

Key Contemporary Thinkers

# IRIGARAY

rachel jones

**Irigaray**  
**Towards a Sexuate Philosophy**

**Rachel Jones**

polity

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First published in 2011 by Polity Press

Polity Press  
65 Bridge Street  
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press  
350 Main Street  
Malden, MA 02148, USA

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ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-5104-0 (hardback)  
ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-5105-7 (paperback)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 10.5 on 12 pt Palatino  
by Toppan Best-set Premedia Limited  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by the MPG Books Group

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## *Acknowledgements*

I would like to thank my colleagues in Philosophy and the 'Women, Culture and Society' Programme at Dundee; the students from those programmes who took the time to read and discuss Irigaray with me; and Nicholas Davey and Stephen Houlgate, who provided valuable encouragement and perspective at key stages of the project.

The feedback from the anonymous readers was invaluable in the development of this book; I would like to thank them for their comments and hope I have responded adequately to their thoughtful suggestions here. My thanks also to Oneworld for the impetus that led to this publication and to Mike Harpley in particular for his generous advice. My editor at Polity, Emma Hutchinson, provided excellent and timely guidance, particularly during the final stages of writing. David Winter's patient editorial assistance and support was greatly appreciated.

Special thanks to Christine Battersby, who first introduced me to Irigaray's work and who has taught me so much about reading (and writing about) philosophical texts; and to my friends – who were often my readers – for their philosophical insight and generosity with their time and support, especially Tina Chanter, Catherine Constable, Beth Lord, Aislinn O'Donnell, Johanna Oksala, Andrea Rehberg, Fanny Söderbäck, and Alison Stone.

With thanks to my mother, June, and my sisters, Beki and Naomi, for their constant love and support; and to Kurt, for reading and commenting on multiple drafts, for thinking with me, and for helping me to think further.

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## List of Abbreviations

- BEW *Between East and West: From Singularity to Community*, trans. S. Pluháček (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002). First published as *Entre Orient et Occident: De la singularité à la communauté* (Paris: Grasset, 1999).
- DBT *Democracy Begins Between Two*, trans. K. Anderson (London: Athlone, 2000).
- EP *Elemental Passions*, trans. J. Collie and J. Still (London: Athlone, 1992). First published as *Passions élémentaires* (Paris: Minuit, 1982).
- ESD *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. C. Burke and G. C. Gill (London: Athlone, 1993). First published as *Éthique de la différence sexuelle* (Paris: Minuit, 1984).
- ILTY *I Love to You: Sketch for a Felicity Within History*, trans. A. Martin (London: Routledge, 1996). First published as *J'aime à toi: Esquisse d'une félicité dans l'histoire* (Paris: Grasset, 1992).
- S *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. G. C. Gill (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985). First published as *Speculum de l'autre femme* (Paris: Minuit, 1974).
- Sf *Speculum de l'autre femme* (Paris: Minuit, 1974).
- TS *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. C. Porter with C. Burke (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985). First published as *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris: Minuit, 1977).



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## *Introduction: Towards a Sexuate Philosophy*

This book seeks to guide the reader through Luce Irigaray's transformation of western thought, showing how her project – at once critical and creative – generates the terms for a sexuate philosophy. The approach taken thus involves positioning Irigaray primarily as a feminist *philosopher*.<sup>1</sup> This immediately raises numerous questions: what kind of feminist is Irigaray? What makes her work specifically philosophical? Why does it matter to position her as a philosopher? Indeed, given the patriarchal bias that her own work locates at the very heart of western philosophical thought, why should feminists have anything to do with philosophy? Conversely, why should philosophers not particularly concerned with feminism have anything to do with Irigaray?

In response, one of the aims of this book is to show that Irigaray's sustained, if profoundly critical, engagement with western thought has much to contribute to key philosophical debates concerning metaphysics and ontology (questions about reality and being) as well as epistemology and ethics (questions about knowledge and value) – not least because she challenges the very terms in which these debates are traditionally framed. At the same time, the book aims to provide an in-depth guide to the philosophical grounding of Irigaray's project for those drawing on her work to address specifically feminist concerns or issues of sex and gender. Such readers may approach Irigaray from a range of diverse fields including gender and women's studies, queer theory, social and political thought, geography, history, film, art, literature, or architecture, as well as philosophy. The book seeks to offer an

opening onto aspects of Irigaray's work that may be less readily accessible for those without a prior training in the history of western philosophical thought. But perhaps more importantly, it hopes to show why it is worth undertaking the intensive philosophical work Irigaray demands of us, if our aim is to challenge and transform the inequitable gendered structures – as well as the gender blindness – that inform western thought and culture.

The reason for foregrounding Irigaray's work as a philosopher is not because feminist philosophy has priority over other areas of feminist thought and praxis. Irigaray herself has conducted her theoretical work alongside her ongoing practice as a psychoanalyst and teacher, as well as her involvement in the realm of practical politics. Nor should the importance of other discourses to Irigaray's own work be underestimated, most notably those of psychoanalysis and linguistics. Rather than a question of priority, the issue is one of specificity: this book aims to introduce readers to the specifically philosophical dimensions of Irigaray's feminist project along with the ways in which she transforms the terms of both traditional and contemporary philosophical debate.

In keeping with this aim, the book's guiding thread is Irigaray's groundbreaking analysis of the history of western thought, *Speculum of the Other Woman*. In many ways, *Speculum* is feminist philosophy's first critique. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant famously displaces sceptical doubts about whether our knowledge conforms to the reality of objects by showing how objects necessarily conform to our cognitive faculties.<sup>2</sup> He thereby revolutionizes thought by grounding knowledge in the human subject rather than the objects known. In *Speculum*, Irigaray sceptically re-examines the philosophical subject's dependence on the object and introduces new doubts about the supposed self-sufficiency and universality of that subject. She does so by showing how the subject's identity is typically secured against a material, sensible realm aligned with the figure of woman. The supposedly 'universal' rational subject thus turns out to be implicitly male, while woman is mapped onto the position of object and 'other'. This pattern of oppositional thinking means that woman is defined against a male subject, rather than in terms of her sexed specificity or as a subject in her own right. Despite his revolutionary approach, Kant is seen as repeating and reinforcing this pattern, together with the forgetting of sexual difference it implies. Indeed, according to Irigaray, western philosophy since Plato has failed to think sexual difference, in that it has failed to think this difference *positively*. Instead, it has reduced the difference between men and women to a specular structure in which

woman is always the 'other' or mirror-image of the self-same (male) subject. By reminding philosophy that each human being is born from a mother who is also a woman, Irigaray asks us to remember that a human being is two: western thought must therefore make space for *two* (different) subjects by attending to the irreducible sexual difference between them. She thereby seeks a revolution in thought no less significant or transformative than Kant's.

Whether one agrees or disagrees with the details of Irigaray's analyses, what matters more is the dramatic shift in perspective *Speculum* endeavours to produce, re-attuning philosophy to sexual difference and opening the way towards a culture of two, irreducibly different, subjects. While *Speculum* is thus a key text for understanding Irigaray's project, it demands a familiarity with philosophy that some readers may initially find off-putting. Thus, a central aim of this book is to aid readers in engaging directly with *Speculum* itself; in turn, *Speculum* will serve as a frame through which to trace key aspects of Irigaray's critical and transformative encounter with the philosophical tradition. The following chapters thus offer in-depth analyses of specific sections of *Speculum*, while pointing ahead to connections with Irigaray's later work.

These connections will be particularly foregrounded in Chapters 6 and 7; however, the purpose of this book is not to give a descriptive summary of Irigaray's extensive body of work, nor even of all her key texts. Rather, its aim is to provide readers with a way of approaching Irigaray – of 'following her trajectory', as one commentator puts it – that will aid them in reading and engaging with her texts for themselves.<sup>3</sup> In particular, it seeks to equip readers to approach Irigaray's writings with an attunement to their philosophical dimensions as well as to the ways in which philosophy is transformed via what Irigaray calls the '*interpretive lever*' of sexual difference (*TS*, 72). This lever operates not only by drawing critical attention to the specific claims western philosophers have made about women, but by revealing the gendering that marks the fundamental conceptual structures of their thought. As Irigaray shows, this gendering is paradoxically dependent on a blindspot regarding sexual difference. It is this blindspot that her work seeks to expose and to overcome.

## Sexuate Subjects, Sexuate Others

A further key aim of this book is to show that, right from the start, Irigaray's project is never merely critical. While the intricate textual



fabric of *Speculum* undoubtedly seeks to reveal and displace the blindspots of the tradition, it also contains many of the ideas which Irigaray will go on to elaborate more fully in her later works so as to cultivate ways of thinking, writing and living which are attentive to sexual difference. Among the keys to this project is Irigaray's notion of the 'sexuate', a neologism used in English translations of her work (for the French *sexué*) as well as by Irigaray herself when writing and speaking in English. Although it already appears in the English translation of *Speculum*, this term becomes increasingly prominent in Irigaray's later texts where she writes of the need for sexuate rights, sexuate identity, and a sexuate culture characterized by two (sexuate) subjects. In many ways, the notion of the sexuate captures Irigaray's distinctive approach to the question of sexual difference; thus, one of the central tasks of this book is to unfold its significance. For now, however, it is worth noting that the 'sexuate' refers neither to a mode of being determined by biological sex nor to a cultural overlay of gendered meanings inscribed on a 'tabula rasa' of passively receptive matter. The 'sexuate' does not separate the becomings that shape our bodily being from the production of social and cultural meanings or behavioural dispositions. Rather, it signals the way that sexual difference is articulated through our different modes of being and becoming, that is, in bodily, social, linguistic, aesthetic, erotic, and political forms. In this book, I will move fairly fluidly between the 'sexuate' and 'sexual difference' (as does Irigaray). Broadly speaking, however, I understand sexual difference to be that which western culture has forgotten and which Irigaray seeks to recover, while the sexuate involves taking up a positive relation to sexual difference by acknowledging it as the irreducible difference which inflects every aspect of our being.

One reason why it is important to emphasize that the 'sexuate' maps neither onto pre-discursive biological differences nor onto gender understood as a purely discursive construct is because of the pervasiveness (and importance) of this kind of sex/gender distinction in much Anglo-American feminist debate. According to this distinction, 'sex' is generally understood as referring to our bodily existence as male or female, that is, as a matter of biology and anatomy, while 'gender' is used to refer to masculinity and femininity as cultural and social constructions. Many feminist thinkers have – for good reason – sought to privilege the (changeable) cultural constructions of gender and been suspicious of attempts to root social and political structures in appeals to the body: such appeals illegitimately make human structures seem



'natural' and hence *un-changeable* in ways that have all too often been used to legitimate discrimination against women. At the same time, others have been more suspicious of the normative power invested in the sex/gender distinction itself, and hence the supposed 'naturalness' of this very distinction has in turn been called into question, notably via the work of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, part of the subversiveness and originality of Butler's position lies in the way she so thoroughly problematizes any sustainable distinction between (biological) 'sex' and (socially constructed) 'gender'. However, for the purposes of reading Irigaray, the most important point is that the sex/gender distinction which has been so important to Anglo-American feminist debates does not map neatly onto direct French equivalents:<sup>5</sup> the terms '*masculin*' and '*féminin*' have a broader significance than their English counterparts, while '*mâle*' and '*femelle*' are used in a much narrower, more strictly biological sense (e.g. when determining the sex of animals). For this reason, the work of thinkers like Irigaray, as well as others who came to be aligned with the 'new French feminisms', is not structured around a clear sex/gender divide.<sup>6</sup> Thus, when Irigaray uses the French '*féminin*', this needs to be heard not as a direct equivalent to the English concept of the 'feminine' (understood as a culturally scripted set of attitudes, gestures and roles), but as encompassing women's bodily existence as female, as well as the social and cultural significances of that bodily mode of being.

As others have noted, this absence of a clear-cut sex/gender distinction is to some extent an advantage, given the ways in which this distinction can trap feminist theory back into a mind/body or nature/culture divide that it typically seeks to escape.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, one of the unfortunate effects of re-imposing a sex/gender distinction onto Irigaray's work is that this tends to lead to the charge of 'essentialism': read through this frame, Irigaray's appeals to female specificity are reduced to references to an unchanging and unchangeable body (women's 'sex') that determines what women are as well as how they act and think. I agree with many other readers of Irigaray that the charge of essentialism is misplaced, an issue I return to more fully in Chapter 6. For Irigaray, while biological features undoubtedly set certain limits on our modes of being, this is far from saying that we are simply determined by our biology. On the contrary, Irigaray makes it repeatedly clear that what is at stake is how biological differences are represented and what kinds of social and cultural value they are given. Indeed,