Also available in English by the same author:
Speculum of the Other Woman

Luce Irigaray

THIS SEX WHICH IS NOT ONE

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"cloacal" eroticism constitutes an intermediate stage between anal eroticism and the much later eroticization of the vagina. Thus the vagina is only an annex of the anus, or to be more precise it is not yet differentiated from it, and the cloacal opening as a whole is the dominant prephallic and postphallic erogenous zone, right up to the stage of postpubertal vaginal eroticization. 24

The Symbolic Order: Jacques Lacan

Fifteen or twenty years after the controversies over female sexuality had cooled down, after the issues had been forgotten (repressed anew?), Jacques Lacan reopened the debate. He sought to stress, in particular, the fact that the questions had often been badly put, and also to draw up a balance sheet for those issues that, in his opinion, remained unresolved. Among these latter, he evoked new developments in physiology concerning the functional distinction between "chromosomal sex" and "hormonal sex," as well as research on "the libidinal advantage of the male hormone," which led him to reexamine the patterns according to which the "break" between the organic and the subjective occurs; he also brought back to our attention our continuing ignorance as to "the nature of the vaginal orgasm" and the exact role of the clitoris in the displacement of caathexes in erogenous zones and in "objects" of desire. 25

The Phallus as Signifier of Desire

As for the divergent psychoanalytic opinions about female sexual development, Lacan criticizes those points of view that dis-


Psychoanalytic Theory: Another Look

Tance themselves from Freud's for neglecting the perspective of structural organization that the castration complex implies. An inadequate differentiation of the registers of the real, the imaginary, and the symbolic, and of their respective impacts in deprivation, frustration, and castration, for example, leads psychoanalysts to reduce the symbolic dimension—the real issue in castration—to a frustration of the oral type ("Propos directifs"). In order to delineate more sharply the symbolic articulation that castration has to effect, Lacan specifies that what is at issue as potentially lacking in castration is not so much the penis—a real organ—as the phallus, or the signifier of desire. And it is in the mother that castration must, first and foremost, be located by the child, if he is to exit from the imaginary orbit of maternal desire and be returned to the father, that is, to the possessor of the phallic emblem that makes the mother desire him and prefer him to the child.

Thus the operation of the symbolic order becomes possible, and the father’s duty is to act as its guarantee. Thus he prohibits both mother and child from satisfying their desires, whether the mother identifies the child with the phallus that she lacks, or whether the child is assured of being the bearer of the phallus by satisfying, incestuously, the mother’s desire. Depriving them of the fulfillment of their desire, of the "fullness" of pleasure, the father introduces them, or reintroduces them, to the exigencies of the symbolization of desire through language, that is, to the necessity that desire pass by way of a demand. The ceaselessly recurring hiatus between demand and satisfaction of desire maintains the function of the phallus as the signifier of a lack which assures and regulates the economy of libidinal exchanges in their double dimension of quest for love and of specifically sexual satisfaction.

To Be a Phallus or to Have One

"But one may, by reckoning only with the function of the phallus, set forth the structures that will govern the relations
between the sexes. Let us say that these relations will turn
around a ‘to be’ and a ‘to have’. . . . Paradoxical as this for-
mulation may seem, we shall say that it is in order to be the phallus,
that is to say, the signifier of the desire of the Other, that a
woman will reject an essential part of her femininity, namely,
all her attributes in the masquerade. It is for that which she is not—
that is, the phallus—that she asks to be desired and simultaneously to
be loved. But she finds the signifier of her own desire in the body
of the one—who is supposed to have it—to whom she addresses her demand for love. Perhaps it should not be forgotten that the organ that assumes this signifying function takes on the
value of a fetish.”26

This formulation of a dialectic of relations that are sexualized
by the phallic function does not in any way contradict Lacan’s
maintenance of the girl’s castration complex as defined by
Freud (that is, her lack or nonpossession of a phallus) and her
subsequent entry into the Oedipus complex—or her desire to
obtain the phallus from the one who is supposed to have it, the
father. Likewise, the importance of “penis envy” in the woman
is not called into question but is further elaborated in its struc-
tural dimension.

“The Image of the Body”: Françoise Dolto

Françoise Dolto’s research on the sexual evolution of the little
girl should also be cited.27 She stresses the need for the mother
to be recognized as “woman” by the father in order for the little
girl to feel that her feminine sex has value; and she provides
useful descriptions of the structuration of the body image at each

Alan Sheridan (New York, 1977), pp. 289–90; emphasis and interpolated
statements added. For an analysis of one of Lacan’s more recent publications
on female sexuality, see below, “Così Fan Tutti,” Chapter 5.
27Françoise Dolto, “La libido génitale et son destin féminin,” in La psych-analyse, no. 7 (Presses Universitaires Françaises).
whatever it may say about these conditions in discourse. For example the "matter" from which the speaking subject draws nourishment in order to produce itself, to reproduce itself; the scenography that makes representation feasible, representation as defined in philosophy, that is, the architectonics of its theatre, its framing in space-time, its geometric organization, its props, its actors, their respective positions, their dialogues, indeed their tragic relations, without overlooking the mirror, most often hidden, that allows the logos, the subject, to reduplicate itself, to reflect itself by itself. All these are interventions on the scene; they ensure its coherence so long as they remain uninterpreted. Thus they have to be reenacted, in each figure of discourse, in order to shake discourse away from its mooring in the value of "presence." For each philosopher, beginning with those whose names define some age in the history of philosophy, we have to point out how the break with material contiguity is made, how the system is put together, how the specular economy works.

This process of interpretive rereading has always been a psychoanalytic undertaking as well. That is why we need to pay attention to the way the unconscious works in each philosophy, and perhaps in philosophy in general. We need to listen (psycho)analytically to its procedures of repression, to the structuration of language that shores up its representations, separating the true from the false, the meaningful from the meaningless, and so forth. This does not mean that we have to give ourselves over to some kind of symbolic, point-by-point interpretation of philosophers' utterances. Moreover, even if we were to do so, we would still be leaving the mystery of "the origin" intact. What is called for instead is an examination of the operation of the "grammar" of each figure of discourse, its syntactic laws or requirements, its imaginary configurations, its metaphoric networks, and also, of course, what it does not articulate at the level of utterance: its silences.
This Sex Which Is Not One

But as we have already seen, even with the help of linguistics, psychoanalysis cannot solve the problem of the articulation of the female sex in discourse. Even though Freud's theory, through an effect of dress-rehearsal—at least as far as the relation between the sexes is concerned—shows clearly the function of the feminine in that scene. What remains to be done, then, is to work at "destroying" the discursive mechanism. Which is not a simple undertaking... For how can we introduce ourselves into such a tightly-woven systematics?

There is, in an initial phase, perhaps only one "path," the one historically assigned to the feminine: that of mimicry. One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it. Whereas a direct feminine challenge to this condition means demanding to speak as a (masculine) "subject," that is, it means to postulate a relation to the intelligible that would maintain sexual indifference.

To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself—inasmuch as she is on the side of the "perceptible,"" of "matter"—to "ideas," in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make "visible," by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language. It also means "to unveil" the fact that, if women are such good mimics, it is because they are not simply resorbed in this function. They also remain elsewhere: another case of the persistence of "matter," but also of "sexual pleasure."

Elsewhere of "matter": if women can play with mimesis, it is because they are capable of bringing new nourishment to its operation. Because they have always nourished this operation?
Women are thus in a situation of specific exploitation with respect to exchange operations: sexual exchanges, but also economic, social, and cultural exchanges in general. A woman "enters into" these exchanges only as the object of a transaction, unless she agrees to renounce the specificity of her sex, whose "identity" is imposed on her according to models that remain foreign to her. Women's social inferiority is reinforced and complicated by the fact that woman does not have access to language, except through recourse to "masculine" systems of representation which inappropriate her from her relation to herself and to other women. The "féminine" is never to be identified except by and for the masculine, the reciprocal proposition not being "true."

But this situation of specific oppression is perhaps what can allow women today to elaborate a "critique of the political economy," inasmuch as they are in a position external to the laws of exchange, even though they are included in them as "commodities." A critique of the political economy that could not, this time, dispense with the critique of the discourse in which it is carried out, and in particular of the metaphysical presuppositions of that discourse. And one that would doubtless interpret in a different way the impact of the economy of discourse on the analysis of relations of production.

For, without the exploitation of the body-matter of women, what would become of the symbolic process that governs society? What modification would this process, this society, undergo, if women, who have been only objects of consumption or exchange, necessarily aphasic, were to become "speaking subjects" as well? Not, of course, in compliance with the masculine, or more precisely the phallic, "model."

That would not fail to challenge the discourse that lays down the law today, that legislates on everything, including sexual difference, to such an extent that the existence of another sex, of an other, that would be woman, still seems, in its terms, unimaginable.
This Sex Which Is Not One

What is the double syntax (masculine-feminine)?

That phrase refers to the fact that rather than establishing a hierarchy between conscious and unconscious and subordinating one to the other, rather than ranking them as "above" and "below," Freud might instead have articulated them and made them work as two different syntaxes.

To respond from another angle: might we not say that it is because it has produced and continues to "hold" syntax that the masculine maintains mastery over discourse? Within this syntax, in this order of discourse, woman, even though she is hidden, most often hidden as woman and absent in the capacity of subject, manages to make "sense"—sensation?—manages to create "content." This syntax of discourse, of discursive logic—more generally, too, the syntax of social organization, "political" syntax—isn't this syntax always (how could it be otherwise? at least so long as there is no desire for the other) a means of masculine self-affection, or masculine self-production or reproduction, or self-generation or self-representation—himself as the self-same, as the only standard of sameness? And, as masculine auto-affection needs instruments—unlike woman, man needs instruments in order to touch himself: woman's hand, woman's sex and body, language—hasn't that syntax necessarily, according to an economic logic, exploited everything in order to caress itself? Whereas the "other" syntax, the one that would make feminine "self-affection" possible, is lacking, repressed, censured: the feminine is never affected except by and for the masculine. What we would want to put into play, then, is a syntax that would make woman's "self-affection" possible. A "self-affection" that would certainly not be reducible to the economy of sameness of the One, and for which the syntax and the meaning remain to be found. (See "This Sex Which Is Not One," Chapter 2, "The 'Mechanics' of Fluids," Chapter 6, and "When Our Lips Speak Together," Chapter 11.)

In this connection, one may very well say that everything advanced in psychoanalysis—especially since the masturbation of little girls is conceived according to the model of "doing what the little boy does"—leaves completely aside whatever woman's "self-affection" might be. For woman does not affect herself, does not practice "self-affection" according to the masculine "model." What is "unheard-of"—and this might be one explanation, but not the only one, for the fact that the affirmation of woman as the other should come so late and that her relation to language should be so problematical—is that woman can already be affected without "instruments," that woman can touch herself "within herself," in advance of any recourse to instruments. From this point of view, to forbid her to masturbate is rather amusing. For how can a woman be forbidden to touch herself? Her sex, "in itself," touches itself all the time. On the other hand, no effort is spared to prevent this touching, to prevent her from touching herself: the valorization of the masculine sex alone, the reign of the phallus and its logic of meaning and its system of representations, these are just some of the ways woman's sex is cut off from itself and woman is deprived of her "self-affection."

Which explains, moreover, why women have no desire, why they do not know what they want: they are so irremediably cut off from their "self-affection" that from the outset, and in particular from the time of the Oedipus complex, they are exiled from themselves, and lacking any possible continuity/contiguity with their first desires/pleasures, they are imported into another economy, where they are completely unable to find themselves.

Or rather, they find themselves there, proverbially, in masquerades. Psychoanalysts say that masquerading corresponds to woman's desire. That seems wrong to me. I think the masquerade has to be understood as what women do in order to recuperate some element of desire, to participate in man's desire, but at the price of renouncing their own. In the masquerade, they submit to the dominant economy of desire in an attempt to remain "on the market" in spite of everything. But
they are there as objects for sexual enjoyment, not as those who enjoy.

What do I mean by masquerade? In particular, what Freud calls “femininity.” The belief, for example, that it is necessary to become a woman, a “normal” one at that, whereas a man is a man from the outset. He has only to effect his being—a-man, whereas a woman has to become a normal woman, that is, has to enter into the masquerade of femininity. In the last analysis, the female Oedipus complex is woman’s entry into a system of values that is not hers, and in which she can “appear” and circulate only when enveloped in the needs/desires/fantasies of others, namely, men.

That having been said, what a feminine syntax might be is not simple nor easy to state, because in that “syntax” there would no longer be either subject or object, “oneness” would no longer be privileged, there would no longer be proper meanings, proper names, “proper” attributes . . . Instead, that “syntax” would involve nearness, proximity, but in such an extreme form that it would preclude any distinction of identities, any establishment of ownership, thus any form of appropriation.

Can you give some examples of that syntax?

I think the place where it could best be deciphered is in the gestural code of women’s bodies. But, since their gestures are often paralyzed, or part of the masquerade, in effect, they are often difficult to “read.” Except for what resists or subsists “beyond.” In suffering, but also in women’s laughter. And again: in what they “dare”—do or say—when they are among themselves.

That syntax may also be heard, if we don’t plug our ears with meaning, in the language women use in psychoanalysis.

There are also more and more texts written by women in which another writing is beginning to assert itself, even if it is still often repressed by the dominant discourse. For my part, I tried to put that syntax into play in Speculum, but not simply, to the extent that a single gesture obliged me to go back through the realm of the masculine imaginary. Thus I could not, I cannot install myself just like that, serenely and directly, in that other syntactic functioning—and I do not see how any woman could.

What is the relation or the nonrelation between speaking (as) woman and speaking-among-women?

There may be a speaking-among-women that is still a speaking (as) man but that may also be the place where a speaking (as) woman may dare to express itself. It is certain that with women-among-themselves (and this is one of the stakes of liberation movements, when they are not organized along the lines of masculine power, and when they are not focused on demands for the seizure or the overthrow of “power”), in these places of women-among-themselves, something of a speaking (as) woman is heard. This accounts for the desire or the necessity of sexual nonintegration: the dominant language is so powerful that women do not dare to speak (as) woman outside the context of nonintegration.

What is the relation between speaking (as) woman and speaking of woman?

Speaking (as) woman is not speaking of woman. It is not a matter of producing a discourse of which woman would be the object, or the subject.

That said, by speaking (as) woman, one may attempt to provide a place for the “other” as feminine.

C. Is it implicit in your discourse that the constitution of a woman’s alterity implies the same thing for a man?

If I understand your question correctly, yes. But is it up to me, I wonder, to speak of the “other” man? It’s curious, be-
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within the realm of the philosophical itself. Thus it was necessary to deploy other languages—without forgetting their own debt to philosophical language—and even to accept the condition of silence, of aphasia as a symptom—historico-hysterical, hysterico-historical—so that something of the feminine as the limit of the philosophical might finally be heard.

What method have you adopted for this research?

A delicate question. For isn’t it the method, the path to knowledge, that has always also led us away, led us astray, by fraud and artifice, from woman’s path, and to the point of consecrating its oblivion? This second interpretation of the term method—as detour, fraud, and artifice—is moreover its second possible translation. In order to reopen woman’s path, in particular in and through language, it was therefore necessary to note the way in which the method is never as simple as it purports to be, the way in which the teleological project—the teleologically constructive project—the method takes on is always a project, conscious or not, of turning away, of deviation, and of reduction, in the artifice of sameness, of otherness. In other words, speaking at the greatest level of generality so far as philosophical methods are concerned: of the feminine.

Thus it was necessary to destroy, but, as Rene Char wrote, with nuptial tools. The tool is not a feminine attribute. But woman may re-utilize its marks on her, in her. To put it another way: the option left to me was to have a fling with the philosophers, which is easier said than done . . . for what path can one take to get back inside their ever so coherent systems?

In a first phase, there is perhaps only one path, and in any case it is the one to which the female condition is assigned: that of mimery. But the mimetic role itself is complex, for it presupposes that one can lend oneself to everything, if not to everyone. That one can copy anything at all, anyone at all, can receive all impressions, without appropriating them to oneself, and without adding any. That is, can be nothing but a possibility that the philosopher may exploit for (self-) reflection. Like the Platonic chora, but also the mirror of the subject.

To go back inside the philosopher’s house requires, too, that one be able to fulfill the role of matter—mother or sister. That is, what always begins anew to nourish speculation, what functions as the resource of reflection—the red blood of resemblance—but also as its waste, as the discard that shunts what resists transparency—madness—to the outside.

Having a fling with the philosopher also entails safeguarding those components of the mirror that cannot reflect themselves: its backing, its brilliancy, thus its dazzlements, its ecstasies. Reproducive material and duplicating mirror, the philosopher’s wife also has to undertake that narcissism which often extends onto a transcendental dimension. Certainly without saying so, without knowing it. That secret in particular must never be disclosed. This role is only possible because of its ultimate avoidance of self-exploration: it entails a virginity incapable of self-reflection. And a pleasure that is wholly “divine.”

The philosopher’s wife must also, though in a secondary way, be beautiful, and exhibit all the attractions of femininity, in order to distract a gaze too often carried away by theoretical contemplations.

That woman—and, since philosophical discourse dominates history in general, that wife/woman of every man—is thus
pledged to the service of the "philosopher's" "self" in all forms. And as far as the wedding celebration is concerned, she is in danger of being no more than the requisite mediator for the philosopher's celebrations with himself, and with his fellows.

If she can play that role so well, if it does not kill her, quite, it is because she keeps something in reserve with respect to this function. Because she still subsists, otherwise and elsewhere than there where she mimes so well what is asked of her. Because her own "self" remains foreign to the whole staging. But she doubtless needs to reenact it in order to remember what that staging has probably metabolized so thoroughly that she has forgotten it: her own sex. Her sex is heterogeneous to this whole economy of representation, but it is capable of interpreting that economy precisely because it has remained "outside." Because it does not postulate oneness, or sameness, or reproduction, or even representation. Because it remains somewhere else than in that general repetition where it is taken up only as the otherness of sameness.

By this token, woman stands indeed, as Hegel has written, for the eternal irony of the community—of men. Provided that she does not will to be their equal. That she does not enter into a discourse whose systematicity is based on her reduction into sameness.

What are the conclusions of your work?

In conclusion, then, I come to what might be presented as propositions:

1. The fact that Freud took sexuality as the object of his discourse does not necessarily imply that he interpreted the role of sexualization in discourse itself, his own in particular. He did not carry out an analysis of the presuppositions that bear upon the production of discourse insofar as sexual difference is concerned. Or again: the questions that Freud's practice and theory raise for the scene of representation—questions about what it represses in the form of what he designates as unconscious, questions about what it neglects as effects of overdetermination, of deferred action, "death instinct," and so on, questions about the utterances of the subject—these questions do not go so far as to include the question of the sexualized determination of that scene. Lacking such an interpretation, Freud's discourse remains caught up in a meta-physical economy.

2. From a more strictly philosophical viewpoint, one may wonder whether taking into account the sexualization of discourse does not open up the possibility of a different relation to the transcendental. Neither simply subjective nor simply objective, neither univocally centered nor decentered, neither unique nor plural, but as the place—up to now always collapsed in an ek-stasis—of what I would call the copula. Which requires the interpretation of being as having always already taken on (again) the role of copula in a discursive economy that denies the copulative operation between the sexes in language.

3. That place may only emerge if the feminine is granted its own "specificity" in its relation to language. Which implies a logic other than the one imposed by discursive coherence. I have attempted to practice that other "logic" in the writing of Speculum; I have also begun to indicate certain of its elements in "L'incontournable volume."5 Let us say that it would reject all closure or circularity in discourse—any constitution of arché or of télos; that it would privilege the "near" rather than the "proper," but a "near" not (re)captured in the spatio-temporal

Publisher's Note on Selected Terms

and Irigaray's emphasis on the commodity as feminine or female matter cannot be fully translated. Thus, ironically, her larger point—that the organization of sexual difference is reflected in language as well as in social practices—is slightly blunted due to the differences between actual languages.

"dragonfly" ("Libellule")
The name of the cap that is passed around in the film discussed in "The Looking-Glass, from the Other Side."

ek-sistance (ek-sistance)
Existence as conscious separation or differentiation from nature; the state of being opposite to that generally ascribed to the feminine.

indifferent (indifferent[e]s)
a) Within the masculine order, the woman is indifferent in the sense of non-different or undifferentiated because she has no right to her own sexual difference but must accept masculine definitions and appropriations of it.
b) As a consequence, she is indifferent in the sense of detached or remote because of the imposture of her position.
c) From a feminine perspective, however, she might experience difference differently, in relation to her resemblance to another woman rather than to a masculine standard. (V. "When Our Lips Speak Together."

masquerade (la mascarade)
An alienated or false version of femininity arising from the woman's awareness of the man's desire for her to be his other, the masquerade permits woman to experience desire not in her own right but as the man's desire situates her.

mimicry (mimétisme)
An interim strategy for dealing with the realm of discourse (where the speaking subject is posited as masculine), in which the woman deliberately assumes the feminine style and posture assigned to her within this discourse in order to uncover the mechanisms by which it exploits her.

one, oneness (le un)
The universal standard and privileged form in our systems of representation, oneness expresses the requirements for unitary representations of signification and identity. Within such a system, in which the masculine standard takes itself as a universal, it would be impossible to represent the duality or plurality of the female sex and of a possible language in analogy with it.

other/same (autre/même)
A related tendency in Western discourse which privileges masculine "sameness-onto-itself" as the basis of signification and identity and, as a consequence, posits the feminine as other only in relation to masculine sameness, that is, not as a different mode of signification.

proper, proper name, property, appropriate (propre, nom propre, propriété, approprier)
This word cluster suggests close connections between the related systems of capitalism and patriarchy—more specifically, between their demands for order, neatness, the proper name, and the proper or literal meaning of a word, on the one hand, and the concepts of property ownership and appropriation, on the other.

questions (questions)
A habitual mode in Irigaray's writing, because it introduces a plurality of voices and facilitates the examination of a priori concepts without, however, insisting upon definitive answers or revisions of the systems of thought that are brought into question.

retraversal (retraversée)
The process of going back through social, intellectual, and linguistic practices to reexamine and unravel their conceptual bases, in analogy with Alice's voyages of exploration in Through the Looking-Glass.

reversal (reverserment)
A reversal in the hierarchies of power, so that the formerly "inferior" term then occupies the position of the "superior" term but without altering the nature of their relations.

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