Writing on patriarchal missiles: the chauvinism of the 'Gulf War' and the limits of critique

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Abstract. The limits of critique are politically significant. Such politics become examinable through deconstruction as a form of interested closure. To do this, however, it is first necessary to distinguish the Derridean deconstruction of writing from the purely literalist interpretations it is commonly but mistakenly given. The example subsequently used as an illustration of limited critique is a conference paper on the 'Gulf War' previously presented by the author in 1991. This paper drew on feminist psychoanalytic theories in order to critique the geopolitical effects of masculinist nationalism made manifest in the war. It is reprinted here and then reexamined in terms of its problematic production of truth through writing. This reexamination is pursued at three levels: by considering the conference paper's instrumentalisation of feminist theories and the questions this entails about male academics and feminism; by examining the dangers of normalisation inherent to the normative frameworks of psychoanalytic criticism; and by indicating some of the specific differences that were concealed as this form of criticism was brought to bear in an explanation of the chauvinism of the war. Although deconstruction is shown to offer a way of monitoring how critique risks erasing the heterogeneous through an inevitable essentialism, it is also argued that it is vital to come to terms with the political definition of such risks.