

LUCE IRIGARAY AND 'THIS SEX WHICH IS NOT ONE'

Luce Irigaray, like H el ene Cixous, follows the thinking of post-structuralist theorists in asking questions about the relationship between language and bodies, specifically male and female bodies and masculine and feminine language. Like Cixous, she focuses on the female body and how it has been constructed in phallogocentric systems like Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Irigaray, however, discusses the question of a female or feminine sexuality in more depth than Cixous; she wants specifically to explore the question of a feminine *jouissance* and what that might be when defined on its own terms, in reference to the female body only.

'Female sexuality has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters,' Irigaray declares in the first sentence of her essay 'This Sex Which Is Not One.' She's following Freud here, who defined all active erotic behavior as masculine, and all passive behavior as feminine; he also labeled clitoral sexual pleasure as active and masculine, and vaginal sexual pleasure as passive and feminine. Freud declared that the clitoris was literally a 'little penis,' insofar as it provided a masculine/phallic pleasure for women. Irigaray points out that, using Freud's definitions, female sexual organs and female eroticism are defined only in terms of male sex organs and male eroticism. If the female sex organ is the clitoris, then it is really a penis, and one smaller and less powerful than the male version; if the female sex organ is the vagina, then it is passive, waiting to be filled with a penis.

Note the 'if's in the above statements: if the female sex organ is the clitoris, if the female sex organ is the vagina. This, for Irigaray, is a central flaw in psychoanalytic theory and in Western cultural thought: we don't know how to talk about female sexuality, and female bodily configurations, because we are focused on finding the *one* female sexual organ. Irigaray points out that Freud has 'nothing to say' about woman and her sexual pleasure: 'nothing' because Freudian psychoanalysis defines female pleasure solely in terms of

male bodies, and 'nothing' because Freud defines female genitalia as 'nothing,' since there is 'nothing' to see, 'nothing' visibly present, in the supposedly already-castrated female.

Freudian psychoanalysis insists on each sex having only one visible and nameable sex organ, based on Freud's notion that the penis is the only male sex organ; in so doing, he claims women have no sex organ, and also ignores all the other parts, such as testicles, that are part of the male body. Irigaray asks why Freud, and Western culture in general, needs to have just sex organ for each sex. Is it because we need to have a single word, a unique signifier, to represent sexuality in one specific locus on the body? Irigaray here is questioning the basic structure of Western metaphysics, the binary opposition, which requires that there be one signifier, and only one, on each side of the slash.

For male sexuality, this has been relatively unproblematic, as Freud and Lacan both agree that 'penis' is the signifier for male sexuality, the left side of the slash. But if 'penis' is one side of a binary opposition, what's on the other side? Look at some of the possibilities:

- Penis/vagina
- Penis/clitoris
- Penis/no penis
- Penis/nothing

All of these definitions (and perhaps more) appear in psychoanalytic attempts to name *the* female sexual organ that is the counterpart of the penis. For poststructuralist feminists such as Irigaray, this list is inherently deconstructive: if you can't find one term, and one term only, to be on the right side of the slash, the opposite of 'penis,' then the whole system of binary oppositions, the phallogocentric system of Western metaphysics, starts to fall apart.

Female sexual pleasure, or *jouissance*, according to Irigaray, is of a different order, in a different economy than male sexual pleasure, because the male and female bodies are configured so differently. Man needs an instrument with which to touch himself, she argues; if his pleasure is indeed based in his penis, then something else – a hand, a vagina, a mouth, language – has to touch the penis in order to produce pleasure. The female sexual organs – and Irigaray insists that they are plural – are, by contrast, always in contact with each other; the layers of labia enfold the clitoris and provide constant

autoerotic contact. Thus female sexual pleasure needs no external object, but is complete unto itself.

From this, Irigaray posits heterosexual intercourse as a 'violation,' an interruption of female autoerotic pleasure, as the penis forces apart the labia and forces female sexuality back into a phallic order. She calls this a form of 'rape,' naming heterosexual intercourse as 'foreign to the feminine.'

Irigaray links the male desire for intercourse with the desire to return to the original union with the mother's body, which is forbidden in both Freud and Lacan's accounts of human development. In intercourse, then, the female partner's body is only a 'prop' for a male fantasy of reunion and re-merging. The female partner's desire – which, presumably, is the same as the male's desire, that is, to return to and merge with the maternal body – has no place in heterosexual intercourse, according to this model; the woman can't fantasize that she's joining with the mother's body when the man is having that fantasy while joining with her body. In fact, Irigaray claims, the man's pursuit of his own desire to merge with the mother's body, expressed as vaginal intercourse, actively interrupts the woman's communion with her own autoeroticism, with her labia constantly touching each other.

Irigaray is advocating for masturbation or lesbian sexual activity as the only means for female desire to be expressed in female terms. She argues that feminine desire, so long molded by and into masculine parameters, is like a 'lost civilization,' one which has a 'different alphabet' and a 'different language.' This lost desire, lost civilization, lost language was 'submerged by the logic which has dominated the West since the Greeks.' This logic is what Derrida discusses as logocentrism and Cixous names phallogocentrism: the preference for presence over absence, for things that are visible over things that are invisible, for things that have a definite and singular shape or form over things that have an ambiguous or fluid shape or form. Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic constructions of male and female sexual desire follow this logic, according to Irigaray, preferring the visible bounded penis to the hidden and amorphous female genitalia, which become 'nothing to see.'

Irigaray points out how dependent the phallogocentric Symbolic Order is on the register of the visible, as Lacan requires that entry into the Symbolic be preceded by the misrecognition of one's self in the mirror stage as a visual experience. The Western emphasis on

vision, which marks female genitalia as 'nothing to see,' subsumes all other sensory registers to that of vision. Touch thus belongs to the realm of the repressed, the unconscious, the realm of the maternal body and the Real which must be abandoned in order to enter the specular Symbolic Order. For Irigaray, the primary form of female desire, of female eroticism based solely on the configuration of the female body, lies in touch, not in sight, and hence female desire does not require the unity and phallogorphism which the visual dimensions of phallogocentrism demand.

Women's pleasure, their *jouissance*, comes from touch, and from the idea that woman is constantly touching herself because her 'sex,' her genitalia, are not singular but multiple. Similarly, according to Irigaray, female language – Cixous's *l'écriture féminine* – is equally multiple and amorphous, rather than single and linear, like the penis (in psychoanalytic thought). The female body can speak from everywhere, in Irigaray's view, because the female body experiences pleasure everywhere. Like Cixous, Irigaray does not try to define or categorize this language of female erotic pleasure, noting instead that it is inherently slippery, unfixed, fluid, and doesn't make 'sense' in the way that traditional phallogocentric language does.

Irigaray's critique of the phallogocentric Symbolic Order is more radical than Cixous's critique, if only because Irigaray rejects heterosexuality as irredeemably patriarchal. She argues, in this essay and elsewhere, that the articulation and celebration of lesbian sexuality will work as a deconstructive force, shaking the foundations of patriarchal phallogocentric systems of meaning and exchange. The radical potential of non-heterosexual forms of writing and desire is an important part of queer theory, the topic of the next chapter.

NOTES

- 1 Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979, p. 3.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- 3 Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa,' in Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle, eds, *Critical Theory Since 1965*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1986, p. 310.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 319.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 314.
- 6 *Ibid.*, pp. 318–19.