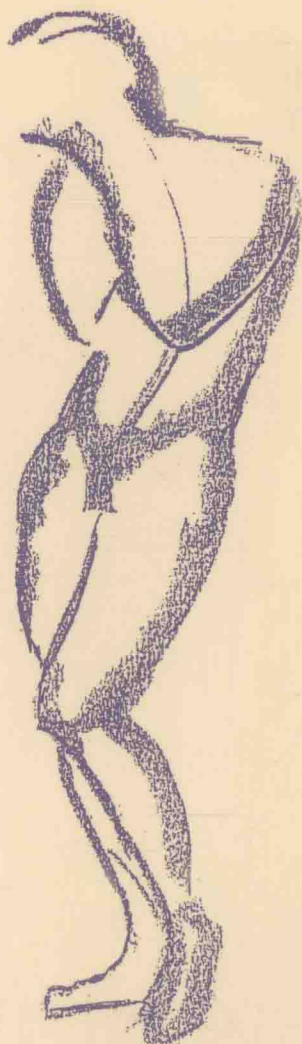


SEXES AND GENEALOGIES

LUCE IRIGARAY

TRANSLATED BY GILLIAN C. GILL



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Columbia University Press
NEW YORK

Columbia University Press wishes to express its appreciation of assistance given by the government of France through Le Ministère de la Culture in the preparation of this translation.

Columbia University Press
New York Chichester, West Sussex
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Irigaray, Luce.

[*Sexes et parentés*. English]

Sexes and genealogies / Luce Irigaray; translated by
Gillian C. Gill.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-231-07032-2

ISBN 0-231-07033-0 (pbk.)

1. Sex differences (Psychology)—History. 2. Women—
Psychology—History. 3. Feminist theology. I. Title.

BF692.2.I7413 1993

92-32495

155.3'3—dc20

CIP



Casebound editions of Columbia University Press books
are printed on permanent and durable acid-free paper.
Printed in the United States of America

c 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

p 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Like my earlier book, Ethics of Sexual Difference, this volume is a collection of lectures. They were not all addressed to the same public, they were not all given in the same places and the same circumstances, and therefore there are variations in style, tone, and mode of development. The essential issue, however, is always whether it is possible to advance an ethics governing the relationship between the sexes. In this particular collection, the issue is discussed along the double axis of the genders as we know them today and as they have come into being over time—what I call their genealogies. No social and cultural relationship between the sexes is possible without that double consideration. Actually, our History has collapsed male and female genealogies into one or two family triangles, all sired by the male. The oedipus complex as elaborated by Freud is one example of such triangles. But Freud's model can be traced back at least as far as ancient Greece. In order to fuse two genealogical trees, it is always necessary to have recourse to a transcendent and unique God-Father. Sometimes his name is Zeus, sometimes Jupiter. He is also God the Father of Judeo-Christian tradition. Respect for God is possible as long as no one realizes that he is a mask concealing the fact that men have taken sole possession of the divine, of identity, and of kinship. Once we give this whole issue the attention and serious consideration it deserves, however, it becomes obvious that God is being used by men to oppress women and that, therefore, God must be questioned and not simply neutered in the current pseudoliberal way. Religion as a social phenomenon cannot be ignored. Marx fails to offer us any exhaustive guidance on this point, and his disciples risk perpetuating religious sectarianism and repression because they lack*

*Ithaca: Cornell University Press, translated by Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill, forthcoming 1993.—Tr.

Preamble

any adequate analysis of the materiality of culture and language. Claims that men, races, sexes, are equal in point of fact signal a disdain or a denial for real phenomena and give rise to an imperialism that is even more pernicious than those that retain traces of difference. Today it is all too clear that there is no equality of wealth, and claims of equal rights to culture have blown up in our faces. All those who advocate equality need to come to terms with the fact that their claims produce a greater and greater split between the so-called equal units and those authorities or transcendences used to measure or outmeasure them. Whether we like it or not, these authorities are still called capital or profit, and God(s), Man/Men. Any woman who is seeking equality (with whom? with what?) needs to give this problem serious consideration. It is understandable that women should wish for equal pay, equal career opportunities. But what is their real goal? It is all too easy to make the argument that women cannot do equal work because of pregnancy, child care, housework, etc. This does not mean that women should be paid less. It does mean that salaries and social recognition have to be negotiated on the basis of identity—not equality. Without women, there is no society. Women have to proclaim this message loud and clear and demand a justice that fits their identity instead of some temporary rights befitting justice for men. To achieve this goal, women must learn how they relate both to gender and to kinship. Sexual difference represents one of the great hopes for the future. It is not to be found in reproduction (whether natural or artificial) but in the access the two sexes have to culture. Childbearing is just one effect of this. If childbearing becomes a goal in itself, it often becomes confused with respect for nature. These lectures explain what misunderstandings and confusions are covered over by the reproductive mandate. Often reproduction takes the place of respect for nature and the world. In our day and age it seems less important to analyze where the split between nature and culture occurs than to mark the places where growth has been sterilized, misunderstood, repressed. Our culture has in some ways become too simple, in other ways too complex. We need to regain places where measure is possible, and I believe this can be done if we look at the cultural becoming of the sexes, as defined in relation to their genealogies.

The first four of these lectures have already been published. For this collection I have reread and revised them as they bring special light to bear on the lectures that follow, particularly in regard to the psychosocio-religious dimension. My goal in this volume is also to conjure up

the communities, the cities, the places where these lectures were given and thus to make them better known. The essays in this collection for the most part present the material as it was offered to the public on first occasions. My thanks go out to all the people who invited me to speak and engage in cultural exchange with them.

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EACH SEX MUST HAVE ITS OWN RIGHTS

In the field of law, one sector that is currently mutating is the relationship between the male and female sexes, particularly insofar as the family and its relation to reproduction are concerned. Our cultures are seeing changes in the laws relating to the obligation to bear children, the right to contraception and abortion, the choice of name for women and children within the marriage, freedom to choose a domicile for the members of the couple, the relevance of paying a salary for housework, length of maternity leaves, protection for women in the workplace, etc. These measures cut across lines of natural law, penal codes, civil codes, religious law. Little thought is given to what the whole field represented by these different parts might mean.

Hegel did take on the project of interpreting how a whole society or culture might function. His aim was to describe and work out how the *Geist* or spirit of man as individual and as citizen functioned. The weakest link in his system seems to lie in his interpretation of spirit and right within the family. Even though he consistently sought to break up undifferentiated units, Hegel is unable to think of the family as anything but a single substance within which particular individuals lose their rights. Except the right to life, perhaps? Which is not that simple. . . .

THE ORIGIN OF THE FAMILY . . .

In the chapter of *The Phenomenology of Mind* that deals with the family, Hegel concentrates the first part of his analysis on the relation of man to spirit in culture. The chapter initially concerns the issue of ethics and their relation to morality. In this passage Hegel says something very important about the right of genders. Yet this seems to have been lost in the implications Hegel draws about the spirit of the people (*Volk*) and of peoples.

What is the issue here? In the analyses he devotes to the family as it relates to the state, Hegel explains that the daughter who remains

faithful to the laws relating to her mother has to be cast out of the city, out of society. She cannot be violently killed, but she must be imprisoned, deprived of liberty, air, light, love, marriage, children. In other words, she is condemned to a slow and lonely death. The character Antigone represents that daughter. Hegel's analysis is supported by the content of Sophocles's tragedies.

What is the nature of the laws that Antigone respects? They are religious laws relating to the burial of her brother who has been killed in a war among men. These laws have to do with the cultural obligations owed to the mother's blood, the blood shared by the brothers and sisters in the family. The duty to this blood will be denied and outlawed as the culture becomes patriarchal. This tragic episode in life—and in war—between the genders represents the passage into patriarchy. The daughter is forbidden to respect the blood bonds with her mother. From the spiritual viewpoint, these bonds have a religious quality, they move in consonance with the fertility of the earth and its flowers and fruits, they protect love in its bodily dimension, they keep watch over female fruitfulness within and without marriage (depending on whether the kingdom of Aphrodite or of Demeter is invoked), they correspond to times of peace.

Under the rule of patriarchy the girl is separated from her mother and from her family in general. She is transplanted into the genealogy of her husband; she must live with him, carry his name, bear his children, etc. The first time that this takes place, the move is recorded as the abduction of a woman by a man-lover. A war breaks out among men to recapture the stolen woman and bring her back to her community of origin.

Our code of morality today is still derived from those very ancient events. This means that the love between mother and daughter, which the patriarchal regime has made impossible (as Freud in fact reinforces for our benefit), has been transformed into the woman's obligation to devote herself to the cult of the children of her legal husband and to the husband himself as a male child. In fact, despite the incest taboo, there seems little indication that man has sublimated the natural immediacy of his relationship to the mother. Rather, man has transferred that relationship to his wife as mother substitute. In this way the man-woman couple is always out of phase by a generation, since male and female genealogies are collapsed into a single genealogy: that of the *husband*.

THE DOUBLE MEANING OF THE WORD NATURE

The achievements recorded by recent movements for women's liberation have failed to establish a new *ethics* of sexuality. They nonetheless serve notice to us that ethics is the crucial issue because they have released so much violent, undirected energy, desperate for an outlet. They fall back into unmediated naturalness: the obligation to give birth, violence barely channeled into sado-masochistic scenarios, regression to animality (with no display?) in the erotic act, fear and destructiveness between the sexes. . . .

Obviously, I am not advocating a return to a more repressive, moralizing, conception of sexuality. On the contrary, what we need is to work out an art of the sexual, a sexed culture, instead of merely using our bodies to release neuropsychic tensions and produce babies.

When women are forced to bear children within the genealogy of the husband, this historically marks the beginning of a *failure of respect for nature*. A new notion or concept of nature is set up, which takes the place of earth's fertility, abandons its religious quality, its link to the divinity of women and to the mother-daughter relation. Paradoxically, the cult of the mother in our cultures today is often associated with a scorn or neglect of nature. It is true that in patriarchal genealogy we are dealing with the cult of the *son's mother*, to the detriment of the daughter's mother. The cult of the son's mother ties our tradition into the whole mother-son incest issue and the taboo upon it. Our societies forget fascination with that incest leads us to neglect the genealogy of the woman, which has been collapsed inside the man's.

Once one genealogy has been reduced to the other's, it becomes impossible or at least difficult for the casual thinker to define two different genders or sexes. Man takes his orientation from his relation to his father insofar as his name and property are concerned and from his mother in relation to unmediated nature. Woman must submit to her husband and to reproduction. This means that gender as sexuality is never sublimated. *Gender is confused with species*. Gender becomes the human race, human nature, etc., as defined from within patriarchal culture. Gender thus defined corresponds to a race of men (*un peuple d'hommes*) who refuse, whether consciously or not, the possibility of another gender: the female. All that is left is

the human race/gender (*le genre humain*) for which the only real value of sex is to reproduce the species. From this point of view, *gender is always subservient to kinship*. Man and woman would not come to maturity with a thinking and a culture relative to the sexual difference of each. They would be more or less sexed children and adolescents, and then reproductive adults. In this perspective, the family serves the interests of property, of material patrimony, and of the reproduction of children. The family is not a small unit in which individual differences can be respected and cultivated.

As for life, the conclusion is inevitable that rights are unequally distributed and frequently turn into duties, especially for women: the duty to bear children, sexual duties. No legislation offers women protection. This anomaly is often accounted for by the power of religious morality in questions of social practice and reproduction. This influence, which is the residue of ancient gynocratic traditions, is marked today by patriarchal imperatives: give property to the husband, children to the State. . . .

We need to reinterpret the idea of nature that underlies such imperatives. Often, it is less a question of life than of an idea of life and of a valid lifestyle. But value, and values, have been codified in the men's camp: they are not appropriate to women, or not appropriated by them. The law has not been written to defend the life and property of women. A few partial changes in rights for women have been won in recent times. But even these are subject to recall. They are won by partial and local pressures whereas what is needed is a full-scale rethinking of the law's duty to offer justice to *two genders that differ* in their needs, their desires, their properties.

SEX AS AN ETHICAL DIMENSION

When faced by questions such as these, many men and women start talking about *love*. But love is only possible when there are two parties and in a relationship that is not submissive to one gender, not subject to reproduction. It requires that the rights of both male and female be written into the legal code. If the rights of the couple were indeed written into the legal code, this would serve to convert individual morality into collective ethics, to transform the relations of the genders within the family or its substitute into rights and duties that involve the culture as a whole. Religion can then rediscover how each gender interprets its relation to the divine—a reli-

gion freed from its role of guardian of a single gender and financial trustee for the property of one gender more than of the other. Hardly a godly role! Furthermore, once the rights of each gender have been written into the legal documents representing society or culture, this will mean that natural law is no longer separate from civil law, and that a concrete private law is set up that takes the daily needs of each one of us into account. What does the right to private property mean when excessive noise and odor pollution and the organized violence of the media, etc., destroy the sense *perceptions* indispensable for life and mind? Such a law is merely an abstract demand, based on money and careless of the bodies, love, and intelligence of the men and women who share an often limited and expensive living space.

Such living conditions do not contribute to the development of human peoples. How often our nerves are set on edge. We are driven to compete in the rat race of modern life—so maddened and overwhelmed by the pace of existence that we embrace war as a means of regaining some measure of order and opening some new space onto the future. This was often true in the past. It will continue to be so if we fail to set up an ethics of the couple as an intermediary place between individuals, peoples, States. Wars break out when peoples move too far from their natural possibilities, when abstract energy builds up so much that it can no longer be controlled by subjects or reduced to one or more concrete responsibilities. Collective madness, then, is the name we give to the concrete, sacrificial goal we set in order to reduce the rising tide of abstraction.

In the exercise of a social and cultural ethics that acknowledged sexual difference, History might find a more continuous course of development, one less subject to periodic expansions and reductions that defy society's control.

BODY AGAINST BODY: IN RELATION TO THE MOTHER

Montreal, May 31, 1980
Fifth Conference on Mental Health
in the province of Quebec,
entitled "Women and Madness"

I should like to begin by thanking the organizing committee of the conference on mental health for choosing "Women and Madness" as the theme of this meeting and for thus playing some part in breaking the silence and invisibility that afflict so many women.

I am surprised—and, sadly, am not at all surprised! but I prefer to keep on being surprised—that so few male practitioners have come to the conference today to hear what women have to say about their madness. Most women are treated by male physicians, and the absence of these men already tells us something about their practice, particularly their psychiatric practice. They seem to have so little interest in what women say. To establish a diagnosis and prescribe a treatment, men need only each other. Why bother listening to the female patient? This attitude goes far to explain the therapeutic choices available to these male doctors.

Yet how often have I heard men say how annoying it is that women get together for meetings and how much they, the men, would like to be able to attend and find out what is going on. So their absence here today is all the more significant. They were not excluded from this conference, at which women speakers would be in the majority. Why hasn't their curiosity brought them here? The few men who are in attendance today should make an effort to try and understand how and why they come to be exceptions!

Could it be that those other men, the majority of practitioners, have refrained from coming because of the power issue? Men are not leading this conference. Or are they simply ashamed to make an appearance, in light of the statistics offered this morning on the frightening number of women committed to psychiatric institutions (usually committed by their families, with the hospital serving as a

The title of this speech or essay, "*Le corps-à-corps avec la mère*," has no simple translation in English. The expression *corps-à-corps*, which recurs throughout the text, usually denotes armed combat between two warriors—hand-to-hand fighting. However, it is the word *corps* (body) that is crucial to Irigaray, who is looking to some new relationship between mother and child that accepts the body of both parties and moves toward a new imaginary and a new symbolic.—Tr.

place of incarceration) who are then treated with chemotherapy, not psychotherapy? Unless it is all a matter of professional disdain for a conference organized by and for women? Or of sexual indifference? I leave the interpretation open.

— In any case, the absence of male doctors is, in and of itself, one explanation of madness in women: their words are not heard. Women and their words are not given the keys to the city when it comes to developing the diagnoses and therapeutic decisions that concern them. Serious scientific discourse and practice remain the privilege of men who have control of politics in general as well as of our most private sphere as women. Everywhere, in everything, men's speech, men's values, dreams, and desires are law. Everywhere and in everything men define the function and the social role of women, right down to the sexual identity that women are to have—or not to have. Men know, men have access to the truth, not us. We barely, at times, have access to fiction!

Rather to his own surprise, one particularly “honest” male friend admitted to me not long ago: “You know, you’re right. I always thought that all women were mad.” And he added: “Obviously that was one way of avoiding the issue of my own madness.”

This is in fact how the question needs to be posed. Each sex has a relation to madness. Every desire has a relation to madness. But it would seem that one desire has been taken as wisdom, moderation, truth, leaving to the other sex the weight of a madness that cannot be acknowledged or accommodated.

— This relation of desire to madness works in a privileged manner in the relation to the mother, for man as well as for woman. But all too often man rids himself of that madness and unloads it upon woman—or women.

— The relation to the mother is a mad desire, because it is the “dark continent” par excellence. It remains in the shadow of our culture, it is night and hell. But men cannot do without it anymore than—or perhaps less than—women can. And if today's society is so polarized by the issues of contraception and abortion, surely this reflects the need to escape the question of the imaginary and symbolic relation to the mother, to the woman-mother. What is woman, apart from her social and material function in reproducing children, nursing, renewing the work force?

The maternal function underlies the social order as well as the