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The subject of love

Hélène Cixous and
the feminine divine

Sal Renshaw



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The subject of love

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**'Now' is a gift of the gods and an access onto reality. To address
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to grasp what is happening in your soul at that moment
is to begin to understand how to live.**

**Anne Carson, *Eros: The Bittersweet* (Illinois:
Dalkey Archive Press, 1998: 153)**

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It should come as no surprise that a book about abundant, generous, other-regarding love should begin with something of a hymn to the generosity and love that have both framed and exceeded the context of its writing. I couldn't have written this text outside of the complex and varied relations with love that have supported and challenged me in infinite ways.

They have provided the quotidian experiences of a love divine, mostly joyful, sometimes agonising, experiences that inevitably come in the living of a life with others. For me these experiences have been generously framed by life's so called simpler pleasures; fabulous food in the spirit of *agape* feasts; shared dogs walks in Northern Ontario's most spectacular woods; companionable and sometimes consoling conversation with the most beloved of friends, often on the phone, best over wine and cheese! I am so very grateful to all of those who have and continue to live love with me, in all its quixotic complexity. I realise now, in writing this, that I am truly blessed in knowing that they are actually too many to name. May we all be blessed in this way!

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his desolate bones; I believe his existence persists as it has moved into my present thought' (1991a: 190). As with so much of Cixous' poetico-philosophy we are left with questions rather than answers. Are we to assume that the radical divide between life and death is momentarily overcome in the present thought of the dead loved one, in the spirit of Kierkegaard's most divine and perfect love of the dead? Perhaps we are to suppose that the radical divide between God and humanity is overcome in the same way? Or does the death of the father also mark the death of God, the desolate bones of one signifying the desolate bones of the other?

Perhaps it is no surprise that Cixous might prefer to see her work as a continuing exploration of an ethics which is constantly informed by her commitment both to difference and to poetics rather than as a progressive journey of maturation. Notions of progress tend to carry with them associations with linearity and by extension, then, masculinity, both of which Cixous might want to complicate. She has always been deeply opposed to notions of arrival, with their attendant implications of closure, preferring instead to invoke the signifying openness of journeying. As Conley recognises, 'Journeys, traversals, are the very stuff of all her writing' (1992: 58). It seems likely that, while Cixous might recognise the possibility of reading her work in and through the lens of maturation, she would and does resist claiming such stories as 'her own'. In her own words in relation to the question of her writing of both 'fiction' and for the theatre: 'There is no political or ethical rupture among my activities, but my fiction and my plays are two worlds or two continents with completely different formal and aesthetic laws' (Fort, 1997: 427). Sameness and difference are in tension here as Cixous distinguishes between a form that changes and a content that remains consistent at the level of the ethical.

In the spirit of this ethical – and I would add political – continuity (although Cixous herself rejects the political) that multiplies rather than resolves contradiction, I turn to questions of divinity in Cixous' work. What concerns me are the multiple ways in which divinity is invoked throughout her writing life, and the 'work' which divinity does, quite specifically, for the claims she makes with respect to subjectivity. Why does she evoke the divine when she wants to engage the possibility of a different economy of subjectivity, and what is the nature of this evocation? How, for example, should we understand the notion of soul that she says marks the uniqueness of each of her plays, so concerned as they are with questions of human relations at a global level? 'For me, each of these plays is different, unique, and I do not think of it in a globalizing context, but as having a specificity, as a singular soul' (Fort, 1997: 429).

Cixous is by no means alone in this kind of invocation of divine signification. As we have seen in Chapter 2, it is equally, if differently evident in the work of Luce Irigaray, particularly in her most recent writings. Similarly it is also apparent in Julia Kristeva's theorisation of maternal/feminine *jouissance*.⁹⁰ However, it

is important to remember that, while all these theorists engage the divine, they do so, by and large, in the service of different projects from those of feminist theologians. Divinity, particularly in their collective work of the last fifteen to twenty years, is typically invoked, and in some sense assumed rather than considered a subject of inquiry in itself. In this regard, all three thinkers fit well within the trajectory of what is being termed by some as the 're-turn to religion' which has defined so much of post-structural continental thought in recent years – disciplinary and even national borders notwithstanding.

The very content of much of Cixous' writing provides good reason to reject commentaries that suggest she has 'matured' from a concern with self to a concern with otherness. It seems far more consistent with an overall Cixousian project to suggest that she has always concerned herself with questions of the relations between self and other. Given that her work is equally informed by an ongoing, if until recently somewhat submerged, dialogue with Jacques Derrida and the work of deconstruction, Cixous can be understood as beginning her exploration of subjectivity from a position that assumes that the subject is dispersed rather than unified.⁹¹ Thus, it is to questions of *becoming* that she turns, rather than to the modernist and masculine preoccupation with *being*. As Verena Conley says, 'In place of the bourgeois subject, she constructs a multiple being in perpetual metamorphosis' (1992: 31). Cixous' 'multiple being' offers a sometimes trenchant, but more often than not a subtle yet sustained, critique of Enlightenment discourses of subjectivity that esteem the masculine notions of an autonomous, singular and rational subject, and against which she proposes a fluid and dispersed feminine subject of the moment.

To this end, much of her earlier, 'theoretical' work seems to be informed by her initially qualified and allusive conceptualisation of feminine dispersal as the defining quality of a 'new' conception of subjectivity, a conception that lends itself to sustaining difference. This is particularly the case in so far as this early, speculative work takes shape as a counterpoint to her critique of both Hegelian and Freudian notions of subjectivity. However, by the early to mid-1980s much of the explicit voice of the critic of patriarchal logocentrism gives way to the more

⁹¹ It was not until 1998 with the French publication of the co-authored *Voiles* (translated into English and published as *Veils* in 2001) that Hélène Cixous and Jacques Derrida appear in print together. Both, however, long acknowledged the profound influence they had on each other's work. Since the publication of *Voiles* in 2001, Cixous has written an homage to Derrida entitled *Portrait de Jacques Derrida en Jeune Saint Juif* (translated into English as *Portrait of Derrida as a Young Jewish Saint* in 2004). In 2002 Derrida's homage to Cixous was published as *H. C. pour la vie, c'est-à-dire* (translated into English as *H. C. for Life: That Is to Say* and published in 2006). In 2003 Cixous published a selection of her own dreams under the title *Rêve, je te dis* (translated into English and published in 2006 as *Dream I Tell You*). The 'you' of the title is Jacques Derrida. In 2006 the *Journal New Literary History* (37:1) published a special issue on the work of Hélène Cixous and many of the articles address the intellectual conversation between Derrida and Cixous. There is also in this volume an interview with them both.

speculative voice that seems to derive from Cixous' investment in the socially subversive potential of *écriture féminine*. Her encounter with the work of the Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector clearly marks a shift from a certain critique of what is, that is, patriarchy and hierarchical opposition, to a speculation of what might be, that is, dispersal and equality in difference. Lispector's influence on Cixous also marks a significant shift in her theorisation of subjectivity. At this point she abandons her overt dialogue with Hegel and Freud on questions of subjectivity and turns to a more thoroughgoing engagement with the feminine as a principle of what she refers to as a different economy of exchange. In the context of her implicit engagement with divinity, unsurprisingly perhaps, she also moves away from an overt critique of patriarchal religion, which is so evident in essays like 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1980 [1975]), 'Castration or Decapitation?' (1981 [1976]), and 'Sorties' (1986a [1975]). The responsive tone of these works shifts to an affirmative envisioning of what may be possible in a meeting between self and other, and with this shift comes a less constrained and more speculative invocation of the divine. In the context of her theoretical, rather than her literary, allusions, she turns to Heidegger and Nietzsche, albeit obliquely, in her later writings which concern themselves so much more overtly with what the conditions of such an affirmative intersubjectivity might permit. In works like *The Book of Promethea* and *La Bataille de Arcachon*, for example, we find Cixous exploring a love relation in which it is radical alterity that provides the occasion of a calling forth of divinity, a *becoming* divine.

While Cixous' project of exploring 'new' or other possibilities for understanding subjectivity can be easily situated in philosophical debates, the language she uses and the metaphors and allusions she relies upon speak to themes that are also germane to the discourses of theology and religion. Indeed, particularly when she is writing of love, her rhetorical style is often extraordinarily evocative of both the Jewish prophets and the Christian mystics.⁹² This is especially the case

⁹² Cixous has consistently noted that she is 'not religious' and that, while she is Jewish by ethnicity, the family was certainly not orthodox in terms of practice. Nor either, however, was the family without rituals and traditions that do find their source in Judaic worship. Cixous makes the point that, though at the time she deeply experienced these rituals in connection to family, they felt unanchored from any systematic sense of Judaism. Thus, she claims not to have been left with an abiding sense of the family as religiously Jewish (personal conversation, Paris, May 2004). Given the centrality of the 'feminine' spaces of family, home, and food to the quotidian experience of Judaism, perhaps Cixous underestimates somewhat the religiosity of her own family as well as the influence of this 'religious' experience in the later formation of her thought. Moreover, the influence of her Jewish textual and cultural heritage including her oft-observed love of the Hebrew Bible and especially the Pentateuch, along with her formative experiences of anti-Semitism, cannot be underestimated. Surely they too are profound influences on the formation of what I am here arguing is an essential aspect of all her writing, her desire for a loving, non-exclusionary, love of the other. While I think the question of the relationship between Cixous' ideas on love and difference as they bear specifically on the influences of Judaism would be an important and revealing study, it is not one with which I am engaged here. Specifically, and to reiterate, my interest is limited to the way Cixous' writings on feminine economies of

in *The Book of Promethea* where, in her theorisation or exploration of an escape from antagonistic dualism, her subjects can be explicitly understood as encountering divinity, although the nature of that divinity often remains ambiguous. Consider, for example, the tone and language of her description of just such a moment from *The Book of Promethea*.

[I]f I get ready to embrace Promethea – and every time it is as if I were embracing the world, it is simpler and simpler and more and more religious, because from that moment on rarely does the kiss remain one between the two of us; it is scarcely given before it calls the whole universe to celebrate, in an infinitesimal and incredible celebration, genesis fills the air we breathe – so I have scarcely bent to kiss her before I see the earth quiver, the oak tree three steps to the right of Promethea suddenly lights up, all the leaves catch, and the tree goes deep into my soul with Promethea's eyes forever. Yes, the whole world is stricken with my amazements. Thousands of ecstasies come over it. I had heard about this. Now I have seen it. (1991a: 52)

Unlike *The Book of Promethea*, however, 'Sorties' is not a text that immediately evokes questions about divinity. Yet its central place in Cixous' thinking about feminine subjectivities invites us to reflect upon what might be thought of as the antecedents of a trope which I am arguing becomes increasingly pivotal in her later writing, divinity. 'Sorties' can, and most often is, described as an essay that reflects a period in Cixous' work in which she was explicitly engaging with issues of sexual difference. Yet what is equally apparent in this text is the overarching trope of a kind of divine justice that informs her analysis, including her call for women to be liberated from beneath the oppressive constraints of a patriarchal law which has been buttressed by a patriarchal notion of God. It is in the context of this spirit of something like divine justice that Cixous calls upon women to 'write themselves', to write the embodied experience of woman, and by whatever means, to break through the oppression and silence of the patriarchal logos.

To write – the act will 'realise' the un-censored relationship of woman to her sexuality, to her woman-being giving her back access to her own forces; that will return her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her vast bodily territories kept under seal; that will tear her out of the superegoed, over-Mosesed structure where the same position of guilt is always reserved for her (guilty of everything, every time: of having desires, of not having any; of being frigid, or being 'too' hot; of not being both at once; of being too much of a mother and not enough; of nurturing and not nurturing . . .). Write yourself: your body must make itself heard. Then the huge resources of the unconscious will burst out. Finally the inexhaustible feminine Imaginary is going to be deployed. (1986a: 97)

difference make possible a meeting in love between subjects where love itself is configured as abundant, excessive, generous, and potentially divine. It is this specific configuration of love that Christianity has claimed as uniquely its own. Challenging that claim, while a worthy and important project, is not mine here. However, I do briefly make mention of what I consider to be the Jewish origins of *agape* in Chapter 3, p. 111, footnote 98. To the extent that Nygren identifies the act of creation in Genesis as the first demonstration of the *agapic* nature of God, he is inadvertently affirming its Jewish origins.

Cixous is clearly making a connection here between the 'over-Mosesed' structure of patriarchy, i.e., a connection between Moses, Law, and God 'the Father', and woman's displacement from her self as woman. I would also add that the religious dimension of this observation cannot be thought of as incidental to Cixous' claim most especially when it is constituted as the ground of the very structure that inaugurates woman's inevitable guilt and responsibility. When Cixous calls for the deployment of a feminine imaginary she is calling for it against this singularly masculine conception of divinity.

The remainder of this chapter takes up the spirit of Cixous' call to women to write themselves, but is more explicitly focused on her conception of feminine subjectivity, for 'Sorties' is the first of her essays to offer a sustained and explicit engagement with this topic. Because so much of the essay is constituted as a critique of institutionalised patriarchy, it also offers us the opportunity to reflect on Cixous' understanding of the place of the Jewish and Christian God(s) in patriarchal logocentrism. This, then, provides a background for reflecting on what I am suggesting is her own invocation of divinity, specifically a feminine divine which I take up in Chapters 4 and 5. However, and importantly from my point of view here, in the final third of 'Sorties', Cixous develops and extends her preceding discussion of subjectivity through a more speculative engagement with the relationship of the feminine to love. Through a rereading of two mythical tales of love, Heinrich von Kleist's *Penthesileia* and Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, she inquires into the conditions of what is clearly an amorous love relationship that, on Cixous' reading, seems to encounter divinity. In both these readings, she is speculating about an idealised love between two subjects who have escaped, if only momentarily, the culture of 'death' and negation that she sees as being aligned with Hegelian subjectivity and sustained by the oppositional structure of the Jewish and Christian logos. In paying close attention to the language and imagery she uses, we can begin to glean something of the way she perceives this kind of feminine love as one that in its openness to difference momentarily calls forth the divine. Through her ongoing engagement with 'philosophies' of alterity as they bear on subjectivity in the subsequent chapters I will be following the way Cixous' 'evolving' discourse of love functions to offer a certain materiality to her affirmative vision of a feminine economy of exchange between subjects. However, for now, as we will see, the moment of divinity is short-lived, particularly in *Penthesileia*, and in part this is because the dualistic and indeed binary paradigm of lover and beloved, self and other, that defined *eros* in Plato's *Symposium* and *agape* in Nygren's *Eros and Agape*,⁹³ is not sufficiently disrupted. As we will see in the next two chapters, the trope of feminine love becomes increasingly difficult to

⁹³ See Chapter 1 for a full account of both Plato's *Symposium* and Nygren's *Eros and Agape*. See Chapter 2 for a sustained engagement with the feminist theological interventions around the binary structure of love implied in *agape* in Nygren's work.

separate from divinity, and the affiliation returns us to the initial question of the structure of the divinity which Cixous comes to rely upon. Central to this structure will be the way Cixous' feminine love is constituted elsewhere to binary logic, elsewhere to the dualisms of lover and beloved.

Theorising sexual difference

'Sorties' begins with Cixous' understanding of logocentrism as constructed through a binary logic, which, when coupled with phallocentrism, necessarily positions woman or the feminine as the negative side of an oppositional structure based on sameness.⁹⁴ This structure does not amount to men and women, culture and nature, day and night. Rather, it amounts to men/not-men, culture/not-culture and day/not day.⁹⁵ Binary logic is thoroughly saturated with a hierarchical value system that has always excluded the possibility of equality and/in difference, and, in so doing, it comes to produce a desire that is based on the appropriation and/or negation of the difference of the other. For Cixous, this relation, which is turned towards death, is epitomised in the Hegelian dialectic. She says,

It is true that recognition, following the phallocentric lead, passes through a conflict the brunt of which is borne by woman; and that desire, in a world thus determined, is a desire for appropriation. . . . Where does desire come from? From a mixture of difference and inequality. No movement toward, if the two terms of the couple are in a state of equality. It is always difference of forces which results in movement. (1986a: 79)

Appropriation, then, is the fulcrum around which the self/other relation turns within patriarchy. Difference is not simply refused; it is subsumed, annihilated, and erased. Like many feminist theorists, Cixous has found Hegel's master/slave dialectic a strategic and productive metaphor for thinking about the relations of sexual difference in Western culture.⁹⁶ Logocentrism and phallocentrism come together in the Hegelian dialectic with the ironic force of 'the natural' driving their claims to truth (Cixous, 1986a: 65). But it is the very 'naturalness' of this coupling that Cixous wants to disrupt, for it papers over the universalising grasp

⁹⁴ See note 5 on the issue of Cixous' use of the terms masculine and feminine, woman/man.

⁹⁵ While there has been a significant contribution from feminist writers on the question of binary logic, Elizabeth Grosz's *Sexual Subversions* (1989) provides a concise account in the context of 'French feminism' and Derridean deconstruction. See in particular pp. 26–38.

⁹⁶ Like many of the French theorists of the post-1968 period, Cixous' intellectual milieu was such that she would have been exposed to Alexander Kojève's interpretation of Hegel. Kojève's emphasis of the master/slave dialectic as a defining feature of the journey to self-consciousness has led to ample controversy in recent years. Hegel's own position did not assume that the master/slave dialectic was other than simply one stage on the path to self-consciousness. It was by no means the defining feature of the self/other relation. Nonetheless, within the context of certain feminisms, the master/slave dialectic provides a compelling account of the intersubjective relations that have defined sexual difference. Elizabeth Grosz provides a detailed account of the influence of Kojève's reading of Hegel, in *Sexual Subversions* (1989). See in particular pp. 2–6.

of a history which has never included women. The subject that is Hegel's subject is sexed: male.⁹⁷ While 'History' is indeed the history of this struggle for the appropriation of difference, 'Sorties' can in part be read as a deconstructive challenge to such a history, which offers instead, a herstory of History. By highlighting the *aporia* of sexual difference within History, and heretofore challenging the naturalness of the universal subject, 'Sorties' makes possible the notion that things could be otherwise. As Cixous says:

One could, in fact, imagine that difference or inequality – if one understands by that non-coincidence, asymmetry – leads to desire without negativity, without one of the partner's [sic] succumbing: we would recognise each other in a type of exchange in which each one would keep the other alive and different. (1986a: 79)

But this is not his/story, at least not yet. History, according to Cixous, is marked by a masculinity which produces otherness as a paradox in which the other, of which woman is an archetype, 'is there only to be reappropriated, recaptured, and destroyed as other' (1986a: 71). It is no other at all, for the conditions of meeting are structured dialectically in such a way as to make the possibility of a non-sacrificial encounter barely imaginable. But what if a feminine relation to difference could inaugurate a non-sacrificial economy of desire? As we will see both in the later part of 'Sorties' and more explicitly in my analysis of *The Book of Promethea* in Chapter 5, a feminine economy of desire offers one way of thinking about a positive exchange between subjects for whom difference is the occasion of becoming, not annihilation. Difference, then, becomes a calling into birth, not death. As Morag Shiach says of *The Book of Promethea*, it 'dramatises the possibility of a relationship of intersubjective identification that is not a relationship of negation and death' (1991: 96).

As noted previously, the explicit references that Cixous makes to religious questions in 'Sorties' are actually relatively few. Those she does make are primarily threaded through her critique of the structure of patriarchy. Yet, particularly from her engagement with Freud's account of the rise of patriarchy, we can nevertheless get a sense of why she so vehemently rejects the notion of God as it pertains to both Judaism and Christianity. For Cixous, the God(s) of the Judaic and Christian traditions are firmly tied to phallocentrism, and thus, ironically, to the perpetuation of injustice. At one point in the essay – which is illustrative of the way Cixous is so allusive in her engagement with institutional religion – she lyrically sings the transgressive possibilities of Freud's Dora, whose hysteria, she says, is the embodied, feminine, and sexual subversion of Freudian, phallic, and Mosaic law. And to signify still further the very material connection between patriarchy, religion, and the oppressive discourses of power, she notes that this feminine

⁹⁷ See Genevieve Lloyd's groundbreaking *Man of Reason* (1984) for an account of the phallogocentric history of philosophical discourse. On Hegel see particularly chapters 4–6.

embodied disruption that Dora signifies, this *jouissance*, is in fact the disruption of a Bibliocapitalist social order (1986a: 95), i.e., a disruption of the economies of God, the disruption of the marriage of God and capitalism. In the *Dawn of Phallogentrism*, a subsection within 'Sorties' that we will be considering shortly, Cixous can be seen as elaborating on her sense that the Jewish and Christian God/(s) are born of a masculine imaginary. In the interstices of a changing social order, the maternal – 'for reasons which remain "historically" unknown' – apparently could no longer guarantee life, and she, this divine mother, thus gives way to the rise of a monotheistic paternal God. Against this context of what amounts to a patriarchal will-to-divine power we must, I think, take seriously the positioning of Cixous' later discussions of divine love as it emerges in *Penthesileia* and *Antony and Cleopatra* for it is with these stories of amorous love that she closes 'Sortie', her apparently incendiary manifesto on sexual difference!

Psychoanalysis and the gods of men

Drawing on Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* (1939) and Aeschylus' founding myth of patriarchal law, the *Oresteia*, as reference points for her critique of patriarchy and its affiliations with a masculine religious imaginary, Cixous begins by engaging with Freud's assertion that patriarchy represents a 'triumph of the spiritual over the sensory' (Freud in Cixous, 1986a: 101). Freud considers that a socio-cultural shift from the mother to the father, albeit a mythic one, is a step forward in civilisation. He justifies his claim by reinscribing the binary opposition between mind and body and 'reasons' that, 'since maternity is proved by the senses whereas paternity is a surmise based on a deduction and a premise' (Freud in Cixous, 1986a: 101), the maternal represents a more primitive relationship to being. Freud is relatively silent on the more obvious association of paternity with faith because the opposition that he assumes or constructs between feminine corporeality and masculine spirituality, female immanence and male transcendence, is indebted to classical Greek assumptions about a privileged relation between masculinity and reason. In his mythico-psychoanalytic account of 'human' origins and the rise of the patriarchal God(s), Freud determines that patriarchy is derived from an unconscious anxiety that is provoked by the psychological uncertainty of a man ever really knowing that he is the father of his own offspring. What is at stake here is a battle over the power of generating life. As Cixous says, 'Filiation through the mother cannot be denied, but who is sure of the father?' (1986a: 111). Obviously, there is no equivalent anxiety for the mother, and thus for women. As I noted in Chapter 1, in the context of the story of *agapic* love as generative but apparently exclusively Christian love that the Protestant theological Anders Nygren tells, there is an interesting tension between the Jewish and Christian Gods which is further inflected in Freud's story of the emergence of patriarchy. Nygren's assertion that 'genuine Christian'