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0521862701 - Luce Irigaray and the Philosophy of Sexual Difference

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Introduction

Luce Irigaray and the Nature of Sexual Difference

This book defends an understanding of sexual difference as natural, challenging the prevailing consensus within feminist theory that sexual difference is a culturally constructed and symbolically articulated phenomenon. The book supports this challenge with a distinctive interpretation and critical rethinking of Luce Irigaray's later philosophy of sexual difference. According to my interpretation, the later Irigaray sees sexual difference as a natural difference between the sexes, which should receive cultural and social expression. Opposing the dominant view that any idea that sexual difference is natural must be politically conservative and epistemologically naïve, I want to show that Irigaray's later conception of sexual difference is philosophically sophisticated and coherent, and supports a politics of change which – importantly – aspires not only to improve women's situations but also to revalue nature and to improve humanity's relations with the natural world. However, I will not simply defend the later Irigaray but will criticise her for overlooking what I call the natural multiplicity within each of our bodies: a multiplicity of forces and capacities such that we are never simply sexually specific. Given this problem, I shall argue, Irigaray's philosophy must be fundamentally rethought within the framework of a theory of nature as self-differentiating, a theory which can recognise the reality and value of bodily multiplicity as well as that of sexual duality. Thus, this book is not merely an exposition of Irigaray but also the development of an original position within feminist thought – a philosophy of self-differentiating nature.

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Although Irigaray's earlier thought has exerted immense influence on feminist theory, her later philosophy has proved considerably less popular.¹ As one feminist critic writes: 'Irigaray's later work is far more problematic with respect to the charge of essentialism, and her deployment of sexual difference has seemed increasingly to suggest certain pre-given and determinant qualities of the feminine'.² The later Irigaray assumes that men and women naturally have different characters, implying that they are qualified for distinct ranges of activities. This looks troublingly close to the traditional view that women's natural character predisposes them to childrearing and the domestic sphere. In attempting to identify and describe the natural characters of the sexes, Irigaray appears to overlook how deeply any perceptions of their characters must be shaped by existing cultural prescriptions, prescriptions which she can only end up reproducing. Moreover, to support her account of the natural differences between the sexes, she appeals to an understanding of nature as a whole: seemingly, for her, 'the fixity of the natural, material world is the ground of the fixity of the social world', whereas, for most feminists: 'Any theory of women's liberation . . . must certainly abandon the belief that nature is immutable and fixed; otherwise, no liberation is possible'.³

Against these criticisms, my first aim in this book is to show that Irigaray's later philosophy has underappreciated strengths. Her focus on nature is valuable in reminding us that we are natural beings, surrounded and shaped by natural environments. Moreover, she sees nature not as a static realm of fixed forms but, rather, as a process (or set of processes) of open-ended growth and unfolding. By stressing that human beings belong to nature so conceived, Irigaray can maintain that human beings have natures which need to grow and express themselves culturally. She thereby links feminist and ecological politics, by arguing that the pursuit

¹ Despite Irigaray's influence on feminism, she herself avoids the label, instead professing support for 'movements of liberation of women' ('Women's Exile', trans. Couze Venn, in *Ideology and Consciousness* 1 (1977), p. 67). I take this to reflect not a substantial rejection of feminism by Irigaray but her desire to mark that her feminism takes an original and unusual form.

² Margrit Shildrick, *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries: Feminism, Postmodernism and (Bio)ethics* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 227. Even Penelope Deutscher's sustained examination of Irigaray's later thought in *A Politics of Impossible Difference: The Later Work of Luce Irigaray* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002) is premised on the view that her recourse to natural reality is *prima facie* problematic; for discussion of Deutscher's reading, see Chapter 1, note 33.

³ Dorothea Olkowski, *Gilles Deleuze and the Ruin of Representation* (California: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 5, 7. Olkowski is not explicitly discussing Irigaray's later position here but a (comparable) position which she calls 'naturalism'.

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of our own flourishing as sexed beings must be based on recognition of our dependence on, and responsibilities to, the natural environment. As for her belief that humans naturally have sexually specific characters which need to unfold and develop culturally, this need not be conservative; it enables her to criticise existing society on the grounds that women's nature has never been allowed expression. Admittedly, this would hardly appease critics if women's nature gave them a need to express themselves only in the activities traditionally allotted to them, such as childrearing. But Irigaray distinguishes her account of women's (and men's) nature from traditional views by deriving her account from her novel conception of nature as processual.⁴ This conception leads her to rethink sexed individuals as differing, fundamentally, in respect of certain rhythms which (as I will explain later) she takes to regulate the circulation of the fluid materials composing individuals' bodies.⁵ (Throughout, when I refer to 'bodies', this denotes specifically human bodies, not natural bodies generally.) Irigaray maintains that these fluid materials enter into transient bodily forms, which give rise to sexually specific bodily capacities and forms of experience and perception.

In claiming that men and women have inherently different characters as an effect of their location within nature, Irigaray can be seen to use the concept of nature in two main senses. Firstly, the 'nature' of something, for her, denotes its defining character or essence – in this sense, men and women are said to have different natures. Secondly, for Irigaray, 'nature' designates the material world or environment as a whole, which is understood to exist, and to pursue patterns of development, independently

⁴ Irigaray demarcates her view of nature from that of 'patriarchal' (*patriarcal*) cultures, which interpret nature 'in accordance with a *human nature* that they have themselves defined' (SG, 129/143). That is, patriarchal cultures interpret nature in a way which supports belief in fixed, hierarchical, sexual difference. So: 'We need to reinterpret the idea of nature' (4/16); Irigaray reinterprets nature as 'in the first instance . . . earth, water, wind, fire, plants, living bodies, which precede any definition or fabrication that tear them away from roots and origins existing independently of man's transforming activity' (129/143).

⁵ Alison Martin notes that Irigaray's 'philosophy of two [is] a philosophy of two *rhythms* . . . [which] emphasizes that the structures of sexual difference she envisages are primarily structures of process, flow, and becoming in which form and content are united in a regulated harmony' (*Luce Irigaray and the Question of the Divine* (Leeds: Maney Publishing, 2000), p. 123). One might ask why Irigaray thinks that rhythms regulate the circulation of bodily fluids rather than thinking that some other factor (perhaps chromosomal and genetic material) causes this circulation, with rhythms as a side effect. Irigaray will argue against that alternative on the grounds that any potentially causal factor within bodies must itself result from a process of growth which must already have a rhythm. See Chapter 3, Section IV.

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of human transformative activities. This material world includes human beings insofar as they have natures (and act according to those natures), but it excludes humans insofar as they are distinctively cultural beings, engaged in activities of transforming themselves and the material world around them.

The idea that Irigaray's descriptions of nature and sexed humanity differ from traditional – patriarchal – descriptions may seem problematic. Is Irigaray hereby claiming to 'leap to a pre-linguistic, pre-metaphysical, pre-cultural description of nature that would deny our unavoidable situation in language, culture, and metaphysics'?⁶ Irigaray does not deny that she claims knowledge of nature and human bodies from a culturally specific standpoint; rather, in her view, her cultural location within the European philosophical tradition gives her epistemic access to nature and to the natural reality of human bodies. This location offers her the resources to reconceive nature in a novel way and, on that basis, to offer a correspondingly novel – and socially critical – account of sexual difference.⁷

The feminism of sexual difference which Irigaray espouses in her later work differs significantly, I believe, from that of her earlier work.⁸ This earlier work understands sexual difference as the difference between 'male' and 'female' as identities or positions made available within the symbolic order (that is, broadly, the linguistically articulated realm of culture and meaning). On this understanding, sexual difference differs importantly from both *sex* difference – the biological difference between the sexes – and *gender* difference – the difference between masculinity and femininity

⁶ Stacy Keltner, 'The Ethics of Air: Technology and the Question of Sexual Difference', in *Philosophy Today* Suppl. 45:5 (2001), p. 60.

⁷ As Sally Haslanger argues, it does not 'follow from the fact that our epistemic relation to the world is mediated (by language, by concepts, by our sensory system, etc.) that we cannot refer to things independent of us ... Intermediaries do not necessarily block access' ('Feminism in Metaphysics: Negotiating the Natural', in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminism in Philosophy*, ed. Miranda Fricker and Jennifer Hornsby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 121). For example, spectacles and telephones are intermediaries which enable us to know about things which really, independently, exist.

⁸ Irigaray herself periodises her work into an 'early' phase, criticising the 'monosexual' character of western culture, a 'middle' phase, creating the conditions for female subjectivity, and a 'later' phase, encouraging dialogic relations between the sexes (JLI, 96–97; DBT, 121–41). As Chapter 1 will explain, I think that it is in her middle phase that Irigaray introduces the idea that sexual difference is natural, which persists in her self-proclaimed later phase. Thus, when I refer to Irigaray's later thought, I take this to encompass both her self-proclaimed middle and later phases.

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as roles embodied in social practices.⁹ According to the earlier Irigaray, western culture persistently defines the female as the inferior counterpart of the male, establishing patterns of symbolism which are more fundamental and all-pervasive than the contingent, varying, gender roles which result from social practices. Irigaray's early form of sexual difference feminism is important in focusing attention on the symbolic constitution of sexual difference and in opening up the project of transforming received patterns of symbolism by reconceiving female identity positively.¹⁰ But, although sexual difference feminism is usually understood consistently with Irigaray's earlier position, she herself moves away from this position, which she comes to find incoherent.¹¹ This position aims to revalue female identity and, also, nature, matter, and embodiment – with which the female is traditionally aligned – yet it attempts to revalue these only as culturally conceived and symbolised, presupposing, all along, the validity of the conceptual hierarchy which privileges (symbolically male) culture over (symbolically female) nature. Irigaray rightly moves on to espouse her later form of sexual difference feminism, which, preferably, does not devalue nature and matter relative to culture and meaning. One might object that she has reverted to focusing on biological *sex* difference, not sexual difference. But she insists that sexual difference, as a difference in rhythms which (among other things) regulate sexual energy and forms of perception and experience, remains culturally significant

⁹ As Judith Butler (not, herself, a sexual difference feminist) explains, “gender” is...opposed in the name of sexual difference precisely because gender endorses a socially constructivist view of masculinity and femininity, displacing or devaluing the *symbolic* status of sexual difference’ (UG, 185).

¹⁰ Irigaray's earlier form of sexual difference feminism is distinct from the kinds of difference feminism better known in Anglo-American contexts. These aim to recognise and revalue feminine character traits and abilities which have traditionally been disparaged or neglected. For example, Carol Gilligan recognises and revalues the caring, contextualist, ethical standpoint of women, which influential taxonomies of moral development had ranked as mere immaturity; see Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982). Whereas approaches like Gilligan's presume that a sex or gender difference *already* exists in some domain (for example, in moral reasoning), Irigaray holds that traditional symbolic structures deny sexual difference by regarding the female as merely an inferior approximation of the male. She therefore seeks recognition of an as yet *non-existent* female identity, seeing herself as pursuing a transformation of culture's basic symbolism.

¹¹ For an exemplary definition of sexual difference feminism following the earlier Irigaray, see Rosi Braidotti, ‘Sexual Difference Theory’, in *A Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Alison M. Jaggar and Iris Marion Young (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 298–306.

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and erotically charged, and hence is a *sexual*, not narrowly biological, difference.

Insofar as I am defending Irigaray's later philosophy of sexual difference, I am also – unusually within feminist theory – defending essentialism as it figures in her later thought. Although Irigaray explicitly denies being an essentialist, her later view that men and women have natural characters which need and strive for expression is identifiably essentialist.¹² Generally in philosophy, essentialism is the belief that things have essential properties or characters which are necessary to their being the (kind of) things they are. A stronger variant of philosophical essentialism holds that the essences of things consist in their spontaneous tendencies to develop in certain ways – to exhibit certain distinctive patterns of unfolding.¹³ Within feminism, essentialism denotes the view that women and men are constituted as such by certain essential characteristics. For simplicity, whenever I discuss essentialism, I will understand it in this intra-feminist sense.¹⁴ Irigaray's (feminist) essentialism is of a strong form, holding that women's and men's essential characters consist in the rhythms which ensure that their bodies and experiences grow and unfold in distinctive ways. In attributing this form of essentialism to Irigaray, I have no intention of discrediting her later philosophy; rather, I think that the intricacy and fruitfulness of this philosophy shows that essentialism has underexplored potential which feminists should tap.

Although I shall defend Irigaray's focus on the natural reality of bodies against many of the criticisms levied against it, I nonetheless believe that her later philosophy has serious problems. To name the most salient:

¹² In defence of this point, see Chapter 3, Section IV.

¹³ Both weaker and stronger variants of essentialism can be found in Aristotle's concept of form. He regards form as that in any thing which makes it a member of a given species. But also, more strongly, he holds that form exists within any entity as a striving towards full realisation. See Jonathan Lear, *Aristotle: The Desire to Understand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 28, 35–6.

¹⁴ My arguments in this book could be redescribed based on a broader philosophical definition of essentialism. As currently described, I criticise Irigaray's 'essentialism', arguing that individual women (and men) have diverse capacities and forces such that they are never constituted merely as women (or men). In proposing that these diverse capacities and forces exist and should be expressed and developed, I am, in intra-feminist terms, advocating a synthesis of 'essentialism' and 'anti-essentialism'. If redescribed in broader philosophical terms, though, my position – that all individuals have not only sexed but also diverse, non-sexed forces and capacities – would remain 'essentialist'. In this, I follow Andrew Sayer's principle that 'if social science [or philosophy] is to be critical of oppression, it must be essentialist insofar as it has to invoke . . . extra-discursive human capacities for suffering' or flourishing (*Realism and Social Science* (London: Sage, 2000), p. 99).

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this philosophy is heterosexist, assuming that, being naturally different, men and women are naturally attracted to one another. Irigaray cannot, either, acknowledge deep differences between women but considers them to differ only as particular members of a common kind. She therefore regards sexual difference as more fundamental than other differences, such as race. She also asserts that all individuals are naturally either male or female, implicitly denying – or dismissing as aberrant – the intersexed (those whose bodies have ambiguous sex characteristics, such as testes and a vagina). These problems all stem from Irigaray's conception of natural sexual difference, and so they cannot be resolved unless we fundamentally rethink her later philosophy. Nevertheless, given the attractions of this philosophy – its connection of feminist to ecological politics, and its provision of an original, socially critical, form of essentialism – this rethinking is worthwhile.

Accordingly, I aim to rethink Irigaray's later philosophy, by synthesising it with two other currents of thought: Judith Butler's 'performative' theory of gender and the idea of self-differentiating nature articulated within the German tradition of philosophy of nature. Butler's approach to gender becomes important for my argument because it is strong in the very areas where Irigaray's later philosophy is most problematic. Butler argues that gender, sex division, and heterosexuality are (in a sense to be explained) culturally produced and can, as cultural artefacts, be subverted and dismantled. Accommodating differences among women, she argues that norms concerning gender are continually changing and do not confer on women any common identity or experience. Moreover, she denies that sex difference is more fundamental than other differences, construing it merely as a transient artefact of these shifting gender norms. Despite these advantages, Butler's thought is problematic in that her stress on the cultural production of sex and gender privileges culture over matter and nature. A viable synthesis of her thought with that of Irigaray must therefore considerably revise Butler's thought too, specifically (I will argue) by predicating Butler's claims on the idea that bodies do have a natural character, but one of *multiplicity*. By this, I mean that each body is naturally composed of multiple forces (pre-conscious impulses to pursue particular kinds of activity), where this character of multiplicity is universally shared by all bodies. This idea of bodily multiplicity conflicts with Irigaray's belief in sexual duality in several ways. One is that multiplicity is common to all bodies, so it cannot serve as a principle which introduces sexual differentiation between them. Being universal to all bodies, there is nothing in multiplicity as such which

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could cause these bodies to become specified into two sexually different forms.¹⁵

How, then, can this idea of bodily multiplicity be reconciled with Irigaray's belief in natural duality? For this, we can turn to the tradition of philosophy of nature.¹⁶ F. W. J. Schelling and, to a lesser extent, the poet/thinker Friedrich Hölderlin propose that nature is a process of self-differentiation, endlessly dividing into polar oppositions, then seeking to go beyond these oppositions by subdividing each of their poles. Nature, so understood, generates the difference between the sexes but, once realised in this form, passes beyond it by introducing subdifferentiations into each sexed individual, so that individuals are never simply sexed but always have an internal multiplicity of characteristics as well. Since natural duality can be fully realised only when it is expressed culturally, a culture

¹⁵ For further reasons why the beliefs in multiplicity and duality are opposed, see Chapter 2, Section IV Chapter 3, Section V and Chapter 6, Section II, this volume. The notion of 'multiplicity' may seem obscure. I derive it from scholarship on Irigaray, within which there has been considerable discussion about how far her philosophy of sexual difference celebrates multiplicity. See: Moira Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 43; Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 173; Alison Martin, *Luce Irigaray and the Question of the Divine*, pp. 124–5; Judith L. Poxon, 'Corporeality and Divinity: Irigaray and the Problem of the Ideal', in *Religion in French Feminist Thought: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Morny Joy, Kathleen O'Grady, and Judith L. Poxon (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 48; Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 23. Poxon writes, for instance, of the 'importance of "corporeal multiplicity" . . . [T]hat bodies not be conceived as only masculine or feminine is . . . important. . . . [F]eminist theory [should] . . . theorise the multiplicity of bodily differences that keep "women" from being (simply) "woman"' (p. 48). Within Poxon's and other discussions, multiplicity has three main connotations: differences between women; the presence within each woman, or each individual, of a plethora of forces whose diversity disrupts any identity that the individual assumes; and an indefinite process of becoming and change within both individuals and society. Multiplicity has acquired these meanings, in part, from debates within literary theory about whether 'female'/'feminine' writing expresses women's nature or a profusion of changing bodily rhythms and forces (which are female only symbolically, in being bodily and passionate). The apparently heterogeneous senses of multiplicity actually interrelate and, I aim to show, can be derived from a basic understanding of bodies as composed of diverse, non-sexuate – 'multiple' – forces.

¹⁶ 'Philosophy of nature' translates the German *Naturphilosophie*, a tradition normally taken to include Goethe, Schelling, Hegel, and their scientific followers. On this tradition as a whole, see Robert J. Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2002). Hölderlin, whom I also discuss, is not usually included in this tradition, since his discussions of nature are highly fragmentary and cast in a literary register with little overt reference to science. However, the continuities between his view of nature and those of the *Naturphilosophen* mean that he can reasonably be located in this tradition, as I shall do here.

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of sexual difference is the precondition for the full development of multiplicity within individuals (although, because sexual duality is already partially realised, varying degrees of multiplicity must already co-exist with duality in all individuals). However, any legitimate culture of sexual difference must be of a *self-critical* kind which permits the expression of our accompanying multiplicity as well. According to my rethinking of Irigaray's later philosophy, then, sexual difference remains natural, but it is merely one manifestation of a broader natural process of self-differentiation, and so it should be culturally expressed in a self-critical, self-limiting, form.

Evidently, my approach to Irigaray is not simply expository but is also informed by the aim of working out a viable, substantive position in feminist philosophy – namely, a conception of nature as self-differentiating and manifesting itself in both duality and multiplicity. Given this orientation, I shall explain Irigaray's claims in a critical and analytic style distinct from her own. Her later writing style is less allusive and opaque than that of her earlier texts, yet it often remains evocative and politically inspirational rather than precise. My relatively exact language may seem incapable of doing justice to her thought. Against this, I would stress that readers whose intellectual and cultural standpoints differ from those of a text can, because of this difference, illuminate previously occluded aspects of the text. This principle is familiar from feminist history of philosophy: current feminist concerns can unearth dimensions in earlier texts – for example, the sexed connotations of their concepts – which have always been present but can be articulated and more explicit only in the context of subsequent feminist movements.¹⁷ Similarly, predominantly English-speaking feminist debates around nature, essentialism, and sexual diversity enable us to analyse critically the strengths and weaknesses of Irigaray's later philosophy and so, too, to ascertain how it can be resituated within a framework that recognises bodily multiplicity as well as duality.

Complicating the question of the appropriate language for discussing Irigaray's ideas is the untranslatability of some of her terms, conspicuously her distinction between *masculin* and *féminin*. She speaks of a *féminin* sex, desire, language, and cultural world (TS, 149/146, 30/29; DBT, 131), whereas English speakers, informed by the sex/gender distinction, would

¹⁷ See Genevieve Lloyd, 'Introduction' to *Feminism and History of Philosophy*, ed. Lloyd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), esp. pp. 7–9.

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probably call sex and desire female, language and culture feminine. Irigaray's usage reflects the fact that the French *féminin* covers all aspects of human being, the predicates *mâle* and *femelle* generally applying only to nonhuman animals and plants.¹⁸ To confuse matters further, Irigaray asserts the need for a *genre féminin*; by this, she means not a social feminine role but a culturally recognised female identity with its own specific worth, which all women could see themselves as embodying.¹⁹ In general, the wider scope of the French *féminin* facilitates Irigaray's postulation of a natural sexual difference in humans which is rhythmic and processual, rather than narrowly biological, and which realises itself in sexual, psychological, and, ideally, cultural forms. In turn, whenever I explicate or draw on Irigaray, I will speak indifferently of men and males, or women and females. I shall use the adjective 'female' (or 'male') to translate Irigaray's *féminin* (or *masculin*), given her view that the various manifestations of sexual difference ultimately derive from nature.²⁰

My aim of rethinking Irigaray in terms of ideas from the philosophy of nature may seem idiosyncratic, since her more obvious reference points lie in the traditions of phenomenology and psychoanalysis – although her references to other authors and texts generally tend to be oblique and indirect. Still, there are some elements of the tradition of philosophy

¹⁸ See Stella Sandford, 'Feminism Against "The Feminine"', in *Radical Philosophy* 105 (2001), p. 6. Because French *femelle/féminin* do not correspond to English female/feminine, it is sometimes held that – for better or worse – the sex/gender distinction is unavailable in French (see, for example, Christine Battersby, *The Phenomenal Woman: Feminist Metaphysics and the Patterns of Identity* (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 1998), pp. 19–22). However, some French materialist feminists, such as Christine Delphy, do speak of *genre* and *rapports de genre* (not *sexe*) to denote social relations of gender (see Gill Allwood, *French Feminisms: Gender and Violence in Contemporary Theory* (London: UCL Press, 1998), pp. 89–91). Although French thus does permit at least some distinction between sex and gender, Irigaray avoids any such distinction because she thinks that it would implicitly privilege culture over nature (for a comparable Anglophone criticism of the distinction, see Moira Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies*, pp. 3–20).

¹⁹ The French *genre* means, among other things, kind, as in the *genre humain*; for Irigaray, *genre* must become *sexué* (JTN, 13/14) – humankind must be seen as dual; that is, culture must conceptualise two different sexuate identities (so recognising the difference between the sexes' natural characters). On *genre* as kind, see Whitford, ed., *The Irigaray Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 17; for more on Irigaray's concept of *genre*, see Chapter 5, Section IV, and Chapter 6, Section IV.

²⁰ Some recent translations on which Irigaray has partially collaborated render *féminin* as 'feminine', but I remain convinced on philosophical grounds that 'female' better captures the sense of her *féminin*. Occasionally, though, I will use 'feminine' in translating Irigaray, when 'female' would read oddly; in such cases I will note that *féminin* remains Irigaray's term.