

## INTRODUCTION

# THE WORK OF SEXUAL DIFFERENCE

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According to Luce Irigaray, Western culture recognizes only one type of subject—a masculine subject. This is the central claim of her project. Irigaray is not alone in maintaining that Western culture is profoundly androcentric, but her critique of androcentric culture is unique in its comprehensiveness. Her analysis of the sources of Western androcentrism reaches deep—revealing how basic psychic, logical, and linguistic structures perpetuate masculine domination. In addition to being deep, Irigaray’s analysis is also unusually wide-ranging. Irigaray finds evidence of the one-subject culture in a remarkable variety of sources—from Plato to Freud, from eighteenth-century German opera to the words of present-day Italian schoolchildren, from environmental crises to national constitutions.

Irigaray’s project goes beyond critique, however. It invites us to challenge the one-subject culture, to imagine (and act to bring about) a future more hospitable to difference. Given the depth and breadth of her critical project, it is not surprising that Irigaray views the work of transforming androcentric culture as unfinished. The task of refashioning our culture is formidable. “A revolution in thought and ethics is needed if the work of sexual difference is to take place. We need to reinterpret everything concerning the relations between the subject and discourse, the subject and the world, the subject and the cosmic, the microcosmic, the macrocosmic” (Irigaray 1993, 6).

The essays in this volume take up Irigaray’s invitation to think beyond the androcentric, one-subject culture. Irigaray’s critical project helpfully identifies points of strategic intervention for feminists who want a world more conducive to the flourishing of subjects other than the masculine one. Each contribution to this volume begins from a cultural locus of androcentrism Irigaray has identified and asks how we might think or live it otherwise.

Not all of the contributions reimagine the future in quite the same way as Irigaray does. Some of the contributions reject outright Irigaray's prescriptions for changing our culture, others suggest that her prescriptions are inconsistent with the basic ethical concerns of her project, and still others attempt to shed light on Irigaray's prescriptive "blind spots." However, each of the essays confronts and challenges mechanisms of masculine domination Irigaray has identified. As the book's title indicates, the authors in this collection think *with* Irigaray. And, as Irigaray's own work suggests, to think with another is to challenge that other's worldview and have one's own worldview challenged.

The collection is divided into five sections, each devoted to analyzing and rethinking a mechanism of the one-subject culture that Irigaray has explicitly identified. The pieces by Cheryl Lawler, Elaine Miller, and Penelope Deutscher focus on alternatives to masculine genealogies. According to Irigaray, genealogies—the stories that we tell ourselves about who we are and where we came from—participate in determining the values of our present culture. The prevailing genealogies in contemporary Western culture emphasize the contributions of fathers, whether human or heavenly, in the production of human culture. The masculine sex establishes itself as the origin of all value through such genealogies.

Cheryl Lawler's contribution, "Orestes with Oedipus: Psychoanalysis and Matricide," reveals the tragic effects of masculine genealogy on our psychic structures. According to Irigaray, matricide plays a foundational role in Western culture. Within Western culture, psychic development must happen at the cost of the mother's subjectivity; we can become persons only by identifying with the father. Lawler shows how this culture of matricide pervades psychoanalytic theory and inhibits our development as human beings. It produces a compulsion to repeat the initial matricide and an inability to engage in genuine encounters with female others (and, in some cases, female selves). Lawler is a practicing psychoanalyst, and she offers vivid examples of this hatred of the mother from the first-person narratives of her patients. Lawler also offers a vision for displacing the masculine genealogy. According to her, richer relationships require moving beyond the parental economy of desire to a theory of sexuate love based on intimacy rather than familiarity.

Elaine Miller's contribution, "Beyond the Madonna: Revisiting Luce Irigaray's Aesthetics," examines possibilities for creating a feminine genealogy through art. Irigaray and Miller both understand art as potentially contributing the repertoire of images and symbols from which women may construct a more positive identity. Irigaray's comments on actual artworks seem to reveal a rather narrow conception of the type of art that can contribute to an alternative genealogy. Irigaray focuses on beautiful, holistic

images of women in accordance with which women may build positive images of themselves.

Miller, in contrast, argues that we can see a much wider array of art as contributing to an alternative genealogy and that this is consistent with the broader concerns of Irigaray's project. Miller examines Irigaray's criticism of the work of the German artist Unica Zürn and suggests that her art may have more to offer a new feminist representational repertoire than Irigaray thinks. To uproot the existing masculine genealogy requires more than just displaying attractive images of mothers and daughters. It requires a rethinking of the relationship between matter and form, between representation and meaning, and Miller claims that some nonrepresentational art can do precisely this.

Like the essays preceding it, Penelope Deutscher's essay, "Animality and Descent: Irigaray's Nietzsche, on Leaving the Sea," gestures toward an alternative to masculine genealogy. However, Deutscher is skeptical of placing the mother at the center of a new genealogy and wonders instead about the possibility of an alternative genealogy that makes sexual difference less primary. Deutscher's questioning of genealogy takes the form of a creative reflection on the role of animals in Irigaray's reading of Nietzsche. Irigaray criticizes Nietzsche for never choosing a sea creature as one of his companions, and Deutscher reads this as a criticism about genealogy—where the unacknowledged debt to the sea is the unacknowledged debt to the feminine. Deutscher also notes the repetition of masculine genealogy in the metaphors Nietzsche uses to describe the becoming of the overman—the one who "gives birth to himself."

However, Deutscher points out that Irigaray may have missed some opportunities for critiquing masculine genealogy opened up by Nietzsche and her criticisms of him. She notes that Nietzsche opens up the possibility of eroding the distinction between man and animal, of eroding our understanding of the creation of *man* as the most important moment in the history of the earth. Deutscher also asks whether Irigaray's association of the feminine with the elemental sea suggests that Irigaray herself is skeptical of the installation of a maternal genealogy to replace the masculine one. These questions problematize the task of—and multiply new possibilities for—envisioning alternatives to masculine genealogy.

The second group of essays in this collection focuses on another theme of Irigaray's work: the overcoming of binary oppositions. Beginning in her earliest work, Irigaray has argued that binary thinking plays an important role in sustaining androcentric culture. In Irigaray's view, our culture typically thinks of man and woman as one thing and its opposite, preventing the possibility of woman being thought as anything but a deficient man.

Similarly, the opposition between sensible and transcendental, in Irigaray's view, leads us to a masculine preoccupation with the beyond that prevents us from finding the transcendental side of what is present and incarnate. More generally, binary thinking aids and abets the one-subject culture by preventing us from thinking about differences in a nuanced way that does not simply reinstate the masculine as the source of value.

Gail M. Schwab's essay, "Beyond the Vertical and the Horizontal," takes up Irigaray's proposal that we rethink our conceptions of time and space. Schwab shows how moving beyond the vertical/horizontal dichotomy might help us transform our ethical lives. Through an innovative reading of Irigaray's "Divine Women," Schwab reveals a strand in Irigaray's thinking that entwines the vertical and the horizontal—a strand that describes the transcendent as a horizon. Schwab also suggests that yoga may be a way of experiencing the simultaneous vertical/horizontal or sensible/transcendental. She draws on her own experience of yoga to illustrate the possibility of living space beyond the limits of the flat mirror, of opening oneself to the fullness of space.

Schwab also argues that rethinking the vertical/horizontal dichotomy can help us produce new models of ethical relationship. Traditional types of religion that structure communities around a shared relationship to a single vertical other suppress—or flatten—differences among community members. Schwab suggests that thinking the transcendent otherwise opens up the possibility of spiritual communities that are open to differences among their members.

Like Schwab, D. Rita Alfonso takes up Irigaray's invitation to rethink time and space. However, Alfonso's contribution, "Space and Irigaray's Theory of Sexual Difference," is not concerned with the vertical/horizontal opposition but rather with two other oppositions: the opposition between place and space and the opposition between man and woman. Alfonso claims that the notion of sexual difference in Irigaray is primarily spatial. She works out this claim through an attentive discussion of the differences between Irigaray's and Aristotle's conceptions of space and place. Aristotle claims that space cannot exist, because his metaphysics cannot support the possibility of void, but Irigaray insists that we need space as an interval that allows for two things to be in relation without collapsing into one another.

Alfonso's description of Irigarayan sexual difference as spatial is a highly original contribution to the existing literature on the meaning of sexual difference in its own right. But Alfonso's goal is not simply to endorse this spatial notion of sexual difference. Alfonso agrees with Irigaray that interval is metaphysically important because it produces the possibility of approaching the other (or the world) with wonder. However, she criticizes Irigaray for suggesting that one can wonder only at another of the opposite

sex. Taking examples from contemporary queer theory, Alfonso enjoins us to preserve the possibility of wonder across other types of difference.

Danielle Poe's contribution, "Can Luce Irigaray's Notion of Sexual Difference Be Applied to Transsexual and Transgender Narratives?," shares with Alfonso's contribution an interest in Irigaray's seeming endorsement of a new man/woman opposition. Many of Irigaray's readers—particularly in the English-speaking world—criticize Irigaray for envisioning a world in which there are only two authentic gender identities: male and female. Poe's essay begins to respond to these critics—particularly those critics who claim that the primacy of sexual difference in Irigaray's thought requires the pathologization of transsexual and transgender identities. Poe answers critics of Irigaray who claim that her notion of sexual difference is biologically essentialist or heteronormative. Poe further claims that we can find resources for interpreting the first-person narratives of transsexual and transgender persons *within* Irigaray's notion of sexual difference.

The third section in this collection focuses on the ethical. In Irigaray's view, androcentric culture impedes development of our capacities to relate to one another. By recognizing only one subject, Western culture promotes a tragic solipsism in which the masculine subject looks to the other only to have his own worth confirmed and in which feminine subjects cannot relate to one another. Since the masculine subject is trapped in the cycle of looking for confirmation of his own worth, he cannot relate to others as others across a variety of differences—sexual, generational, cultural.

Britt-Marie Schiller's piece, "The Incomplete Masculine: Engendering the Masculine of Sexual Difference," begins to envision a masculinity that does not recoil from otherness. As Schiller points out, making genuine encounter possible between the sexes is not simply a matter of making feminine subjectivity possible; it is a matter of transforming masculine subjectivity. We must envision a masculine subject that does not claim omnipotence, that is willing to let the other be. Schiller names this new identity "the incomplete masculine."

Schiller proposes permeability, wonder, and improvisation as the virtues of the incomplete masculine. She suggests that males might become capable of inhabiting the "incomplete masculine" by reevaluating some basic events in their psychic development. She suggests, for example, that nursing can be understood as an experience of being penetrated and that sexual penetration can be thought of as an act of discovery rather than mastery. Schiller's essay thus contributes to the project of transforming psychoanalytic theory, as well as thinking new models of relationship.

Karen Houle's essay, "A Bridge Between Three Forever Irreducible to Each Other(s)," examines the possibilities for relationship offered by a particular type of ethical experience: uncoerced but unintended pregnancy.

Although she agrees with Irigaray that the right to abortion is central to women's moral personhood, Houle criticizes Irigaray for treating abortion as juridical without attention to its potential role in women's ethical becoming. Houle argues that we should think of the abortion decision, and the mourning that may occur afterward, as sites of opportunity for ethical development and reflection.

According to Houle, the abortion decision in cases of uncoerced, unintended pregnancy offers a unique opportunity for approaching the other in difference. The man, the woman, and the potential other represented by the embryo are each differently situated and occupy unique positions in the moral dialogue. Houle sees Irigaray's work, which she reads in conjunction with Derrida's, as offering resources for analyzing this ethical experience. In a broader sense, Houle's piece offers a challenge to androcentric culture by beginning to think ethical life from the distinctly feminine experience of unwanted pregnancy.

Houle's piece thus also responds to a different appeal issued by Irigaray's work—the appeal to women to “cultivate interiority.” This is fitting given that Irigaray sees the possibility of genuine encounter with the other as *dependent* on women's cultivation of interiority. To be able to engage in ethical relationship with another, one must have a sense of self to share, to which to retreat from time to time, and to which to return with the fruits of the encounter. Androcentric culture denies women opportunities to cultivate interiority. Irigaray's work describes multiple factors constraining women's claiming of inner space—ranging from the lack of a distinctly feminine genealogy described earlier, to the discouraging of woman-to-woman sociality, to an ethical culture that encourages women to be *for* the male other, whether he appears as husband or son.

The fourth set of essays in this volume examines women and interiority. Breanne Fahs's “Sexuality on the Market: An Irigarayan Analysis of Female Desire as Commodity” reveals the prevalence of a culture that prevents women from owning their sexual experiences. Fahs is a clinical psychologist who has conducted qualitative research with women about their sexual experiences. She uses two of Irigaray's central ideas—the idea that women function as commodities to cement male social bonds and the idea that woman is the mirror who reflects man's value back to him—to interpret these narratives. This analytical framework allows Fahs to offer a particularly illuminating analysis of the pressure on women to produce orgasm. For Fahs, the pathologization of women who do not consistently produce orgasms and the pressure to simulate orgasm that women report are both reflections of a culture unwilling to challenge the function of the heterosexual encounter as an opportunity for the masculine subject to receive confirmation of his

value. Fahs's essay suggests that contemporary American culture—despite its claims to sexual liberation—still leaves women little room for acceding to the status of sexual subjects.

Claire Potter's contribution, "Fishing and Thinking, or An Interiority of My Own: Luce Irigaray's *Speculâme de l'autre femme* (*renversé, inversé, rétroversé*)," helps us to see the extent to which Irigaray's call to women to cultivate interiority is radical. Potter reads Irigaray's claim that a woman needs an interiority of her own alongside Virginia Woolf's claim that a woman needs a room of her own. Potter develops a contrast between physical and psychic space to show why a room of one's own may not be enough for a woman to develop a sense of self. In Potter's view, a room of one's own does not secure the possibility of nonviolent relationship with the other. Potter also indicates that Irigaray's emphasis on psychic space entails a more thoroughgoing rejection of androcentric culture than Woolf's—refusing rigid boundaries between self and other, self and world, visible and invisible.

The final essay on interiority, Morny Joy's "Autonomy and Divinity: A Double-Edged Experiment," asks about the compatibility of Irigaray's prescription that women cultivate interiority with Irigaray's more explicitly political project. Irigaray's appeal to women to cultivate interiority and her demand for sexed civil rights seem intended as two parts of one project—the project of giving women an identity. Joy points out that the two projects are legitimately linked in the sense that women cannot cultivate interiority without certain legal protections.

However, Joy examines Irigaray's suggestions for how women should cultivate interiority with a critical eye. She wonders whether Irigaray's connection of the new feminine identity with women's cultivation of stereotypically feminine qualities is not a regressive move. She also indicates that Irigaray's emphasis on Eastern religious practices as a means to cultivating interiority manifests a feminism targeted exclusively at Western women. Joy's essay concludes with the suggestion that we refuse to take Irigaray's own ideas of how to cultivate interiority and feminine identity as the last word on these issues. She suggests that these projects might be better served by listening to a diversity of feminine voices—across cultures—about what developing women's senses of self requires.

Joy intimates that this listening across cultures might have come to be as a part of shared political struggles. The essays by Sabrina Hom and Tina Chanter examine women as political agents. Irigaray insists that women cannot become subjects if their states do not recognize them. As we saw previously, Irigaray's own remedy for this is a program of sexed civil rights. According to Irigaray, for women to be recognized *as women* by national (and international) constitutions is a necessary step to making agency—

political and otherwise—available to women. Neither of the contributors to this section endorse Irigaray's call for sexed rights, but they do raise the question of women's distinct relationship to the political.

The essays by Hom and Chanter both consider a female mythological figure whose relationship to the state has been read by many philosophers (including Irigaray) as paradigmatic—Antigone. Irigaray understands Antigone's tragedy as the tragedy of the feminine in the conflict between divine and civil law. Hom's essay, "Antigone Falts: Reflections on the Sustainability of Revolutionary Subjects," asks whether Sophocles' Antigone might provide a positive model of political subjectivity for women. Antigone is uniquely poised to provide such a model; she defies the state and does so *as a woman*—that is, to perform the distinctly feminine task of burying her brother.

Hom offers a nuanced reading of *Antigone* that cautions against unequivocally celebrating her as a feminist heroine. Her analysis draws our attention to the filial and public structures that deny Antigone the possibility of performing a heroic act. However, Hom also claims that we can learn from Antigone's limits what changes it might take to make revolutionary subjectivity available to women. Hom concludes that such a change would require a rethinking of the relationship between human and divine law. It would require recognizing human vulnerability and the work that sustains it. Recognizing and degendering care work, like—but not limited to—the work of burying the dead, is key to creating a world in which women can be political subjects.

Where Hom cautions against taking Antigone as a *prescriptive* exemplar of women as political agents, Chanter's essay, "Antigone's Exemplarity: Irigaray, Hegel, and Excluded Grounds as Constitutive of Feminist Theory," suggests that Antigone may not even be a *descriptive* exemplar. Antigone's situation is rife with strange particularities—her being the product of an incestuous union just one among them. Chanter asks whether feminists who take Antigone as an exemplar might inadvertently be falling into the trap set by Hegel, who is the first to grant Antigone such importance—the trap of winnowing all women down to a single representation. However, Chanter suggests that Irigaray's reading of Antigone is doing something more complicated than this. Chanter argues that Irigaray's evocation of a figure as variously represented and interpreted as Antigone, as well as her analysis of Antigone's place *in Hegel*, constitute an invitation to proliferate questions about the significance of Antigone.

Chanter takes up this invitation and offers a reading of Antigone remarkably different from both Irigaray's and Hom's. For Chanter, Antigone's act *is* heroic. She dares speak to Creon as an equal and defies his law. She changes the future by exposing the contingency of Creon's law, by showing



that it is not the ultimate authority. Moreover, by refusing to let Ismene die with her, Antigone deliberately assumes her punishment as her *own*, as part of a choice that she made—rather than simply the lot externally inflicted on all women. Thus, for Chanter, Antigone is a figure who calls us to challenge political regimes that perpetuate themselves by denying subjectivity to certain persons.

Hom and Chanter's essays show that political power—in addition to language, psychic structures, and epistemological assumptions—sustain the one-subject culture that Irigaray's work painstakingly diagnoses. Each of the essays in this book attempts to reveal the mechanisms that entrench that culture. Each of them also attempts to think beyond it—even as some of the essays suggest that thinking beyond the one-subject culture means questioning some of Irigaray's foundational claims. The variety of approaches to thinking beyond that culture offered in this book testify to the enormity of the task of imagining a future that recognizes more than one type of subject. They also testify to the creative possibilities that lie before us as we imagine that future. They remind us, to use Irigaray's words, that “we have a lot of work to do. But at least we have a future before us rather than some new version of the past.”

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

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