

## #WICKEDARY

---

### #MARYDALY #GYNERGY #SADOCRACY

If any single publication could stand as a clarion call for this issue, it would be the bizarre and visionary book *Websters' First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language*, first published in 1987. "Conjured" (instead of "written") by the radical lesbian feminist theologian Mary Daly, the volume announces itself as a "metadictionary" excavating "webs of words that are hidden in patriarchal discourses." "Passed off in academentia as authoritative and original," these sources, the book wagers, "contain fragments of and clues to our own stolen heritage" (Daly/Caputi/Rakusin 1987: xxii–xxiii). Daly's charge is as ambitious as it is zany; at stake are not only patriarchal discourses, but language itself as the master discourse of power, implemented through the authoritative voice of standard dictionaries (the "Websters" in her title appropriates one of these "dick-tionaries," as she calls them). Given that the book is virtually untranslatable, with purposeful misspellings and invented words ("academentia" is one of them), this contribution seeks to close that gap by offering a view onto Daly's counter-discourse. It seeks, furthermore, to underscore the essential *translatability* of the project's goal, which Daly emphasizes when she invites "Wild women of other tribes and tongues to weave their own Wickedaries," citing even the "suburb example" of "the New Intergalactic German Word *Hexikon*," meaning "Witches' Lexicon" which was "Dis-covered by Erika Wisselinck" – the German translator of Daly's *Pure Lust* (ibid.: xx).

— What you as the Reader will have already noticed is Daly's fantastic disregard for linguistic convention, a strategy that characterizes her book (and philosophical project more broadly). The basic premise here is that any feminist project will have to take a good hard look at our working language – and recognize that it is language that both perpetuates patriarchy and holds the seeds of its undoing. Daly experiments with this undoing through various strategies: irregular capitalization, which conforms "to meaning rather than standard usage" (with meanings, of course, being radically redefined by the *Wickedary* itself) as well as unconventional spelling: thus *Gyn/Ecology*, to take one example, "is created by a slash in the old word *gynecology*, an oppressive word used to designate a gynocidal branch of murderous modern medicine" (ibid.: xxi, 14). Daly also harnesses etymology: the word *Webster*,

“Dis-covered by Judy Grahn,” Daly writes, is derived from the Old English *webbstre* for “female weaver” and had served as a pivotal English surname in standardizing the language (the orator Daniel Webster and the dictionary listings of Merriam-Webster as prime examples); in the *Wickedary*, the term *Webster* is expropriated for another project, redefined as “a woman whose occupation is to Weave, esp. a Weaver of Words and Word-Webs” (ibid.: 178). Playing with these roots as well as the “ontological Shapeshifting of words” (“spelling,” for instance, becomes collapsed with “the casting of Spells”), Daly also addresses discursive conventions (ibid.: 14). One of these will be especially familiar to German-speaking readers: “the continual white noise of the patriarchal Passive Voice—the noise/noose that keeps women passive,” a ploy to “disguise *who* are the agents of androcracy’s atrocities” (ibid.: 44).

— Even as a native English speaker, I needed more than one dictionary handy to read Daly’s magisterial metatext. Much of its imaginative power is in the book’s core section, a counter-dictionary composed “in cahoots” with the feminist cultural theorist Jane Caputi, which offers new definitions of established words (“patriarchy” and “Abecedarian”, following her spelling) as well as new words entirely (“Archimage” and “sadosociety”). The word *Wickedary* is an example of the latter category. The term is derived from the adjective *wicked*, which can be traced to the same Indo-European root (*weik-*) as *wicce*, the Old English word meaning Witch; as such, “the Weaving of the Wickedary,” Daly writes, “is an Originally Sinful Act for it questions and challenges the old saws/laws of the Lecherous State” (ibid.: xiii). While reading, I was reminded of Adorno’s charge in *Minima Moralia* (itself a lexicon of a different kind) that part of what is so destructive about the society “bent on the destruction of all Life” (to draw from Daly’s entry for “patriarchy”) is its petrifying effect on language, reducing all expression to sound bites, ad slogans, truncated thought, microblogging à la Twitter – all while maintaining – to borrow from Jodi Dean’s communicative capitalism – the fantasy of infinitely expanded articulation.

— The *Wickedary*, by contrast, offers fantasy of another kind. It testifies to the incredible imaginative force behind #feminism – powerful enough to invent new languages and subjects (which she calls “inhabitants of the Background...Hags and Nags, Gorgons and Grimalkins, together with other Friends and Familiars”) – and it is no coincidence that the work borders on feminist science fiction (ibid.: 102). It is an “Intergalactic project,” “an expression of Star-Lust, of seeking and finding Astral dimensions,

Cosmic connections,” all while acknowledging that “standard English is pathetically inadequate and even Wicked English is far from sufficient” (ibid.: xx). It proposes that new worlds, “Other Wicked Dreams” besides its own, will have to be spun, provisionally tested, and daringly asserted in the face of all convention – and that the diametric opposite of this “Courage to Sin” is fear – patriarchy at its purist, control perfected under the sign of ‘safety for yourself and others’ (ibid.: 69). The book is a call to arms for linguistic empowerment and we would do ourselves a favor to take it seriously.

// References

Daly, Mary (1986): *Reine Lust: Elemental-feministische Philosophie*. Trans. Erika Wisselink. Munich, Verlag Frauenoffensive.

Daly, Mary / Caputi, Jane / Rakusin, Sudie (1987): *Websters' First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language*. San Francisco, Harper Collins.

// About the Author

Jordan Troeller is an art historian of modern and contemporary art, and postdoctoral researcher at the Freie Universität Berlin. A graduate of the University of California, Berkeley, and Harvard University, she has held teaching positions at the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz. Her research has appeared in *Hyperallergic*, *October*, and *Women's Art Journal*, among other publications. An article on motherhood and artistic creation is forthcoming in *kritische berichte*.

// FKW is supported by the Mariann Steegmann Institute and Cultural Critique / Cultural Analysis in the Arts ZHdK

Sigrid Adorf / Kerstin Brandes / Edith Futscher / Kathrin Heinz / Marietta Kesting / Julia Noah Munier / Mona Schieren / Kea Wienand / Anja Zimmermann // [www.fkw-journal.de](http://www.fkw-journal.de)

// License

This work is licensed under the CC-BY-NC-ND License 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>

