditions of male creators, who are regarded as embodying the essence of a culture, ethnicity or nation, means that all too often that lesson has not been learnt.

The second sense of “genius” is much more commonplace, and involves treating a genius as a personality-type: often, indeed, an “outsider” who is near to madness. On this understanding of the term, there is a huge gulf between “mere” talent and genius. The 19<sup>th</sup>-century German philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer, is amongst those who viewed genius in this way. For him, a talented individual can perform “more rapidly and accurately” than ordinary human beings; but “the genius perceives a world different from them all”.<sup>18</sup> It is because the

<sup>14</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge *Biographia Literaria*, eds James Engell and W. Jackson Bate. Reprint of Number 7 of *The Collected Works*. 2 vols in 1. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983.

<sup>15</sup> Adolph Gottlieb, Mark Rothko with Barnett Newman, “Statement” [13 June 1943]. in *Art in Theory, 1900–1990*, eds Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, Oxford: Blackwell, 1992, p. 562.

<sup>16</sup> Battersby, *Gender and Genius*, chapter 6.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Isis Brook, “Can ‘Spirit of Place’ be a guide to Ethical Building?”, in *Ethics and the Built Environment*, ed. W. Fox, London: Routledge, 2000, pp. 139–151; C. Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*, New York, Rizzoli, 1980; Gunilla Jivén and Peter J. Larkham, “Sense of Place, Authenticity and Character: A Commentary”, in *Journal of Urban Design*, 2003, Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 67–81; Stefan Behnisch, “Genius Loci: inspiring a new international architecture”, BT Lectures, Nov 10, 2015, and <http://www.placeness.com/spirit-of-place/genius-loci/> [accessed 27 November 2017].

<sup>18</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* (1819/1844), trans. E.F. J. Payne, New York: Dover Publications, 1966, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. II, p. 376.



genius inhabits an entirely different kind of reality, Schopenhauer argues, that so many geniuses find themselves locked up in madhouses.<sup>19</sup> Like many others who regard genius as a beneficial mode of illness, Schopenhauer explicitly asserts that “Women can have remarkable talent, but not genius”.<sup>20</sup> This is, he says, because women are too “subjective”; but others in this tradition have used other excuses to deny women entrance to this élite.

Schopenhauer was writing in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; but this way of regarding genius is still current today. We can see this, for example, in an article written by Scarlet Cheng in the *Los Angeles Times* in 2001, “Shhh, Mad Genius at Work”.<sup>21</sup> Cheng is trying to understand why films—especially Hollywood films—about great artists tend to be so bad. She explains that Americans are inclined to see artists either as mad geniuses or as frauds, and she argues that this is reflected both in the artists that are picked as subjects for films (Van Gogh, Jackson Pollock, Francis Bacon, Salvador Dali) and also in terms of the way in which the artists are portrayed, as inspired, crazy or subject to mystic insights which resist rational explanation. On this model, the genius is crazy; and the genius is also supposed to create only in a state of inspiration, in a kind of frenzy that leads him to a complete surrender ego and conscious control. Cheng picks out a 1965 film by Carol Reed, “The Agony and the Ecstasy”, to illustrate this stereotype of genius. In it, Michelangelo

receives his inspiration for the Sistine Chapel akin to the way Moses ... received the Ten Commandments in the film of that name. Standing atop a mountain, the artist sees the clouds unroll before him into the shapes of God and Adam reaching out to one another by their forefingers—thus the source of the central image of his masterpiece.<sup>22</sup>

As Cheng also points out, both Michelangelo and Moses were played by the same actor, Charlton Heston—albeit in two different Hollywood films—and this overlap also heightens the sense that the genius is a godlike figure who receives his or her inspiration from God or other divine or mystic forces.

Although there is, in principle, no reason why the inspired and crazy genius figure might not be a woman, in both popular and high culture it is rare to find a great woman artist portrayed in these terms. And this is, in part, because this account tends to fuse with a third model of genius which emphasises the role of *male* sexual energies in the production of great art works. This third sense of genius draws on what I call “the virility theory of creativity” which appeals to an underlying physiological reason for the ability of the unconscious to take over the consciousness of an artist in a way that is artistically productive. On this model, what is explicitly claimed is that is *male* sexual energies that are sublimated in the production of great artistic—or also scientific or mathematical—inventions. Freud has been a special influence here. Thus, for Freud, the great artist only becomes great insofar as his curiosity is first aroused in childhood through the sexual instinct, and then that sexual energy is redirected into his work which become “to some extent compulsive and a substitute for sexual energy”.<sup>23</sup> For Freud, it is Leonardo da Vinci who is the paradigm of genius, and it is his sublimated sexual libido (or energy) that serves as the “core” of Leonardo’s nature and is hence the “secret” of his genius.<sup>24</sup> For Freud, genius involves a kind of “latent” or “ideal (sublimated) homosexuality”, but his analysis only applies in the case of the male sex.<sup>25</sup>

Famously, in his *Introductory Lectures to Psychoanalysis*, Freud argues that culture comes from the re-direction of the instinctive forces, especially sexual drives, which are “sublimated (*sublimiert*)”—that is to say, they are diverted from their sexual aims and directed to

<sup>19</sup> Schopenhauer, *loc. cit.*, vol. I, p. 191

<sup>20</sup> Schopenhauer, *loc. cit.* vol. II, p. 392.

<sup>21</sup> Scarlet Cheng, “Shhh, Mad Genius at Work”, *Los Angeles Times*, February 11, 2001, <http://articles.latimes.com/2001/feb/11/entertainment/ca-23823> [accessed 27 July 2017]. Cheng quotes Lynn Zelevansky, curator of modern and contemporary art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, in support of her claims.

<sup>22</sup> Scarlet Cheng, *loc. cit.* [accessed 27 July 2017].

<sup>23</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Leonardo and the Memory of his Childhood” (1910), in *Sigmund Freud: Art & Literature*, vol. 14 in The Penguin Freud Library, p. 170.

<sup>24</sup> Freud, “Leonardo”, p. 151.

<sup>25</sup> Freud, “Leonardo”, p. 170 and see his comments on Dostoevsky’s “repressed homosexuality” in “Dostoevsky and Parricide” (1928), vol. 14 in The Penguin Freud Library, p. 449.



others that are socially higher and no longer sexual”.<sup>26</sup> However, in his lecture on “Femininity” (*Weiblichkeit*), Freud also claims that women have “less capacity for sublimating their instincts than men”.<sup>27</sup> From the conjunction of these two claims, it follows that the Freudian woman will be psychically unsuited for the tasks of cultural production as opposed to those of biological reproduction. Women’s “shame” produces their one real cultural achievement (weaving), Freud says, and even this is not ascribed to sublimation (and hence to genius), but to the imitation of nature (and hence to craft). He thus asserts,

Shame, which is considered to be a feminine achievement *par excellence* [...] has as its purpose, we believe, concealment of genital deficiency. [...] It seems that women have made few contributions to the discoveries and inventions in the history of civilization; there is, however, one technique which they may have invented — that of plaiting and weaving. If that is so, we should be tempted to guess the unconscious motive for the achievement. Nature herself would seem to have given the model which this achievement imitates by causing the growth at maturity of the pubic hair that conceals the genitals. The step that remained to be taken lay in making the threads adhere to one another, while on the body they stick into the skin and are only matted together.<sup>28</sup>

Freud’s women remain mere copyists. They are, at best, crafts-people, and they lack the bodily energies and drives that can “sublime” sexual energies into art.

Such a notion is not new to Freud and can be traced back to Romantic writers, such as Schopenhauer who was a direct influence on Freud. Samuel Taylor Coleridge also fits with this model. He might have claimed that “a great mind must be androgynous”, but he certainly did not mean by this that the man of genius has the body of a female.<sup>29</sup> And when he talks about “certain secretions [which] must be taken up again into the circulation, and be again and again re-secreted” in order to produce great works of art, we can be sure that it was not the retention of female semen that he was thinking about.<sup>30</sup> Many of the Romantic writers appropriated the medieval and Renaissance language of alchemy which drew a distinction between androgyny, as the state of sublimed and heated materiality, and hermaphroditism which is neither male nor female, and which is unproductive in terms of the alchemists’ ideal of converting base matter to gold.<sup>31</sup> For Coleridge, the androgynous genius required a *male* body, but also a *feminine* mind. By contrast, women of genius tended to be seen as sterile hermaphrodites. Thus, by the end of the nineteenth century, it had become a cliché to assert with Cesare Lombroso in *The Man of Genius*: “there are no women of genius; the women of genius are men”.<sup>32</sup> In *Gender and Genius* I give more recent examples of writers and artists who pick up and rework the virility theory of creativity. The list includes Norman Mailer, Wallace Stevens, Picasso, amongst many others. For all of these writers and artists—as also for Freud—the genius was, in effect, a “feminine” or “supernormal” male. By contrast, women of genius were simply regarded as oddities, and as being unsexed by their capacity to create. It is this double-bind that made it so difficult for women to position themselves, and be seen by others, as geniuses—and that still seems to me to be broadly true today.

I now want to consider the fourth sense of the term “genius”, and this involves engaging with a quite different tradition of theorising greatness. On this model, genius is understood as a kind of *talent*—in stark opposition to Schopenhauer’s claim that talent and genius

<sup>26</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis”, in *The Pelican Freud Library*, vol. 1, trans. J. Stacey, Harmondsworth 1974, lecture 1, pp. 39–49, pp. 47–48.

<sup>27</sup> S. Freud, “Femininity, Lecture 33” in “New Introductory Lectures of Psychoanalysis” in *The Essentials of Psychoanalysis*, ed. A. Freud, trans. J. Stacey, Harmondsworth 1986, p. 432.

<sup>28</sup> Freud, “Femininity”, p.430.

<sup>29</sup> S. T. Coleridge, *Specimens of the Table Talk of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, London: J. Murray, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., 1851, p. 199 (1 September 1832), <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=njp.32101068581386;view=1up;seq=237>

<sup>30</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*. (1817), ed. Nigel Leask, London: J. M. Dent, 1997, ch 11, fn.45. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/6081/6081-h/6081-h.htm#linknote-45>

<sup>31</sup> See Chapter 6 of Battersby, *The Sublime, Terror and Human Difference*, for more detail on the alchemical texts.

<sup>32</sup> Cesare Lombroso, *The Man of Genius* [1863], trans. from revised ed., London: Scott, 1891, p. 138. Lombroso takes this phrase from Edmond de Goncourt et Jules de Goncourt, *Les hommes de lettres* (1860), and uses it as a motto.



are completely opposed. This was how Richard Lynn was using the term “genius”, in the piece published in the *Daily Mail* which I referred to early on in this paper. There, Lynn could be seen defining genius in terms of an IQ above 145. Genius in this sense is potentially quantifiable, and the emphasis is on “facts” that are supposedly objective, and therefore measurable in accordance with IQ tests, or in terms of other tests for a “genius quota”. Interestingly, Burt and Terman who developed the first IQ tests in the US supposed that what they were measuring was genius. Their studies focused on a group of 1000 children with IQs above 135 whose progress was to be followed throughout their lives. The first of their studies, called the *Genetic Studies of Genius*, was published in 1925, and it was only much later—in 1954—that they reluctantly concluded that “genius” was the wrong word to have used, opting instead for the word “giftedness”.<sup>33</sup> Even some supporters of this talent-based approach to the measurement of giftedness recognise its drawbacks, especially in terms of trying to compensate for the sexual, racial and environmental biases in the selection and assessment of the participants. Thus, as one of the founder of an important New York centre for gifted children, remarks:

“A high test score tells you only that a person has high ability and is a good match for that particular test at that point in time.... A low test score tells you practically nothing, ... because many factors can depress students’ performance, including their cultural backgrounds and how comfortable they are with taking high-stakes tests.”<sup>34</sup>

Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this fourth model of genius was taken up by the eugenicists, and those who wanted to breed a better type of human. The German and Italian fascists were amongst those who adopted this goal, and this meant that, after the end of World War II, eugenics was regarded with deep suspicion. However, the emergence of the Human Genome Project—which ran from 1990 to 2003—has led to a renewed interest in eugenics, including the question of whether there is a “gene for genius” or for creativity. The Genome Project set out to map the complete sequence of the human DNA, and that map has now been declared complete. However, debates about its implications still carry on, especially in popular science and also in medicine, where the question is whether scientists and doctors should assist parents in the breeding of so-called “designer babies”. This is particularly problematic in that the genetic data was, from the start, used to argue that women—and people of certain racial groups—cannot be geniuses.<sup>35</sup>

Interestingly, it turns out that there is an overlap between the Latin term “*genius*” and the much more recent concept of a “gene”, insofar as both are rooted in the Roman notion of the male family clan, or *gens*. For the Romans, as for the Greeks, family characteristics were passed down the male line, via the *gens*. Of course, the fact that we now understand that children inherit half of their genetic inheritance from their mothers has scrambled the picture. But many in this tradition cling to the distinctly old-fashioned notion that the “genius gene” is somehow bound up with maleness. Thus, in *Genius Genes: How Asperger’s Talents Changed the World* (2007), Michael Fitzgerald and Brendan O’Brien explicitly argue that it is statistically unlikely that women possess the “genius gene”.<sup>36</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, the question about whether a “genius gene” exists has also been muddied by the fact that the traditions of regarding genius as a kind of talent and treating genius as a type of madness have been mixed up in the literature, especially in popular science books on giftedness and genius. Thus, here we see that Fitzgerald and O’Brien have aligned genius with a kind of mental abnormality—Asperger’s Syndrome—that gives rise to particular talents, not with the simple measurement of an IQ above 145 that Lynn made reference to in his article in the *Daily Mail*.

<sup>33</sup> See *Gender and Genius*, chapter 13, for a more extended discussion of early attempts to measure genius.

<sup>34</sup> This is a quote from Dona Matthews who co-founded the “Center for Gifted Studies and Education” at Hunter College, New York. See Tom Clynes, “How to Raise a Genius: Lessons from a 45-year study of Super-Smart Children”, *Nature News*, London, Nature Publishing Group, September 7, 2016, <http://www.nature.com/news/how-to-raise-a-genius-lessons-from-a-45-year-study-of-super-smart-children-1.20537> [accessed 2 August 2017]

<sup>35</sup> Thus, for example, Charles Murray is amongst those who link genius—defined in this tradition in terms of high intelligence—to those with Caucasian racial characteristics. See Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray, *The Bell Curve*, New York: Free Press, 1994. Murray continues to speak and to write on this topic today. His findings have been subject to rigorous criticism and also protest. See Richard E. Nisbett, Joshua Aronson and Clancy Blair, et al, “Intelligence: New Findings and Theoretical Developments”, *American Psychologist*, February–March 2012, Vol. 67, No. 2, Feb–March 2012, <https://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/releases/amp-67-2-130.pdf> [accessed 2 August 2017]. See also “Bell Curve author Charles Murray speaks out after speech cut short by protests”, *The Guardian*, 6 March 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/mar/06/bell-curve-author-charles-murray-speaks-out-after-speech-cut-short-by-protests> [accessed 4 September 2017].

<sup>36</sup> Michael Fitzgerald and Brendan O’Brien, *Genius Genes: How Asperger’s Talents Changed the World*, Shawnee Mission, KA: Autism Asperger Publishing Co, 2007, pp. x, 8–9, 117,





Fortunately, not everyone engaging in this type of research is so gender-blind. In *The Genius in All of Us* (2010), for example, David Shenk argues against the sexual division of talent, as well as against the hypothesis that genius is genetically determined.<sup>37</sup> Instead, Shenk claims that it is the environment that determines which aspects of one's genetic inheritance are switched on or off. Thus, Shenk argues that although we've all been taught from the time of Galton and beyond that we inherit many of our traits straight from our parents' DNA in a straightforwardly top-down way, in recent years, these early notions about heredity have been brought into question. Shenk quotes geneticists Eva Jablonka and Marion Lamb who argue that, "The gene cannot be seen as an autonomous unit—as a particular stretch of DNA which always produces the same effect."<sup>38</sup> Like Jablonka and Lamb, Shenk is adopting what is called the *epigenetic* approach to genius. Epigenetics is not an uncontroversial view, but it has been growing in acceptance in the last decades, partly as a way of explaining some unexpected experimental results which date back to the 1950s. Epigenetics has been given traction by the discovery that there are many less genes than was supposed when scientists started mapping the human genome around the turn of the millennium. We now know that humans have a mere 30,000 to 40,000 genes; and this is not that many, given that even a fruit fly has 13,600 genes. These new figures seem to bear out the arguments of those who claim that while a single defective gene can be identified as the cause of a disease or of dysfunctional behaviour, it is not the case that for each individual talent or propensity there is also a single gene that causes it.

Those in the epigenetic camp assert that genes are not, as was originally thought, blueprints with fixed instructions for individual properties or features (such as creativity or "genius"). Instead, genes are more like volume knobs and switches on a giant control board. Many of those knobs and switches can be turned on and off at any time by multiple factors, and the resultant process is what gets called "gene expression". As the biologist Patrick Bateson puts it,

The individual animal starts its life with the capacity to develop in a number of distinctly different ways. Like a jukebox, the individual has the potential to play a number of different developmental tunes. But during the course of its life it plays only one tune. The particular developmental tune it does play is selected by a feature of the environment in which the individual is growing up. ... Furthermore, the particular developmental tune that is selected from the developmental jukebox is adapted to the conditions in which it is played.<sup>39</sup>

According to Bateson, this adaptive process starts in the womb, but then carries on right through life, and up until death. As such, an epigenetic approach would seem to imply that it is a mistake to link one sex, or any particular ethnicity, with a gene or set of genes for genius or for creativity.

I now want to turn to the fifth and final understanding of the term "genius", and to a tradition of theorising genius that can be traced back to the work of the philosopher Immanuel Kant who published his *Critique of Judgment* in 1790. What is distinctive about Kant's approach is that it does not treat an aesthetic judgment about art as purely descriptive. Thus, to say that something is beautiful, sublime or a product of genius is not simply to express a personal preference. It is instead to make a claim about how others *ought to* respond to the object in question. Recognising that originality and newness is necessary (but not sufficient) for genius, and that the genius *ought to* be famous (even when he is not), Kant defines genius as "the talent (or natural gift) which gives the rule to art"<sup>40</sup>. The "genius" is the one who provides future directions for art of a particular genre or type. There is a descriptive element to genius (it is linked with talent), but genius is *more than* just talent. Genius provides a means of *breakthrough*, a direction in which art *ought to go*. To claim that somebody is a genius is not simply to describe, it is to *prescribe, evaluate* and assess art in terms of future directions that *ought to be* opened up by the individual's artistic, scientific or other cultural achievements.

<sup>37</sup> David Shenk, *The Genius in All of Us: Why Everything You have been Told about Genetics, Talent and Intelligence is Wrong*, London: Icon Books, 2010, pp. 127–28, 274–75.

<sup>38</sup> Shenk, *loc. cit.*, p. 12; ee also Eva Jablonka and Marion Lamb, *Evolution in Four Dimensions*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, revised ed., 2014, p. 7.

<sup>39</sup> Patrick Bateson, "Behavioural Development and Darwinian Evolution", in *Cycles of Contingency*, eds Susan Oyama, Russell D. Gray and Paul E. Griffiths, Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2003, p. 153.

<sup>40</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement* [1790], trans. J. H. Bernard, New York: Hafner, 1951, § 46, p. 150



Kant had an 18th-century complacency in terms of his view of human nature. He supposed that the most highly developed humans have the same sensory and cognitive powers, and that they will therefore ultimately agree about what gives aesthetic pleasure, and also about genius. But Kant also supposed that it is males who originate in Northern Europe who have the most finely tuned faculties and reasoning powers. Thus, in his anthropological writings he makes a number of quite explicit comments on the inferiority of women, and also about most (but not all) non-European races.<sup>41</sup> Kant denies women the capacity for genius, but there is nevertheless merit in his approach, if we can cut away his implicit misogyny, along with his undoubted racism. For Kant, our judgments about genius are grounded in features of the artworks, and centre round the question of whether a work brings into existence a novel and radical way of seeing, hearing and imagining. For Kant, to call somebody a genius is not simply a matter of saying “I like his or her work!”

In *Gender and Genius* I draw on this modified type of Kantianism, arguing that this is the understanding of genius that is most useful for feminists, even if we must also recognise that not all humans have the same sensibilities, and that the multiple traditions of art cannot all be aligned onto a single graph of excellence. A genius in this fifth sense is (a) a person whose work marks—or *should* mark—the boundaries between the old and new ways within a particular tradition; and (b) a person whose work is judged to have lasting value. I then also set out to draw attention to women artists whose achievements have been overlooked, along with the matrilineal lines of influence that have been screened out of cultural history, but which can suddenly become visible or audible as our expectations and assumptions begin to shift. Insofar as some notion of genius continues to operate in our culture (as it most certainly does), it’s appropriate to extend its scope to include *women*, as well as those in marginalised races, ethnicities and locations, along with the many art-forms and “crafts” that are sidelined by artistic institutions and taste-shapers. We need to shake off the remnants of a history that can only understand artistic excellence through lines of tradition that privilege an élite of males.

---

<sup>41</sup> See Battersby, *The Sublime, Terror and Human Difference*, especially chapters 3 and 4.

