

**WICE  
LUCE**

**PHILOSOPHY**

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**IN THE**

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**FEMININE**

**IRIGARAY**

**MARGARET WHITFORD**

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ROUTLEDGE



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**Luce Irigaray**

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**Luce Irigaray**

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**Philosophy in the Feminine**

**Margaret Whitford**



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# Contents

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|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| Acknowledgements                         | vi        |
| Abbreviations                            | ix        |
| Introductory remarks                     | 1         |
| 1 Feminism and utopia                    | 9         |
| <br>                                     |           |
| <b>Section I: Psychoanalysis</b>         | <b>27</b> |
| 2 Subjectivity and language              | 29        |
| 3 Rationality and the imaginary          | 53        |
| 4 Maternal genealogy and the symbolic    | 75        |
| <br>                                     |           |
| <b>Section II: Philosophy</b>            | <b>99</b> |
| 5 The same, the semblance, and the other | 101       |
| 6 Identity and violence                  | 123       |
| 7 Ethics, sexuality, and embodiment      | 149       |
| 8 Women and/in the social contract       | 169       |
| <br>                                     |           |
| Notes                                    | 193       |
| Bibliography                             | 220       |
| Index                                    | 236       |

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# Acknowledgements

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The first impetus for this book came several years ago when Luce Irigaray, on her first visit to England, suggested that I might like to attend the series of seminars she had been invited to give at the University of Bologna in May–June 1985. At that time, I had only the sketchiest acquaintance with her writing, though I had seen some of the articles and references to her work that were appearing here and there. The seminars in Bologna were most illuminating for me. It became clear that whatever Irigaray was setting out to do, it did not correspond with the majority of accounts of her work that I had seen up to then. I started trying to make sense, to myself and to others, of what had suddenly begun to seem an immensely complex *oeuvre*, whose problems were the problems at the heart of feminist and postmodernist debates. It has been a slow process and I am indebted in many ways to many people.

The second impetus came from co-editing the collection *Feminist Perspectives in Philosophy*. The experience of writing from within feminism has given me a sense for the first time of belonging to a real intellectual community. For many years, it felt as though I was working in a desert; now I find myself part of a much wider network whose existence makes all the difference. It will be clear from the bibliography and from the names of the people it is my pleasure to thank (in the following pages) that this study is indebted in significant ways to women's research and scholarship. Above all, the existence of the Women in Philosophy group was a quite irreplaceable source of support and stimulation.

Luce Irigaray herself has encouraged the project throughout and has generously supplied me with unpublished papers, transcripts of interviews, and even books. I was perhaps excessively scrupulous in wishing to develop an interpretation of her work on the basis of the texts alone; this has meant, however, that I have not at any point consulted Irigaray about the *contents* of this book, and it won't necessarily receive her imprimatur – in fact, she may well want to disagree with some of my interpretations.

A lot of other people assisted directly or indirectly in the writing of this book – by inviting me to give papers or write articles, reading or commenting on drafts, allowing me to read their unpublished work,

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London  
March 1990

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## viii Acknowledgements

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version of Chapter 4 appeared in Teresa Brennan (ed.) *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, Routledge 1989. Translations of quotations from Luce Irigaray, *Sexes et parentés*, and Luce Irigaray, *Amante marine* are copyright forthcoming Columbia University Press and are used by permission. Translations of quotations from Luce Irigaray, *Speculum*, Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* and Luce Irigaray, *Ethique de la différence sexuelle* are copyright Cornell University Press.

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# Abbreviations

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## Freud

SE followed by volume number: *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, London: The Hogarth Press 1951–73.

## Irigaray

### English texts

- B 'Language, Persephone and Sacrifice', interview in *Borderlines* (1985–6)  
GP 'The Gesture in Psychoanalysis' (1989)  
QEL 'Questions to Emmanuel Levinas' (1991)  
SE *Speculum* (1985)  
TS *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1985)  
WE 'Women's Exile' (1977)  
WSM 'Women, the Sacred and Money' (1986)  
WWT interview in *Women Writers Talking*, ed. Janet Todd, 1983.

### French texts

- AM *Amante marine* (1980)  
CAC *Le Corps-à-corps avec la mère* (1981)  
CE 'Créer un Entre-Femmes' (1986)  
CS *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un* (1977)  
E *Ethique de la différence sexuelle* (1984)  
EQ 'Egales à qui?' (1987)  
FPE Interviews 1 & 11 in *Les Femmes, la pornographie et l'érotisme*, ed. Marie-Françoise Hans and Gilles Lapouge (1978)  
LD *Le Langage des déments* (1973)  
OA *L'Oubli de l'air* (1983)  
PE *Passions élémentaires* (1982)  
PN *Parler n'est jamais neutre* (1985)

## x Abbreviations

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- SF     *Speculum* (1974)  
SP     *Sexes et parentés* (1987)  
TD     *Le Temps de la différence* (1989)

Full bibliographical references can be found in the bibliography at the end. Dates of English texts given here refer to the date of first publication in English. I have used (and occasionally modified) English translations where readily available. All other translations are my own.

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## Introductory remarks

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How many people recognize Irigaray as a philosopher? Because, of course, philosophy has often seen itself as the 'highest' of the disciplines, the one which aspires to the realm of the transcendental, above mere empirical concerns and political passions, and most of all, neutral, universal, sexually indifferent. While doing some background research for this book, I looked up Irigaray's name in the extremely exhaustive *Répertoire bibliographique de la philosophie* published as a supplement to the *Revue philosophique de Louvain*. It is the most extensive bibliography of publications in philosophy that I know of, covering books, articles, and review articles in nine languages. It claims to be completely exhaustive in its coverage of books, if not quite exhaustive in its coverage of articles, which are more difficult to track down in the enormous and wide-ranging journal output. What I found was quite significant. Irigaray was first noticed with the publication of her articles on linguistics; in 1969 the *Répertoire* recorded 'Communications linguistiques et spéculaires' (first published in 1966 and reprinted in *Parler n'est jamais neutre*) and 'Négation et transformation négative dans le langage des schizophrènes' (published in *Langages* in 1967 and also reprinted in *Parler n'est jamais neutre*). The French publication of *Speculum* is not recorded, although in 1977 there is a reference to an article which Irigaray published in the Parisian journal *Digraphe* (no.1, 1972: 31–60) on 'L'ustera de Platon' (which subsequently became the final section of *Speculum*). Then nothing for several years. *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un* [*This Sex Which Is Not One*] is predictably not referred to (it is not obviously philosophical). But, no doubt corresponding to Irigaray's increased fame and reputation, *L'Oubli de l'air*, *Amante marine*, *La Croyance même*, *Ethique de la différence sexuelle* and *Parler n'est jamais neutre* are all duly noted (although these are not all obviously philosophy either).

The European countries which seem to take her work most seriously as philosophy are Holland and Italy. According to the *Répertoire*, *Krisis* (Amsterdam) published a special issue in 1981–2 on contemporary French philosophy ('Franse Filosofie') which included an article on Irigaray among the following line-up of French philosophers: Barthes, Deleuze, Guattari, Irigaray, Derrida, Foucault, Bertrand-Henri Lévy and Glucksmann (a list

which is as significant in whom it leaves out as in whom it includes).<sup>1</sup> Another article appeared in the Dutch journal *Kritiek* in 1982. In Italy, Irigaray was invited to speak at the Congress of Milan on 'Sexuality and Politics' in 1975, a year after the publication of *Speculum*. Her Italian translator, Luisa Muraro, published a translation of 'Misère de la psychanalyse'<sup>2</sup> in the philosophy journal *Aut Aut* (Milan) in 1977. *Aut Aut* also published an article in 1978 and an interview: 'Desiderio femminile et pratica analitica' in 1980. In Britain and the States, although there has been a wide reaction to Irigaray in writing about feminism, literature and feminist psychoanalysis, philosophy seems to be a watertight category. I did not find any references to articles on Irigaray in philosophical journals. The same is true of France. Although some of Irigaray's own articles are occasionally recorded – because they have appeared somewhere 'respectable'<sup>3</sup> – many of them (published in quite various places from the explicitly feminist *Cahiers du Grif* to the more literary journal *Critique*) are simply not noted. And from the evidence of the *Répertoire* alone, it would seem that in philosophy, in these countries, no one has written about her. Strictly speaking this is not true – there has been some response from women in philosophy (as we shall see later) but the *Répertoire* has not been recording it. As a result, the scholar or student seeking to find out more about the debates kindled by Irigaray's work has their work cut out simply trying to locate the most important articles.

For Irigaray, the boundaries between philosophy and other domains are not clearly demarcated. Perhaps for this reason, the status of her work as philosophy is suspect. However, I would want to claim that she is engaged in that most philosophical of enterprises: philosophy examining its own foundations and its own presuppositions. In addition, she is trying to work out the conditions of ethics and to rethink the social contract, both recognizable philosophical endeavours. But her emphasis on the historical determinants of philosophical discourse, her political stress on the realities of women's lives, her attempt to bring the transcendental back to earth, her insistence on bringing in psychoanalysis and the question of the *sex* of the philosopher – all of this appears to be deeply unsettling. It might be thought that, at a moment when philosophy as a discipline is being questioned from all sides and in all sorts of ways, it may not be a good idea to claim for Irigaray membership of a category to which in any case she might not want to belong. If, as Michèle Le Doeuff argues, philosophy is constructed by exclusion and in particular the exclusion of women, how can women enter it without contradiction?<sup>4</sup> But Irigaray herself, although she is profoundly critical of a certain kind of philosophy, explicitly situates herself as a philosopher with a clear sense of philosophy as 'the work of the universal' (SP: 162) with stringent ethical requirements.

This book is not intended to be a comprehensive introduction to Irigaray's work. It offers a reading of her that on the whole (with some notable exceptions)<sup>5</sup> has been missing from the public debate. I want to present

her as a *feminist philosopher* with the emphasis on *both* terms, and to address her work directly, rather than seeing her as one of an allegedly more or less homogeneous group of proponents of *écriture féminine* who can then be critiqued generically without regard to their differences. I should thus stress from the outset the parameters of this study. This is not primarily a study of genesis, debts, sources, and roots. It offers an interpretation of Irigaray's texts, based on close readings, and supplemented with a general acquaintance with western philosophy, contemporary theory in France, psychoanalytic theory and feminist theory. Her method, as I will show later, implies a certain parasitism; it is quite clear, for example, that a large number of Irigaray's central terms derive from either Lacan or Derrida – often she is explicitly reworking or redefining them. Some time, someone will want to do the detailed work of showing these derivations and the transformations each has undergone. This detailed work will enrich our understanding of Irigaray. But I have not undertaken it. In addition, it is obvious that German philosophy – Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, Nietzsche – has been extremely important for Irigaray. Here too, I have not done more than register a textual presence. Although Irigaray's relation to Hegelian and post-Hegelian philosophy is undoubtedly one of the perspectives which would shed considerable light on her formulations of questions of desire, subjectivity, identity, and death, it is not my theme in this book. For in order to examine her from this perspective, it would be necessary to see her first as a philosopher, and this is the position that I want to establish here.

Crucially, Irigaray differs from her philosophical predecessors in her feminist commitment, and that difference is what I want to focus on. I think I have been able to put forward a reading of Irigaray which will make her work more available for debate and discussion, and indicate directions for future research and study. What I intended to do in this book was to put Irigaray as a thinker into wider circulation so that her importance, and in particular her value to feminist thinking, can begin to be assessed and measured. I found it disappointing, when I began work on Irigaray, that she had been so often dismissed without much understanding. A woman *speaking as a woman* deserves a fair hearing, and it may be that she is not so easily heard, for all the kinds of reasons that we are now familiar with.

This reading is neither comprehensive nor conclusive; it is interpretation in process. I wanted to display the internal logic of her thought, a network of preoccupations and connections, in the belief that we cannot seriously start subjecting Irigaray's ideas to analysis and critique until we have some detailed understanding of what those ideas are. I hope this study goes some way in this direction, though I know it to be incomplete. If it stimulates others to the kind of scholarship that any other major thinker or cultural theorist can expect as a matter of course, then it will have

#### 4 Luce Irigaray

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achieved at least one of its aims. My intention was to make Irigaray's work available as a resource for feminists. I am interested in the creative relationship between reader and text, rather than in idealizing the text itself (which tends to lead to unprofitable discussions of *less* and *more*: is Irigaray more important than Derrida, or vice versa, and so on). At the moment what interests me is what Irigaray makes it possible for us to think.

My own position is provisionally this. Far from feeling in tune with Irigaray, on the contrary it has taken me a long time to understand her. My own immediate sympathies go rather towards the position taken up by a philosopher like Michèle Le Doeuff, particularly her argument that 'the vocation of feminism is towards universality; it should reveal realities which do not necessarily concern *women only*' (Le Doeuff 1989: 275, my trans.) and her ethical stance: 'an ethics of solidarity and the obligation to assist whoever is in danger' (ibid.: 343). Michèle Le Doeuff's work is lucid and accessible, her commitments to ethics and rationality both forcefully expressed and eminently appealing. Irigaray fascinates me despite myself and in a completely different way. She is more than a little inaccessible; she is associative rather than systematic in her reasoning; it has been a struggle to read and elucidate her, and to come to some understanding of her critique of rationality which appeared to go against my whole intellectual training. She represented an otherness about which I could not say in advance: this is important and valuable, or else: this is not going to be of any use. In addition, one is constantly assailed by the doubts engendered when other writers, whose views one respects, explain why we need not study her further. However, I have come to the conclusion that, albeit from a completely different perspective, Irigaray is *also* committed to 'the work of the universal' and to the centrality of ethics, preoccupations which have been somewhat obscured by the reception of her work, and indeed by the difficulty of the language in which she presents them.

Despite the dismissals, the challenge represented by her work refuses to go away. In more or less all of the critiques I have come across, there is a simultaneous attraction and rejection. These critiques represent a range of political positions. They include views such as the following: Irigaray's inaccessibility makes her elitist; she does not recognize the contribution of other women; she is not really a feminist; she reduces the diversity of women to a falsifying unity by ignoring forms of otherness – racial and class differences for example – which are not sexual otherness; she is essentialist, hypostatizing 'woman'; her theory is not materialist. These objections can be found directed both against Irigaray in particular and against *écriture féminine* in general.<sup>6</sup> They seem to me often to be critiques directed at feminist theory in the name of the women's movement. In summary form, they indicate the fear not only that feminist practice and feminist theory are antithetical, but also that certain kinds of theory may act as a positive brake on action. The tension between feminist theory and

political action is a real one, and most feminists find themselves at one time or another attempting to negotiate it at a personal or collective level. As I shall argue later, I think Irigaray has begun to theorize *dissent* and *dissension* within the women's movement in a way which might enable feminists to understand further the tension between theory and action, particularly in relation to unthought and unsymbolized drives. She has a theory which addresses directly the problem of conflict – whether located as internal to the self, or the group, or expelled and situated in some other (men, other feminists, other women). So for the moment, I shall just make the following general comments. There is no membership requirement for feminism: its diversity is its strength. Feminism is like Merleau-Ponty's heap of sand; each grain individually is minute, but the total sandbank may block a river. We cannot afford to ignore interventions at any level. We do not know clearly in advance which interventions will have been decisive. And, in the process, the goals themselves may change. Because diversity is essential to the women's movement, Irigaray alone is not enough; she cannot fulfil all our needs. But at the same time Irigaray is too important to ignore; she is trying to *think* sexual difference in the strong sense of the term – to bring into existence the unthought and the unsymbolized, an endeavour she shares with more grassroots activists.

However, there is a contradiction inherent in being a 'star'.<sup>7</sup> Critics are simultaneously suspicious of Irigaray's stardom, and yet expect her to be, or see her as, more than the average grain of sand. So it is necessary to stress that the women's movement is what gives Irigaray's work its major contemporary significance, and that we cannot judge her with the eyes of posterity. We simply do not know how important she will turn out to have been, in retrospect. There is no sense in which we can definitively arbitrate on priorities – there is too much to be done, everywhere, both in theory and in action. Trying to think the unthought is an enterprise of colossal difficulty and unpredictability. I want to argue that Irigaray *needs* her readers and interpreters, and that this need is inherent in her theory, as I shall explain later. She cannot, on her own, bring about change in the symbolic order. So far from being an impediment, the effort of understanding needed to read her may be part of the cost of change. I want to insist on *the time of understanding*, and to reject the idea that immediate intelligibility is always and under every circumstance a desirable goal, since it does not allow for the possibility either of the reader changing over a period of time (and understanding at one moment what was obscure at another), or of being changed as a result of reading, not in an immediate flash but in a slow process of making connections. I suggest that the diversity of interpretations to which Irigaray's work has given rise is itself an indication of a fertility and complexity which should encourage us not to discard too quickly this feminism of difference, with all its problems.

The critiques which I shall be discussing in most detail in this book are the philosophical ones. These take a number of forms – for example, the argument that Irigaray has not grasped the implications of the work of Lacan or Derrida; or that she is an essentialist (this includes attributing to her the view that women are closer to the imaginary, or should ‘return’ to the imaginary). Another version of the philosophical critique is that made by Michèle Le Doeuff, who attributes to Irigaray the view that the ‘main enemy’ is the philosophical *logos* because of its legislative status with respect to other discourses (Le Doeuff 1989: 70).<sup>8</sup> Le Doeuff argues that philosophy itself is not immune from influence. Meaghan Morris explains:

Le Doeuff [insists] that the circulation of elements does not necessarily go *from* philosophy to other discourses and practices – and that to ‘imagine’ it does would be to repeat the ‘philosophicentric proposition’ that so-called popular culture is the by-product of a process of degradation.

One immediate implication of Le Doeuff’s argument here is that the dismantling of ‘philosophical discourse’ *in general* need not be of first priority for feminist theoretical work. (Morris 1988: 89)

I am not sure to what extent Irigaray does in fact hold the strong thesis that Le Doeuff credits her with. This reading is presumably based on the statement in *This Sex Which Is Not One* that philosophical discourse ‘lays down the law to all the others’ (TS: 159; CS: 154–5). But Irigaray also writes in *Ethique de la différence sexuelle* that popular movements such as feminism are evolving faster than philosophical thought and discourse (E: 114). However, in a sense it does not matter if Le Doeuff is correct in her reading of Irigaray. The specific and textually detailed interpretations of philosophical texts that Irigaray offers do not depend rigorously on the premise that the dismantling of the philosophical *logos* ought to be a feminist priority. I will suggest in Chapter 1 that Irigaray can be read in different ways, and that interpretations can either immobilize or energize. I link these readings to the two broad types of utopian writing, the static and the dynamic. I will argue that it is more valuable to choose the dynamic interpretation, rather than imprisoning Irigaray in the limitations of her own perspective. The important thing is to engage with Irigaray *in order to go beyond her*. I also put forward an argument about feminism and utopia in general and, under this heading, discuss briefly the materialist critique of Irigaray.

In Chapter 2 I outline Irigaray’s method of ‘psychoanalysing the philosophers’ and her use of psychoanalysis as a dynamic model. I look at the question of how we might understand speaking (as) woman. This chapter does assume that the reader has already come across Irigaray’s work and is familiar with the terminology. However, if this is still fairly new, it might be helpful to read Chapters 3 and 4 before Chapter 2, to understand the use

and complexities of terms such as 'imaginary' and 'symbolic'. In Chapter 3 I discuss the antecedents, connotations, and deployment of the concept of the imaginary. The principal aims of this chapter are to explicate what is meant by the claim that rationality is imaginary, and to indicate the implications of Irigaray's notion of the female imaginary in relation to rationality. In Chapter 4 I discuss some of the problems thrown up by the discussion in the previous chapter, in particular the articulation of the symbolic and the imaginary. Although not strictly related to philosophical issues, this chapter discusses Irigaray's claim that woman (the maternal-feminine) provides the unsymbolized basis of masculine theoretical constructions. The first four chapters provide the groundwork; they set out the terms in which I think Irigaray needs to be discussed.

The next four chapters discuss in different ways the marginalization of women in the symbolic and social order, the complicity of philosophy in their marginalization, and the conditions for their inclusion. Chapter 5 argues that for Irigaray it is a single gesture which constitutes women's double exclusion from philosophy and from the polis. It traces Irigaray's interpretation of the philosophical phantasies which perpetuate this conceptual and social gesture. Chapter 6 discusses Irigaray's account of identity, and attempts to provide a framework for understanding why Irigaray insists on identity despite powerful opposition to the notion coming from the direction of modern theory. Chapter 7 discusses Irigaray's view that philosophical conceptualization does not provide women with an imaginary and symbolic world which would 'house' them, and looks at some of her tentative suggestions for the conceptualization of a female imaginary. The final chapter makes the links in Irigaray's thought between the body, the imaginary and the social contract. It concludes by linking the difficulties of her writing with her aim to effect a shift in the position of the subject of enunciation. The second half of the book designates Irigaray's project as 'philosophy in the feminine', that is to say, philosophy which does not regard the social situation and struggles of women as something external or irrelevant to its discourse. I argue that Irigaray is a philosopher who is redefining the terrain of philosophy by investigating and exploring what philosophy until now has been unable to allow in. It is an act of land reclamation on her part, which is intended to be of immediate relevance to the lives of women and to the symbolic organization of society as a whole.

I have used notes liberally, to make connections with other feminist thinking, debate with other views on Irigaray and, in general, to acknowledge my sources. However, my interpretation of Irigaray should be quite clear without the notes, and readers wishing for a more uninterrupted reading should find that this is possible.

On the question of terminology – male/female, masculine/feminine, 'men'/'women', man/woman etc. – I throw up my hands in despair. There has been a proliferation of strategies, in which inverted commas and terminological

## 8 Luce Irigaray

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precautions, informed by a range of political sympathies and ideological commitments (and the explanation that it's different in the French), are meant to shield or disarm, and occasionally lunge at a real or imaginary opponent. I just hope that my arguments in general will be clear enough for the reader to forgive the occasional inconsistency or ambiguity.

## Chapter 1

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# Feminism and utopia

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Un discours peut empoisonner, entourer, cerner, emprisonner ou libérer, guérir, nourrir, féconder. (*Parler n'est jamais neutre*)

A discourse may poison, surround, encircle, imprison or liberate, heal, nourish, fertilize.

There is no mistaking the urgency of the issues which Irigaray is raising. Feminists turn to her work eagerly and as often turn away again in frustration and disappointment. Interpretations of Irigaray which try to pin down and/or *fix* her meaning have often been quite dismissive: Janet Sayers calls her a biological essentialist (1982: 131; see also 1986: 42–8); Lynne Segal calls her a 'psychic essentialist' (1987: 132); Toril Moi thinks that she is making the mistake of trying to give a definition of 'the feminine' (1985: 148); for Monique Plaza, Irigaray is an anti-feminist who echoes patriarchy's recuperation of feminist subversion (1978).

Irigaray faces a dilemma which could be defined as follows: on the one hand, as Moi forcefully points out, 'it still remains *politically* essential for feminists to defend women *as* women in order to counteract the patriarchal oppression that precisely defines women *as* women' (1985: 13), so to that extent it is necessary to define a female identity or specificity; on the other hand, how does one define female specificity without getting locked once again inside the patriarchal metaphysical framework one was trying to escape from? It seems to me that readers of Irigaray are looking for some kind of solution to this dilemma, hoping that she can provide a way out, and so are searching for some statement, some 'theory of woman' that somehow evades the snares and pitfalls of other such theories. But Irigaray herself writes: 'For the elaboration of a theory of woman, men, I think, suffice' (TS: 123; CS: 122); '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' (TS: 135; CS: 133); 'But there is simply no way I can give you an account of "speaking (as) woman": it is spoken, but not in meta-language' (TS: 144; CS: 141). Irigaray does not intend to tell us what 'woman' is: this is something which women still have to create and invent

collectively. What she sets out to do in her work is to expose the foundations of patriarchy and in particular to show it at work in what has traditionally been taken to be the high discourse of universality and reason: philosophy. In the process, the conception of what philosophy consists of (or should consist of) is profoundly shaken. For Irigaray is investigating the *passional foundations of reason*.

More or less simultaneously, her work is presented as both accessible and inaccessible (and either way, it comes under fire). On the one hand, she has been assimilated, along with Kristeva and Cixous, under the heading of *écriture féminine* (women's writing or sometimes 'writing the body'). This strand of Anglo-American criticism tends to make her work sound like little more than a heroic and inspiring but ultimately rather utopian manifesto. Against this view, one needs to point out that in fact her work is steeped in the history of philosophy from the pre-Socratics to the post-structuralists. To read *Speculum*, for example, we really need to know not only Freud but also, among others, Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, Derrida. To read *Ethique de la différence sexuelle*, one needs to know the Greeks, Descartes, Spinoza, Kant, Hegel. She has written a whole book as a dialogue with Nietzsche, another one as a dialogue with Heidegger, and has also engaged with contemporaries: Lacan, of course, but also Derrida, Merleau-Ponty, and Levinas. She is working primarily in philosophy, but she is also a psychoanalyst; to understand what she means by speaking 'as a woman', one needs to take the psychoanalytic dimension of her work seriously. The fact that she is, or has been, a practising psychoanalyst seems to me not merely an incidental feature of her *curriculum vitae*, but as essential to understanding her work as it has been recognized to be in the case of Lacan. And she has also done research in linguistics: her first book was a study of the disintegration of communicative ability in men and women hospitalized with a diagnosis of senile dementia, and her work at the Centre National de Recherches Scientifiques in Paris has been linguistic research, initially on the language of the mentally ill, latterly on sexual difference in language. After *Ethique de la différence sexuelle*, she has become more and more involved in empirical research projects, designed to show the ways in which language is gendered beyond our conscious volition (see for example the special issue of *Langages*, 'Le Sexe Linguistique' (1987), edited by Irigaray).

Ironically, however, some of those who do recognize this erudite background reproach her for it, as Eléonor Kuykendall points out:

The first question for a political analysis of Irigaray's psychologic and mythic proposals for matriarchy is whether it is elitist, hence in its very form an undercutting of a feminist politics, separating women from one another by class . . . Simone de Beauvoir, for example, . . . has suggested that *écriture féminine* is an inappropriate way to do feminist political work, which would be more effectively accomplished by using

everyone's language, ordinary language . . . I found no one, up until a year after its publication, who had been able to read *Amante marine*, with its complex literary allusions. . . . What, then, is the political force of a writing style inaccessible to all but those highly trained academically? (1984: 269–70)<sup>1</sup>

This critique raises the question of Irigaray's relation to feminism and feminist politics.

The complexity of her work is nicely illustrated by the fact that whereas for some women, her work provides a celebration of femininity (Kuykendall 1984; Suleiman 1986), however problematic, for others she falls into the trap of victimology,<sup>2</sup> and fatally ends up presenting woman as innocent and untainted by any trace of phallogocentric culture (Berg 1982: 18); for others again, she may not even deserve the name of feminist (Plaza 1978). It's possible that some of the range of views ascribed to her are largely preoccupations of the ascribers; the opacity of her texts elicits a considerable degree of projection and imaginary identification, or aggressive rejection. My own view is that it is a mistake to attribute to Irigaray a static notion of 'woman' or 'femininity' – whether it is woman as essence, woman as morally pure victim, woman as outside history, woman as closer to the imaginary, and so on. Where, then, does Irigaray stand in relation to feminism?

French women theoreticians are reluctant to adopt a label with so many metaphysical implications (see also Chapter 6). 'Woman' is a concept implicated in the male/female oppositions of patriarchal metaphysics. The relation of women to 'woman' is precisely what needs to be rearticulated, and there is a danger of co-option or collusion with what one is trying to undermine, if one accepts a designation that is linked to an assumption of essence that was challenged as early as 1949 by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* when she wrote: 'One is not born a woman, one becomes one.' Irigaray has a further reason for having reservations about the term 'feminism': 'It is the word by which the social system designates the struggle of women. I am completely willing to abandon this word, namely because it is formed on the same model as the other great words of the culture that oppress us' (WWT: 233). But she goes on to say that to criticize 'feminism' is likewise an equivocal gesture; what needs to be done is to reclaim the term and redefine what one means by feminism: 'the struggles of women' and their 'plural and polymorphous character' (ibid. and cf. TS: 164, CS: 158–9). So I am going to use the term to describe her work, because I believe that she is committed to women's struggles, and that this is the adjective which best expresses that commitment, whatever its misuse and misapplications.

Her relations with the women's movement have not always been easy, as so often happens when a woman attains a certain visibility, and is then taken by academia or the media to be a kind of spokeswoman. Since women have so often been silenced by those who purported to speak in their name and

define them, it has been a principle of 'second-wave' feminism that one does not speak for others, and in particular not for 'women' as a group. So there has been some uneasiness about the political positionality of Irigaray's discourse: where is she speaking from? Who is she speaking for? (see Felman 1975; Plaza 1978). The marginal position which she has assumed – maintaining her independence from any specific women's group or political orthodoxy, while remaining committed to the ideals and aims of the women's movement – has not always made her popular, and although she has received a lot of support and recognition internationally, she has also been bitterly attacked in her own country. She has suggested a theoretical account of these attacks (see Chapter 4), locating their source not purely in individual or group hostilities and rivalries, but in the patriarchal symbolic order and, at the same time, trying to theorize the conditions for an *entre-femmes*, or a sociality among and between women. The danger for women, she suggests, is that of falling back into 'a language and a social organisation which exile and exclude us' (CE: 39). It is clear that she does not have much time for the attempt to 'reverse the order of things' (TS: 33; CS: 32), to simply reverse the balance of power between men and women. What she is concerned with is to promote and encourage the development of a social form specific to women. Separatism, while not a long-term goal – since ultimately she desires a world in which women and men can live together without oppression – can be an effective short-term strategy, imperative even, for some women (see EQ: 435). And certainly an *entre-femmes* is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for the creation of female identity and subjectivity. Women need to learn to love themselves and each other as an indispensable step towards autonomy (TS: 164; CS: 159).

She does not recommend that women enter the political arena as it at present exists (see TS: 165; CS: 159–60), although again she accepts that there can be a strategic necessity (see WWT: 235). The danger is always that in accepting the terms of the system currently in force, women will become 'men'. Fighting for equal wages and equal rights, against discrimination, the fight for equality, is in the end subordinate for her to the much bigger struggle which is to 'challenge *the foundation of our social and cultural order*' (TS: 165; CS: 160). Whatever equality means, it doesn't mean becoming like men.<sup>3</sup> Here she rejoins the feminist mainstream, for few feminists would now regard equal rights as an adequate goal.<sup>4</sup> It would be very easy to misread this position; the problem of a feminism of difference is that women's difference has always in practice been used against them. In fact, Irigaray suggests that we need to distinguish between struggle and critique on the one hand, and the long-term vision on the other. The local struggles are important, even essential, but to lose sight of that larger objective would mean that women become assimilated to the world of men and then have nothing to contribute *is women* (as is made clear by the problems inherent in applying classical liberal theory to women). At the local level it is often necessary to fight on the terrain

of *human* rights rather than *women's* rights.<sup>5</sup> Irigaray is not dictating or even suggesting what strategies any particular women or group of women should adopt (TS: 166–7; CS: 161). Her scepticism about equal rights is not a matter of contesting equal rights per se; as she points out in *Speculum*, equal rights or their approximation may be a necessary condition for the larger question of sexual difference to be raised at all.<sup>6</sup>

To intervene *as a woman*, then, in the discourse of philosophy, is Irigaray's initial aim, and the one which I am going to discuss in this study. It seems to me that this aim is an explicitly feminist stance. In particular, Irigaray diverges sharply from a certain kind of postmodernist feminism in her insistence on struggle.<sup>7</sup>

Feminist philosophy is political and committed; it explicitly desires change (see Griffiths and Whitford 1988), but to provide a blueprint in advance, explaining exactly what the nature of those changes will be, is to fall back into completely traditional methods of philosophy, as Moira Gatens (1986) shows. Gatens points out that ethical and political philosophy in the past depended essentially on a notion of what a human being was: 'In other words, the kind of social and political organisation and the ethical and legal principles that are to govern that organisation are deduced from what a human being is thought to be, what its needs, desires, capabilities and limitations are' (1986: 27). First you start with the definition of the human being, then you move towards the definition of the kind of society in which this human being would ideally live. This is what Rousseau did, for example; in the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* he began by defining the essential needs of the human being as freedom, self-sufficiency and independence, its essential emotions a kind of basic self-love or survival instinct (*amour de soi*) and compassion and pity for others. He then tried to show how society as we know it is the product of an inevitable degeneration in the course of which the fundamental human being had become unrecognizable and distorted. In his subsequent works (*The Social Contract*, *Emile*, *The New Héloïse*) he made various (incompatible and contradictory) attempts to create in imagination a society in which the human being, as originally defined, might be happy.<sup>8</sup> However, modern theory is pushing feminism towards the notion that the subject, the human being, is socially constructed. Not that biology, for example, is not one of the parameters or constraints on this process of construction, but that human beings have no essential self; they are created in the process of socialization, and that there is therefore no ideal society. So a certain feminist utopianism, the attempt to define the future ideal society, comes into conflict with the theory that we are the sort of persons we are because society has largely (or at least significantly) made us that way. If a human being is at least partly a social product, then to project our current version of ourselves into the future would be to arrest change, to see the future as an alternative version of the past. Such a future would be closed to the possibility of new social or ethical forms still to be invented. Irigaray warns against projecting

too far ahead, writing definitive programmes for the future (E: 16; TS: 124; CS: 123). In response to an interviewer, she replied:

In this question, I hear a desire to anticipate and codify the future, rather than to work here and now to construct it. To concern oneself in the present about the future certainly does not consist in programming it in advance but in trying to bring it into existence. . . . Your remarks seem to assume . . . that the future will be no more than the past.<sup>9</sup>

Each moment of change brings about a new situation, which requires a new response, and in the process the meanings attached to 'man' and 'woman' can begin to alter significantly. What this means in terms of feminist philosophy is that it is not static; it is not an attempt to arrive at a final once-for-all truth, beyond patriarchy, but is a continuous process of critical engagement. It is necessary to stress this dynamic aspect, because Irigaray has so often been seen as having a deterministic theory of woman.

There are two main readings of Irigaray that have been current in Britain. The first is that she is a biological essentialist, that she is proclaiming a biologically given femininity, in which biology in some unclear fashion simply constitutes 'femininity'. Very briefly, the charge of biological essentialism assumes that Irigaray posits an unmediated causal relation between biological sex and sexual identity, leaving out completely the imaginary dimension, in which sexual identity may be related in an unstable and shifting way to the anatomical body, or the symbolic, linguistic dimension, in which sexual identity may be constructed. Further, biological essentialism, in the form in which it is usually attributed to Irigaray, is a deterministic and often simplistic thesis which makes change impossible to explain. The second reading is the Lacanian account of Irigaray as a 'psychic essentialist', a term coined by Lynne Segal (1987: 132). The Lacanian reading argues that Irigaray has misunderstood or misrepresented the implications of Lacan's theories (see for example Ragland-Sullivan 1986: 273), that she takes the feminine to be a pre-given libido, prior to language, in which specific female drives are grounded, thus positing two distinct libidos – a masculine and a feminine. The two-libido theory would imply that psychosexuality, again in some unclear fashion, flows from, or is determined by, some pre-given essence of masculinity and femininity. Against this pseudo-Irigaray, it is then argued that Lacan has shown that 'there is no feminine outside language' (Rose 1986: 80) and that Irigaray has not grasped the Lacanian symbolic dimension and what it means for the construction of sexual difference.

What I will argue, against these readings, is that Irigaray's project is an attempt to effect change in the symbolic order, and that what she has been interpreted as advocating or positing in fact resembles more closely her diagnosis of what is wrong with the symbolic order. She is not pre-Lacanian, but post-Lacanian. The Lacanian reading confuses description with prescription. So whether she is celebrated for her new vision of the