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Luce Irigaray (1932-)

[Sarah Falcus \(Huddersfield University\)](#)

Cultural Theorist/ Critic.

Active 1973- in France; Italy

Luce Irigaray is a continental feminist thinker – though her relationship with feminism is complicated – whose work engages with philosophy, linguistics and psychoanalysis. Born in Belgium in 1932, she is one of the theorists who emerged from the French intellectual scene of the 1960s. Originally a student of Jacques Lacan, she broke decisively from Lacanian strictures with the publication of her doctoral thesis, *Speculum de l'autre femme* (translated as *Speculum of the Other Woman*), in 1974. Putting Western philosophy and psychoanalysis under the microscope and finding its positioning of women wanting, Irigaray launched her interest in sexual difference, philosophy and the feminine in the most controversial way, leading to her marginalisation by French psychoanalytic circles and her suspension from her teaching at the University of Vincennes (see Irigaray 1985b, 167). Irigaray is traditionally nominated as one of the “French feminists”, alongside theorists Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous. But this Anglo-American tendency to sweep up sometimes contradictory ideas under one umbrella of psychoanalytically and linguistically inspired feminism that is divorced from any political context can be reductive, ignoring the variety and complexity of continental feminisms. Instead, as Margaret Whitford argues, Irigaray needs to be seen on her own terms in relation to philosophy and psychoanalysis: “Irigaray’s work, then, can be seen as a sort of “psychoanalysis” of western culture and metaphysics, seeking what underpins its fragile rationality, looking for the ‘repressed’ or unconscious of culture” (1991b, 33). Identifying the feminine as the repressed of western culture, Irigaray seeks to establish a new ethical relation between men and women, a transformation of the symbolic order.

As the above suggests, *Speculum of the Other Woman* is crucial to the understanding of Irigaray’s *oeuvre*, despite the development of her ideas in the decades that followed. This book interrogates the Western philosophical tradition and psychoanalysis. Taking on Freud, Irigaray argues that he positions the girl child as a “little man”, making woman “[A] man minus the possibility of (re)presenting oneself as a man” (1985a, 27). Female identity and female sexuality are only ever seen through a male lens in this psychoanalytic model. From this perspective, women are relegated to matter and not allowed a specifically feminine subject position. In particular, she maintains that this system means that the mother (with whom all women are associated) is buried and repressed, constructing women’s only relation to origin through a male imaginary, and that this harms all relationships between women, not just those between mothers and daughters. Much of her work is therefore concerned with relationships between women and with the establishment of genealogies of women, in both horizontal and vertical dimensions. Irigaray similarly imagines the mother as the repressed underbelly of the philosophical tradition and she works to expose this concealed basis. The sacrifice of the mother she sees as necessary to the founding of the Law of the Father, language and culture, resulting in the father taking from the

mother the power of creation and leaving the place of the feminine and “the relation to the mother [as] a mad desire, because it is the ‘dark continent’ par excellence” (1993b, 10). This is not to suggest that Irigaray rejects psychoanalysis, or indeed philosophy. Her work is steeped in and utilises these traditions, and undoubtedly values them; as Whitford makes clear, Irigaray both works with and reinterprets the work of significant philosophers and psychoanalysts (1991a, 3). But at the same time she recognises the historically specific ways in which they have positioned women as matter and nature, seen only through the perspective of the male, a position which she sees as a denial of sexual difference. It is this desire for sexual difference, and concern with sexual difference, that is at the heart of all of Irigaray’s work.

The very title of *Speculum of the Other Woman* — with its play on the idea of mirroring and the speculum as an instrument used in gynaecological investigations and therefore strongly invested with contact with female flesh and with the sexual difference that cannot be seen — makes clear Irigaray’s abstruse and multiplicitous style. The punning *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1977 in French) continues in the same vein, as indeed it does in many senses in its content, which examines the ways in which female sexuality is always seen from a male perspective, in male terms. The emphasis here is on the seen, the prominence of the visual, which Irigaray claims is alien to a female sexuality that is based on touch. This is similarly — if not identically — reproduced in Lacan’s mirror stage, which again prioritises seeing and the male gaze, making man the presence and the one. As Irigaray’s Lacanian training and her earliest work in psycho-linguistics (one of her two doctorates was in linguistics) might suggest, Irigaray is very concerned with language. She accepts the Lacanian model of the subject formed in language and so is necessarily concerned with women’s position within language, and has conducted research that studies men’s and women’s gendered speech patterns. Her early work does advocate the need for women to speak a feminine language, particularly in *This Sex Which Is Not One*. This interest continues into texts such as *Sexes and Genealogies* (1987 in French), which links language and bodily experience. And, as suggested above, her own very demanding writing style (discussed in the translator notes in many of the English versions of her works) can be seen as a challenge to phallogocentric discourse. But it is too simplistic to link this unproblematically to Hélène Cixous’s *écriture féminine*. Irigaray’s interest in language has developed over her work to become less the utopianism of the seventies — less interested in a specific *parler-femmes* — and more about the social and cultural determinants of discourse. So in *Thinking the Difference: for a peaceful revolution* (1989 in French) Irigaray looks at language in terms of social relationships, from the interpersonal to the political, meaning that language must give both sexes the opportunity to speak and to occupy the subject position of the “I”, rejecting the preference for the neutrality of the masculine (1994, xv-xvi).

The examination of the philosophical tradition begun in *Speculum* continues in the three “elementals” books: *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger* (1983 in French), *Elemental Passions* (1982 in French) and *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche* (1980 in French). This is further developed with the wide-ranging *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1984 in French). As some of the titles suggest, these texts continue Irigaray’s detailed engagement with the work of prominent philosophers. In *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Irigaray explores the writings of various Western philosophical figures, from Plato to Levinas, to expose the patriarchal foundations of Western philosophy. The opening statement in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* makes clear the direction and focus of much of Irigaray’s early work on philosophy, but also signals the centrality of sexual difference in her thinking: “Sexual difference is one of the major philosophical issues, if not the issue, of our age.” Interrogating the traditional effacement of sexual difference and imagining a different order of relations between male and female is what Irigaray’s writing does.

During the 1980s Irigaray’s work became more overtly concerned with the position of women in specifically social forms (see Whitford 1991a, 10-13), though always underpinned by her recognition of the importance of change in the way the subject is constituted in relation to the imaginary and the symbolic order. This can be seen in her work with Italian feminists, for example, which is important in *Thinking the Difference* (1989 in French), a text dedicated to the Italian Communist Party, and very concerned with sexual rights and

responsibilities (sexuate meaning founded upon sexual difference, and often connected to sexed rights for Irigaray). In this text Irigaray argues that the issue of sexual difference is much more prominent and attended to in Italy than in France. In the latter, sexual difference is effaced in favour of a discourse of equality. And Irigaray sees this equality as repressive for women, a repression that can only be addressed through attention to the differences between the sexes. This signals Irigaray's movement to a specific interest in sexuate rights and sexual difference, where, like many feminist thinkers, she explicitly rejects the equality argument as effectively a reinstatement of the neuter, which privileges the male subject. These texts make clear the speculative and perhaps utopian nature of Irigaray's philosophical project. Irigaray is not looking for equality, but for change in the whole symbolic order, avoiding the reproduction of the "economy of the same".

A further example of Irigaray's utopian thinking is found in her work on the divine, in which she reworks Feuerbach's divine object in terms of gender. Irigaray links women's (lack of) place in the symbolic intimately with religion and God, suggesting that women are denied images of the divine which reflect their selves *as* women, and are therefore arrested in the process of "becoming" (1993a, 68-9). Instead of the transcendental monotheistic godhead that is figured as male and leaves women imprisoned in matter, she proposes the sensible transcendental, a notion that disrupts the male mind and female body binary thinking that she sees as so harmful for women.

Nevertheless, despite these utopian elements, Irigaray's work has a very political dimension, as her work in Italy makes clear. And her interest in sexuate rights and the need for sexual difference in cultural and political terms continues in her work in the 1990s. In *Democracy Begins Between Two* (1994 in Italian), she argues strongly for the need to recognise male and female, a "co-existence in difference" (2000, 5) that allows for the recognition of the otherness of the other. This text further demonstrates Irigaray's growing political commitment during this period, since it was part of her work as an advisor for the Commission for Equal Opportunities in the region of Emilia-Romagna. Critics of Irigaray's thinking sometimes simplistically ignore this political dimension, which is a significant part of her work and links theory with political praxis.

Irigaray's work has often attracted accusations of essentialism. This is the case right from her early texts, but has become even more fraught in her later work with its greater emphasis on the sexuate couple. As Alison Martin argues, Irigaray founds the whole notion of difference in sexual difference and does not see any difference that does not come from this (2003, 2), a position that becomes more problematic in works such as *I Love to You* (1992 in French) and *To Be Two* (1994 in Italian), which, as Martin explains (2003, 8), dwell specifically on the man-woman couple and therefore seem to privilege heterosexual relations, despite Irigaray's assertions that this is not a sexual relationality. Irigaray is defended by many as a "strategic essentialist" through her ironic use of mimesis, as when she exploits the stereotypical positions assigned to women in order to expose them as such, a strategy seen very clearly in her use of philosophical discourse in *Speculum* and *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Her strategy here derives from her primary arguments about how women are subjected by the patriarchal symbolic order, a position which she demonstrates by exposing male texts to mimetic reinterpretation so as to uncover their patriarchal foundations, rather than proffering a feminine alternative. It is therefore possible to argue, as Whitford does, that Irigaray's work points up the impossibility and undesirability of the binary of essentialist/anti-essentialist feminist thinking:

Her work poses the feminist dilemma in one of its clearest forms. To interpret Irigaray in terms of an exclusive alternative – *either* as modernist/essentialist, *or* as postmodernist in her deconstructive strategies – is to perform a drastic reduction of her exemplarity and centrality. Holding the tension here, walking this particular tightrope, is what makes her work so challenging and so insistent. (Whitford 1991a, 13)

A further critique of Irigaray's most recent work is also related to her privileging of *sexual* difference. In her later work Irigaray relates forms of difference – including national and ethnic – to the foundation of sexual difference, a position that is problematic for many, and seems to bring us back to the charges of universalisation that have often been directed at her. Whilst the potential of Irigaray's work on cultural and racial difference is acknowledged by critics such as Penelope Deutscher, its lack of extended critical consideration of other forms of difference is also noted. Irigaray's interest in difference and respect for otherness is nevertheless sustained into her twenty-first century texts, such as *The Way of Love* (2002, evidence of her continuing dialogue with the Western philosophical tradition in its engagement with Heidegger) and *Sharing the World* (2008), which imagine a different ethical order of otherness, on both local and global scales. Continuing to research and publish, Irigaray remains an insistent challenge – in many senses – to our ways of thinking about women, men and sexual difference.

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