Uncovering the connections between the concepts of language, sexual difference and the divine in the work of Luce Irigaray

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Uncovering the connections between the concepts of language, sexual difference and the divine in the work of Luce Irigaray.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Luce Irigaray is known as a psychoanalyst, a philosopher, a French feminist theorist, a feminist of sexual difference and a feminist of change. For me, Irigaray is one of the few writers who dares to dive down to a deeper level of meaning in search of an opening...a gap, that will lead to a positive recategorisation of women and femininity (Grosz 1989 p.105).

Irigaray’s work is challenging to say the least with some feminist writers referring to her as ‘exceptionally elusive, fluid and ambiguous’ (Grosz 1989 p.101). There appears to be a flow in her work, which initially had me questioning where the beginning is and where is the end. It was only when I realised that there is no beginning or end that I could begin to follow her flow and appreciate the connections that her work creates.

Whilst this fluid style of Irigaray’s work is intoxicating, it makes it almost impossible to examine a single aspect of her work as separate from the rest. I think to simply select one part of her work and explore it as though it stands alone would actually be missing the very point Irigaray is trying to make. It appears to me that rather than approach her work in a linear almost phallic way, one needs to stand in the middle of her work and thus see it as circular/surrounding/including.

Saying that, in this thesis I have focused on what I consider to be the three most important aspects of Irigaray’s work; language, sexual difference and divinity. In fact, it is my premise that these three concepts together form a powerful river, from which all of Irigaray’s work flows and returns. I posit that there are connections between these concepts which when recognised and worked with, provide a three dimensional perspective of Irigaray’s work.

What I have tried to do in this thesis, is to expose the connections I perceive to be present in Irigaray’s work by exploring these concepts individually in separate chapters. The re-occurrence of certain themes and the borrowing of one concept to give understanding to the other, effortlessly demonstrates the mutually supporting nature of these concepts. Therefore, although this thesis has separate chapters for Irigaray’s work on language, sexual difference and the divine, the ebb and flow that is so apparent between these concepts remains, maintaining the fluidity that is Irigaray’s work.
This thesis begins with chapter two, Irigaray and language. My aim in this chapter is to introduce Irigaray’s linguistic focus on language and communication. It looks at the structure and style of language, demonstrating its gendered nature and thus the role it plays in maintaining the subordinate positioning of women. This chapter explores the notion that females and males communicate in very different ways, highlighting that for women, the structure of our language, which is a product of the western, masculine symbolic order, is inefficient for women to express themselves in positive, non-dualist terms and thus requires a major transformation.

Irigaray’s work on language then, emphasises the importance of breaking down the vertical oppositional positioning of males and females which is a product of the western dualisms that are apparent in the structuring of our language, because they undoubtedly work to retain the positioning of women as subordinate.

From here I move into Chapter three, which explores Irigaray’s concept of sexual difference. I posit that the representation of woman-as-subject is the key aspect of Irigaray’s project and it is in this chapter that I investigate this further. This important work is about the recategorisation of women and femininity, from object to subject, so that women can be autonomously defined according to our own needs and desires. Irigaray suggests that at present, western culture is based on sameness, based on one sex, and is a homosexual culture, with only the male’s identity recognised as subjects leaving no space for women to journey towards their potential. According to Grosz (1989, p. 109), “Irigaray aims to break out of the phallogocentric circuit in which women function only as objects (of consumption or exchange) between and for men. She aims then to represent women and femininity otherwise than in phallocentric terms.”

Irigaray’s continuing utilisation of her psychoanalytic background is evident in each of the three concepts I have focused on in this thesis, however it is in this chapter that it plays a primary role, with the creation of a female symbolic and a female imaginary being the focal point of this concept. Irigaray has taken the notion of the symbolic and the imaginary from the work of Jacques Lacan and extended it, re-shaping it into a valuable tool to assist her on her quest to transform the representational space for women.

Another theme which is to be found flowing through all three concepts is the notion of woman-to-woman sociality. Again it is in this chapter (three) that this
notion is explored more fully, with the focus being on the relationship between mother and daughter. Here psychoanalysis is used by Irigaray once again to provide an explanation as to why daughters are forced into objectifying their mothers, leaving no space for the creation of a reciprocal relationship between woman and woman.

Chapter four on Irigaray and divinity provides another angle from which to scrutinize representational space for women in western culture and society. This concept draws together in a more obvious manner, the concepts of language and sexual difference, providing a three dimensional view into Irigaray’s work. This chapter draws more from Irigaray’s later work where she reveals her long standing interest and participation with what she calls ‘Eastern traditions’. This has resulted in a coming together of Irigaray’s Christian background and her eastern experiences, providing a somewhat revolutionary understanding of the divine. One thing that has resulted from this meeting of east and west is the notion of the sensible transcendental, a concept that actually works to reorganise all that which is currently placed as vertical opposites to horizontal differences. Thus this work tackles once again the traditional structure of western dualisms, encouraging the recognition of difference through certain techniques that can help to open up spaces for women to re-position themselves.

Chapter five is titled ‘Making Connections’, here I re-examine my own work, pulling out the themes that I believe act as bridges, connecting Irigaray’s concepts of language, sexual difference and the divine.

**The method**

This thesis is a text based examination of Irigaray’s concepts of language, sexual difference and the divine. I have engaged with the texts that I have chosen to use in a particular way, assuming a reading style known as tactical reading, whereby meanings are produced from the text not by it. A tactical reading practice uses the text as a point of trajectory, “meanings generated by a reading are extrapolated beyond the text into a reading/meaning making practice which states and reinforces the attitudes and values of that reader” (Cranny-Francis, Wearing, Stravropolus & Kirby, 2003, p. 129). By undertaking a tactical reading of Irigaray’s work, I have shifted the focus away somewhat from the text and onto my own perception of her work, which is of course a reflection of some of the
multiple positions I hold in life such as being a woman, a mother of daughters, a
spiritual seeker and an honours student.

While I have explored and indeed sometimes included other commentaries of
Irigaray's work, I have made a conscious decision to mainly use the large amount
of critiques available to inform my own process of reading Irigaray's work and
how I might, in turn, relate to it. I have deliberately focused this thesis on
forming my own approach to reading her work and so largely present this direct
relationship. I have deliberately included Irigaray's voice throughout this thesis,
including her in my work, to continually allow her voice to frame my own
reading.
Chapter Two: Luce Irigaray and Language

How can we remodel existing languages so as to give rise to a sexuate culture?
That is what is at issue in my researches (Irigaray, 1991a, p. 152).

Luce Irigaray has practised the analysis of discourse for over thirty years; producing two PhD’s almost entirely dedicated to this kind of research (Irigaray, 2004, p. 35). Irigaray’s first writing on the notion of the possibility of a different, non-masculine discourse was in the early 1970’s in her work titled ‘This sex which is not one’ (Whitford, 1991, p. 4). The call for changes that will result in the reconceptualisation of women which has always been present in Irigaray’s work, appears to be becoming more urgent...more demanding, with one of the key transformations she urges for being in the processes of language and languages of discourse.

According to Whitford (1991, p. 4), “Irigaray’s work on language is an attempt to make visible the underlying Oedipal structure of language and culture, which distributes different roles to men and women.” Irigaray wants to expose the sexed nature of language and how it works to maintain the subordination of women, demonstrating that the generation of messages is not neutral, but sexuate (Irigaray, 1991a, p. 143). Irigaray’s work demonstrates the connections between language and how its values reflect the social order and vice versa, making it easy to identify the important role language plays in placing women in a secondary position to men.

Irigaray’s work on sexual difference which I explore in chapter three exposes how difference between females and males has been used to implement inequality between the two, revealing that for far too long, females have been looked upon as lacking, not different. Irigaray’s work on language clearly demonstrates how this image of the feminine as ‘lesser than’ is represented in our words and in the construction of western language, a product of the western, masculine symbolic order framed by western dualisms, that constructs our social world.

Language provides many examples of how what is masculine is valorised and what is feminine is devalorized, maintaining inequality between the sexes. Irigaray reveals that in French, where the words have a gender, their sexuate nature is more obvious. For example, the word castle in French is masculine and
The word house is feminine. This also extends into professions, with many stereotypically feminine occupations having a feminine gender and more stereotypically masculine occupations having a masculine gender. With objects too, we can see how the objects with more value have been labelled as masculine, like the sun, the source of life, whereas those objects that are thought of as having a lesser value or harmful, like the moon, are labelled as feminine (Irigaray, 1993a, p. 68).

With this kind of inequality built into the structure of our language, women struggle to live as sexed subjects with equivalent rights. It is only through a transformation of language, a breakdown of binary oppositions that woman-as-subject will become a possibility and Irigaray suggests that this transformation can only take place if we valorise the feminine gender once more, with language representing an essential tool of production for this liberation (Irigaray, 1996, p. 73).

Dialogue between female and male subjects is impossible because 'I' and 'you' do not occupy equivalent positions for both sexes. Men and women are not alternately locutor and interlocutor, which would require a real exchange of words (Irigaray, 2004a, p. 80).

Irigaray’s more recent research in the area of language, where she worked in conjunction with international research teams to examine the expression of sex in language, was done in Italian, English and French in order to attempt to establish how the operation of sex in language takes place in different languages (Whitford, 1991, p. 4). The outcome of this research clearly demonstrated that men and women use language, and therefore communicate, very differently. Irigaray concludes that “men and women do not produce the same sentences with cue words, they do not use certain prepositions in the same way and they do not privilege the same relation to temporality” (Irigaray, 1996, p. 79). Irigaray also reveals that grammatically males tend to use nouns rather than verbs or nouns rather than adjectives, while females tend to use more verbs or adjectives in place of nouns (Irigaray, 2004a, p. 80).

According to Irigaray, women are more inclined to seek out dialogue, intersubjective exchange, to communicate with another person, identifying what is
happening in the here and now and using language accordingly. Men on the other hand, prefer to speak of the concrete object, using language to denote reality, using all the old coded meanings to establish their truths, what they say as the truth, keeping them separated from the now, and aligned more with the past (Irigaray, 1996, p. 95).

Irigaray’s analysis shows us that the inability to understand the terms in which each speaks, makes the exchange of information between the two incredibly poor, with hardly anything transferring from the minds and hearts of one to the hearts and minds of the other, creating what Irigaray calls, ‘mutual deafness’ (Irigaray, 2004a, p. 82). This state of mutual deafness not only keeps a great distance between the two, it also leaves each one with no choice but to live in the past, doing what they perceive they need to do, referring to old codes and meanings, stunting their growth and thus their movement forward.

Each remains in her and his own separate universe, she dreaming of a ‘you’ that does not exist, he imagining himself to be the very model of subjectivity, even as he remains subjugated to imperatives resulting from his relational inadequacies (Irigaray, 2004a, p. 82).

Irigaray sees the dominant Western tradition as a culture designed by men, one that has always worked towards conquering the natural world, aimed at being the master of the natural universe, endeavouring to separate from it. Since the creation of the Pythagorean table of opposites in the sixth century BC (Whitford, 1991, p. 60), where femaleness was linked with the unbounded, uncontrollable natural world, language has been structured to maintain the separation from nature and (m)other that the masculine identity appears to desire and works to sustain the subordinate positioning of women. Therefore, this distance between the two, that language helps to maintain, is a creation of the masculine subject, formulated over time, stemming from what Irigaray calls a ‘hold back’ respect for any personal involvement (Irigaray, 2004a, p. 67).

It is this resistance to closeness, to touching, that has lead to the ‘you’ progressively moving away from all proximity from all contact (Irigaray, 2004a, p. 67). To formulate a world where everything is outside of oneself, separate from oneself, to implement universally valid codes, seemingly provides some kind
of safety net protection mechanism for the masculine identity as one separated
from the original you, the mother (nature). The structuring of western culture and
society around western dualisms has, at least up until now, resulted in a
preference for the object over the subject, for the fabrication, exchange and
consumption of things over the dialogue with the other (Irigaray, 2004a, p. 79).

It appears that this resistance or fear to move towards the other, to touch the
other in the present, forces the subject to rely on already established
perceptions/pictures, removing any hope of reciprocal interaction between the
two, making it easier to hold on to the already identified masculine identity. A
closer look into the way we speak with each other and of the words we use,
reveals the stagnation of meaning that is (isn’t?) transferred. With meaning
already programmed into each utterance, the freedom and vitality that is possible
with communication between two, is lost, restraining the subject from speaking or
hearing anything new and ensuring that the meaningful gets lost in the process
(Irigaray, 2002a, p. 17).

To the other it is not possible to communicate a meaning through a closed word.
Such a word is always already a testamentary legacy, which is transmitted
without serving to communicating with (Irigaray, 2002a, p.25).

According to Irigaray this inflexibility of meaning prevents us from
experiencing a real exchange between two, keeping us distanced from ourselves
and each other. Living with the understanding that words have only a singular
meaning, reduces communication between the two to the fulfilment of needs (his)
and with no access to the silent gaps that breath and growth require (a topic
discussed further in chapter 4), we are cut off from discovering the difference of
ourselves and of the other. Irigaray calls for an interval to be provided, a space
which allows one to recognize oneself and the other, removing the habitual
tendency to perceive the other through closed eyes and to speak with the other
with closed words. In order to implement such a space, Irigaray refers to the
process Hegel called recognition.
Recognition is the act that could enable the hierarchical domination between the sexes to be overcome, which could restore woman and man, women and men, to their respective identity and dignity, and which should bring about relations that are cultured, spiritual and not merely natural; relations founded upon a form of indirection or intransitivity (Irigaray, 1996, p. 104).

So what does recognition between the sexes mean for Irigaray? My understanding in simple terms is that recognition means to notice the difference of the other, recognizing the difference between you and me. Recognising the difference creates an acceptance of it… “I recognize you supposes that I cannot see right through you. You will never be entirely visible to me, but, thanks to that, I respect you as different from me” (Irigaray, 1996, p. 104). Irigaray connects this recognition of difference with the acknowledgement of the incompleteness that therefore resides in all of us, neither one being whole, neither one being better or worse, both beautifully different and therefore irreducible.

With this understanding, comes the acceptance that we can never really know the one or the other on any level, ensuring that the other always remains a mystery. We can no longer assume that individual perception and interpretation of meaning is the same for the one and the other. Meaning must be allowed its fluidity, its motion and movement. Never again should it be imprisoned, choked in old solidified boxes. There is urgency in Irigaray’s work for the transformation of language, but how to begin? Irigaray suggests introducing a double syntax.

* Might we not say that it is because it has produced and continues to ‘hold’ syntax that the masculine maintains mastery over discourse (Irigaray, 1991b, p. 134)? *

The forms/structures of the words and sentences of western language have thus far, according to Irigaray, been developed by and for the masculine subject based on western traditional dualisms. This explains why language not only limits real interaction between the two, but also how it represses and censures woman’s own expression. Hence Irigaray’s call for a double syntax, another form and style of speaking that allows for the expression of the female language.

How would the feminine syntax present? Irigaray suggests that fluidity of meaning would be crucial in the feminine syntax, with the privileging of oneness
that is one meaning, one truth, being no longer valid. The focus would thus move away from the object, which as we have seen thus far serves to maintain distance and move towards the subject, which would require nearness and proximity. This nearness would be in such an extreme form that it would “preclude any distinction of identities, any establishment of ownership, thus any form of appropriation” (Irigaray, 1991b, p. 136).

Irigaray suggests that this feminine form of expression already exists in the gestural codes of women’s bodies. There within, resides a form of expression/communication which is often hidden due to the power of the existing dominant language, often unheard by ears which are sealed shut with old and tired meanings. Irigaray claims that this language however, is readily revealed when women are safe among themselves, sharing their stories, their suffering or their laughter (Irigaray, 1991b, p. 136). This indicates the importance of a woman-to-woman sociality as it is with other women that women can communicate to commune (this topic is dealt with in more depth in chapter 3).

Irigaray’s work on language aims for the inclusion of this feminine expression in the world of communication, “creating another pole of cultural discourse and allowing two-way predication (the double syntax), unfreezing the discourse which has petrified and at the same time giving to women the cultured and symbolic possibilities previously allowed only to men in patriarchy, including the possibility of divinity” (Irigaray, 1991c, p. 48).

When man created a God in his own image, he was able to appropriate divine power, using it to separate himself from nature, separate women from women, and separate women from the divine. The language of man was then accepted as God’s word and that word soon became the all-embracing, universal truth that has been suffocating and separating us ever since (Irigaray, 1991d, p. 70).

Irigaray claims that with patriarchal religious notions of the divine working from within the framework of binary oppositions, they maintain the subordination of women by promoting the movement away from nature (mother) as a progressive one. This movement is reinforced by reciprocal communication between the two not being seen as one of the achievements an individual needs to attain in order to reach high spiritual states (Irigaray, 1996, p. 101). Nature or, the (m)other, the original ‘you’, is therefore depicted as an objective thing which
needs to be transcended in order for true liberation to be met, not something to enter into dialogue with.

Irigaray challenges this notion by claiming that speech between the two is the very thing which is necessary for each individual to truly enter into a divine life. Transcendence for Irigaray, is no longer ‘ecstasy’, a state in which the self (nature?) is left behind, it is now ‘enstasy’, something that remains, “ready to meet with the other, particularly through language, without sacrificing sensibility” (Irigaray, 1996, p. 105). This topic of transcendence is explored in more detail in chapter 4.

It is Irigaray’s claim that by recognizing the other as different/irreducible, each subject confidently communicates with freedom. No longer trapped by old meanings and universal truths, the subject continually returns to the self, becoming more and more faithful to the self, simply becoming more and more (Irigaray, 2002a, p. xiv). The multiplicity which results from such open dialogue provides the space for multiple horizons to be revealed, returning man to nature, woman to woman and woman to the divine. The enhancement of communication between the two and many therefore, becomes a sign of spiritual progress not one of spiritual stagnation.

*I go towards you as towards that which I shall not see but which attracts me, like a path of becoming, of progress. This progress does not mean estrangement from flesh, from my body, from my history. I go towards that which enables me to become while remaining myself (Irigaray, 1996, p.104).*

Irigaray’s work on language intends to make possible “an encounter between the one and the other” (Irigaray, 2002a, p. viii). This encounter in the present will result in the acknowledgement and respect of the two, allowing the necessary space for the creation of multiple horizons for two to move towards continually. What is required is a different liaison with language, one which allows for the interaction/dialogue between the two in the present and one not reliant on the preconceived notions of old coded, masculine meanings.

For language to progress towards true freedom of speech there needs to be an acceptance of the way in which it is encoded with sexual difference. This acceptance of sexual difference within communication insists on multiplicity,
making it imperative to acknowledge that one truth does not speak to all subjects and that one meaning has many (Irigaray, 2002a, p. 9). Irigaray shows us with her work that there are not enough gaps/spaces in the current use of language to question, to witness, to breathe or to be silent.

According to Irigaray, our true strength lies in sharing words (1991e, p. 79). It is this sharing of words, this proximity, that can allow each one of us to flow where we need to, generating the confidence to continue revealing the self whilst exploring the mystery of the other. There is therefore, an urgent need to recognize the irreducibility of female and male worlds so the pathways that can lead to multiple horizons remain safe without any being reduced, invalidated or annihilated.
Chapter Three: Luce Irigaray and Sexual Difference

For the work of sexual difference to take place, a revolution in thought and ethics is needed. We must re-interpret the whole relationship between subject and discourse, the subject and the world, the subject and the cosmic, the microcosmic and the macrocosmic (Irigaray, 1991f, p. 166).

According to Irigaray sexual difference is the major philosophical issue of our age, an issue which represents one of the great hopes of the future, a future in which the two sexes have equal access to culture (1993a, p. vi). Irigaray’s work on sexual difference exposes the homosexual nature of our culture, a culture that is dominated by one sex, a culture constructed by men for men and a culture which demonstrates exclusive respect for the genealogy of sons and fathers; a patriarchal culture (Whitford, 1991, p. 23).

The psychoanalytic discourse which Irigaray utilises in the development of her concept of sexual difference declares that there is only one sex and that this single sex is male (women are only recognised as defective men, men without a penis). The symbolic order, as defined by Lacan and used by Irigaray, is thus masculine, with our culture, identity, logic and rationality all being symbolically male, leaving the female (defective male) outside of it all, like unsymbolised residue (Whitford, 1991, p. 69). The female being outside of it all, cannot accede into subjectivity within this masculine symbolic order, she functions as an object, situated according to the needs and desires of the masculine and not of her own. Therefore, Irigaray suggests that for women to be recognised as subjects, to live according to their own needs and desires...for two sexes to be recognised, transformation in the symbolic order and the imaginary is imperative.

"Women’s exploitation is based upon sexual difference; its solution will come only through sexual difference" (Irigaray 1993a, p. 12).

Many would argue that two sexes already exist, so how do I interpret Irigaray’s concept of sexual difference? Initially it appears that Irigaray is referring to the obvious biological difference between women and men. This superficial understanding of Irigaray’s work has resulted in her being labelled by some
feminists as an essentialist and thus criticised. However, on further reading I understand that Irigaray is speaking of morphology rather than biology. In other words, when she talks of sexual difference she is referring to the result of the social and psychical meanings that are inscribed on the body, not the biology of the body itself (Grosz, 1989, p. 111).

For Irigaray, it is not simply a question of biology, but the construction of meaning and the entire socio-symbolic order that is woven into the picture (Casey 1999). Thus when Irigaray refers to the body, she is observing/writing on the material that has been structured and inscribed, that which is moulded socially and historically, a body that exists as such only through its socio-linguistic construction. According to Grosz (1989, p. 112), “Bodies are not conceived by Irigaray as biologically or anatomically given, inert, brute objects, fixed by nature once and for all. Bodies for Irigaray are the bearers of meanings and social values, the products of social inscriptions, always inherently social.”

The body therefore, is a text to be read and if the readers/interpreters are all children of the patriarchal discourse that is so apparent in our world today then the result will be a feminine object constructed by the learnt male gaze. Irigaray demonstrates how this kind of patriarchal framework maintains male dominance in serious scientific discourse and practice, as well as the control of politics and even the control of the private sphere of women (Irigaray, 1993a, p. 10).

*Everywhere and in everything men define the function and the social role of women, right down to the social identity that women are to have or not to have. Men know, men have access to the truth, not us. We barely, at times have access to fiction (Irigaray, 1993a, p. 10).*

This perception of our culture being a male dominated one, a patriarchal one, is not new, with women’s liberation fighting for equality for many years now. For Irigaray however, what we understand by equality is not clear. Irigaray asks “to whom or what should women become equal?” and then “haven’t women given up being themselves when they settle for equality with men” (2004a, p. 77)? For Irigaray, “to become equal is to be unfaithful to the task of incarnating our happiness as living women and men” (Irigaray, 1996, p. 15). Equality is required, but equality in the sense of allocation to social and symbolic space which of
course requires respect for both sexes, the difference of both sexes to be recognised...the differences between the two.

For the equal allocation of space in the social and the symbolic to prevail, two sexes must be recognised as existing. Irigaray refers to nature (the natural world) to demonstrate the lunacy of acknowledging only half of the human race. She reminds us that in nature there is at least two, ruling out the possibility of 'the universal', a single universal truth (Irigaray, 1996, p. 35). Observing nature (the natural world) reminds us of difference, fluidity, life & death and change. It also shows us how as human beings we have allowed cultures to be created which do not respect the natural world, cultures which strive to separate from nature, cultures which use it to separate.

According to Irigaray, the connections to the cosmic rhythms that worked for and the fertility of the natural order have been destroyed and that ironically the fluid, accepting nature of the natural world has been misinterpreted and therefore, used to construct the stagnant, confining picture of 'the woman's nature'. Based on this picture, defined by a symbolic order structured according to western dualisms, constructed by and for men, "rights are unequally distributed and frequently turn into duties, especially for women; the duty to bear children, sexual duties" (Irigaray, 1993a, p. 4).

The woman is assigned the role of mother, defined by the role of mother, this is where she is valued but as Irigaray reminds us, "values have been codified in the men's camp; they are not appropriate to women or appropriated by them" (1993a, p. 4). Within the male symbolic, woman becomes an object. She is the reproducer of children, the house to come home to; she plays no part in social decisions and is not valorised as a worker, a citizen, or in political life (Irigaray, 1991c, p. 50). Irigaray implies that the mother has no identity, no language; she is but a machine, working to fulfil the needs and the desires of the man-father.

Irigaray suggests that the social order, our culture and psychoanalysis itself are all insistent that the mother must remain silent, outlawed, with her "desires prohibited by all the fathers; fathers of families, fathers in religion, father teachers, father doctors, father lovers, etc" (Irigaray, 1993a, p. 11). Her desires are buried under his needs.
Mothers, and the woman within them, have been trapped in the role of she who satisfies need but has no access to desire. So long as women are imprisoned in the reality of need, where is desire (Irigaray, 1991c, p. 50)?

“In psychoanalysis desire is simply a function of the law of the father: One enters into desire when one enters into the relationship with the father” (Irigaray, 1991c, p. 52). I suggest that this masculine code of desire is that which dwells in the male imaginary, it is that which feeds the male symbolic, which enables these images to manifest into reality, indicating that it is within the imaginary and symbolic that change must take place, something I will elaborate on later in this chapter.

Irigaray’s interpretation of psychoanalysis demonstrates that as females we become the object of desire for/of the father. We are confronted by the fact that only male desires are valid, sending the desires of females which are not compatible with the law of the father somewhere deep inside. Irigaray highlights the fact that if girls then look to the mother to see something of the desire of woman, they are faced only with a machine fulfilling needs, his needs. It is then impossible for daughters to have a personal relationship with or construct a personal identity in relation to someone who is no more than a function (Irigaray, 1991c, p. 50). This works to separate women from one another, removing any possibility of the development of a female culture (Irigaray, 1996, p. 44). Thus Irigaray urges that we need to form a reciprocal woman-to-woman relationship with our mothers, suggesting that it is an indispensable precondition for our emancipation from the authority of fathers.

Let us try to discover the special character of our love for other women. This love is essential if we are to quit our common situation and cease being slaves of the phallic cult, commodities to be used and exchanged by men, competing objects in the market place (Irigaray, 1993a, p. 20).

Irigaray’s work emphasises the importance of the re-establishment of a maternal genealogy so that love between women can be uncovered. Irigaray claims that within the male symbolic order, the maternal genealogy is unsymbolised, that is, “there is an absence of linguistic, social, semiotic, structural, cultural, iconic,
theoretical, mythical, religious or any other representations of that relationship” (Whitford, 1991, p. 76).

By remaining unsymbolised, the mother-daughter relationship poses no threat to the existing patriarchal order as this unsymbolised relationship makes it impossible for women to have an identity in the symbolic order that is distinct from the maternal function (Whitford, 1991, p. 77). The male symbolic works to separate the girl-child from her mother, placing her into the genealogy of the father. The forbidden love between mother and daughter is then transformed into “the woman’s obligation to devote herself to the cult of the children of her legal husband and to the husband himself as a male child” (Irigaray, 1993a, p. 2).

What would happen if the girl-child perceived her mother as a woman as well as a mother? Would this not create a space for women to differentiate themselves from the mother therefore avoiding the diminution of the woman to the maternal function? If women can only relate to their mothers as objects whose function is to fulfil needs (his), then when they identify with their mothers as being the same sex, they are concurrently objectifying themselves. Irigaray’s work calls for transformations which will see women enter language as a subject, to make it possible for them to identify with their mothers without objectifying them.

As Whitford (1991, p. 92) writes, “for Irigaray, symbolising the mother-daughter relationship, creating externally located and durable representations of the prototypical relation between women is an urgent necessity if women are to exist as women in the social imaginary.”

In psychoanalytic categories the path which leads woman to herself has not been thought through. Nor even imagined? It is left in the shadow of the pre-object, and in the suffering and abandonment of the fusional state which fails to emerge as a subject (Irigaray, 1993b, p. 70).

Irigaray moves between the psychoanalytic definition of the imaginary, which is the unconscious, phantasing mind, (the place where Freud claims those desires incompatible with the laws of society, the one’s that threaten the unity and sovereignty of the conscious subject reside) (Weedon, 1999, p. 81), and the phenomenological definition which is the conscious, imagining and imaging mind. Irigaray expands both of these concepts of the imaginary by claiming that
it either carries the morphological prints of the male body; unity, teleology, linearity, self-identity etc., or it carries the morphological prints of the female body; plurality, non-linearity, fluid identity etc (Whitford, 1991, p. 54).

Whitford (1991, p. 54) suggests that the movement between the psychoanalytic and phenomenological definitions of the imaginary indicates that sometimes the imaginary is an unconscious structure and sometimes a structure of the symbolic, but I would argue that both are the structure of the symbolic as the repressed desires that reside in the unconscious, that indeed create the unconscious, are there due to the structure of the symbolic and I propose that this is what Irigaray is aiming to change.

I understand the symbolic and the imaginary to be two parts of one system, a system that works to design our social/cultural structure. The imaginary can be seen as that which presents the first draught of the design and the symbolic is that which ensures the final construction. However, are not the images that come from the imaginary constructed by the needs and desires of the male symbolic? There appears to be a certain reciprocity between the two, with one feeding the other which indicates that change in the imaginary must bring about change in the symbolic and vice versa.

This reciprocity between the imaginary and the symbolic also indicates that if the symbolic is masculine then so is the imaginary, and without a female imaginary, women are left without representations or images from which to design a female symbolic into which they can enter as subjects. Whitford (1991, p. 91) writes, “Subjectivity is a structure, or a position of enunciation. It is not identity; but that structure would be empty without the imaginary: representations are what flesh it out. Subjectivity then belongs to the symbolic which is empty without the imaginary.” Therefore, female subjectivity, that which enables two sexes to be recognised, requires a female symbolic, which depends on a female imaginary, something Irigaray is working towards creating.

The female imaginary is mobile and fluid, a property that is never fixed in the possible identity-to-self of some form or other. It is always fluid. Like the womb it is the formless, amorphous origin of all morphology (Irigaray, 1991g, p. 59).
By moving between the two definitions of the imaginary as Irigaray does, the female imaginary can be defined not only as the pool of unconscious thoughts that have been driven underneath, but also as something which does not yet exist, something which is yet to be created (Whitford, 1991, p. 89). Remembering the reciprocal relationship between the imaginary and the symbolic, it becomes clear that the creation of the female imaginary is indeed a social process with women needing a religion, a language and an economy of their own, vessels into which their imaginary can be poured into (Whitford, 1991, p. 89).

Irigaray’s work on sexual difference which calls for the recognition of two sexes relies therefore on the creation of the female imaginary as it is that which will provide a space in which women can attain subjectivity. Irigaray’s female imaginary is not something to replace the now existing male imaginary, but rather it is the creation of another inventive space/spaces from which a female symbolic can be nourished and thereby flourish.

Irigaray’s work demonstrates a desire to cultivate a social form specific to women which relies on the necessary construction of women-as-subjects. To be a woman-subject means to participate in the construction of the world and the making of cultural and socio-political reality. In other words, it means to occupy a space in the symbolic as producers of truth and knowledge (Whitford, 1991, p. 51). Thus Irigaray asserts that women must be visible in the world of language if we are to enter into the social/cultural world as subjects.

So according to Irigaray, the materialisation of female subjectivity, requires love between women, woman-to-woman sociality, a female homosexual economy as well as a transformation in language and discourse (which was discussed in chapter two) (Whitford, 1991, p. 49). Irigaray proposes that the identification of woman-as-subject not only ensures transformation in the material world of women, but that such a change in the status of women will reveal a different horizon for women to journey towards, re-creating the shape of women’s relations to the divine.
Chapter Four: Luce Irigaray and the Divine

Talking about religion can be hurtful, to oneself and to others. Affect linked to religion is deeply rooted; in some obscure way, it holds together the totality of the self, of the community and culture. Trying to change it can unravel the social fabric, along with subjectivity and religion (Irigaray, 2004a, p. 171).

According to Irigaray, the religious element of our culture is an important one and understanding the role it plays in our daily lives, whether we call ourselves religious or not, provides us with an insight into our culture and thus to ourselves. Many of us, including Irigaray, born and educated in a Christian context, turned away from this tradition (at least the conscious part of it) as soon as we could, only to face the realisation as adults that the roots of this tradition sit deeper than we first thought and thus are not so easily removed.

Irigaray believes that it is important in the development of our feminine subjectivity to return to the religious element of our culture, not in order to blindly obey it, but to reach some perspectives on our culture and on ourselves, which permits a “conscious becoming of our global subjectivity” (Irigaray, 2004a, p. 145). According to Irigaray, exploring the religious element of our culture is “crucial in considering both how we have been determined by this religious dimension and how we can, in the present, situate ourselves with respect to it” (2004a, p. 145).

I think it is important to note, that whilst Irigaray sees it as valuable to explore the religious dimensions of our culture, she at the same time advocates building bridges between different traditions, especially those of the Indian sub continent. Irigaray’s work on the divine and thus her own perception of the Christian tradition has, I believe, been heavily influenced by her reading of and practical experience with what she calls ‘Eastern traditions’.

This influence by ‘Eastern traditions’ in Irigaray’s work is particularly visible in her desire to move away from western dualisms, especially the oppositional positioning of nature/body/woman with spiritual/cosmic/man. According to Irigaray, the western masculine symbolic with its dualisms is centred around the polarity of immanence and transcendence (Jantzen, 1999, p. 270). The divine and the material have been positioned as opposites with women being aligned with
immanence, bodiliness and the earth, thus separated from the divine (Jantzen, 1999, p. 270). Irigaray’s work advocates for the elimination of these binary oppositions which continue to make it difficult for women to journey towards the divine and leave them positioned not as subjects but as objects of exchange.

Irigaray has come to understand through practical experience in Eastern traditions, that “the body is the site of incarnation of the divine” (Irigaray cited in Joy, O’Grady & Poxon, 2003, p. 18). The body for Irigaray is understood as the site of the spiritual, to be cultivated like a divine temple (Roy, 2003, p. 18). Irigaray posits that spiritual progress is no longer separated from the body, a notion she has explored through her experience of practicing yoga and meditation. She writes, “If women alone continue to represent the body, the sensible, then they are excluded from the ideal or transcendent” (Irigaray, 1991c, p. 48).

Striving to disrupt this oppositional positioning, this either/or set-up between immanence and transcendence, Irigaray introduces the notion of a sensible transcendent, a transcendence which is wholly immanent and not in opposition to the body but as the projected horizon for our (embodied) becoming (Jantzen, 1999, p. 271). Irigaray speaks of “the opening of a sensible transcendent coming into being through us, of which we would be the mediators and the bridges” (Irigaray cited in Jantzen, 1999, p. 272). This sensible transcendent brings god to life through us, it binds earth and sky in us and around us. It allows for cultivation of both the terrestrial and the celestial with neither being destroyed in the process (Irigaray, 2003, p. 5). According to Irigaray (cited in Grosz 1989 p. 180), “In order for woman to find/make an identity for herself, she must situate herself (and be situated by others) within a natural or terrestrial order as well as a cosmic or celestial order.”

_The feminine divine assures a bridge between the human world and the cosmic world, between micro- and macrocosmic nature, the body and the universe. The feminine divine never separates itself from nature, but transforms it, transubstantiates it without ruining it_ (Irigaray, 2004a, p. 167).

Irigaray’s feminine divine works to create bridges between these vertically situated opposites, re-positioning them as horizontal differences. As Irigaray sees
it, the “macrocosm and the microcosm in this way remain dialectically linked with the spiritual becoming of each one of us” (Irigaray, 2002a, p. 147).

Accompanying this breakdown of vertical opposites, for Irigaray, is the replacement or at least parallel positioning of individualistic morals with ethics. The motivation behind the move comes from the understanding that morals are a product of religion, the law of God (a male God), which Irigaray suggests does not acknowledge the different needs required by women. Like the tradition they are modelled on, morals are formed from the basis of western dualisms, which work against the development of women’s becoming. It is those morals based on the notion of either/or, that encourage the positioning of men and women into divided roles within our culture. These morals are presented to us as the right way, the only way and we are guaranteed a reward at the end of our lives if we follow this way. Replacing morals with ethics moves us into living with diversity, as well as encouraging and thus permitting multiplicity in the sense that difference is accounted for, especially sexual difference.

Another aspect of Irigaray’s work which appears to be the result of her interest in ‘Eastern’ traditions is her insistence of the recognition of the breath. According to Irigaray, breathing and speaking in the western tradition is used in almost inverse proportions. She suggests that it is common for the speech in our communication to stifle the breath as she writes “our messages, our truths are generally breathless, suffocated and suffocating” (Irigaray, 1996, p. 121). Irigaray posits that we are more likely to use speech as a way of getting oxygen into our bodies, with speech becoming necessary to stay alive. This results in there being no possibility to take time to stop and listen or to be silent.

*What is essential to retain from my teachings, declares Jesus, is the spirit and not the letter* (Irigaray, 2004a, p. 150).

According to Irigaray, the practice of breathing is intrinsic to becoming cultivated, to becoming spiritual (Irigaray, 2002b, p. 8). Although the positioning of women as being subordinate is evident in Eastern traditions, it appears that unlike in the West, this subjugation is not maintained by the structured dualisms that are so apparent in Western culture. Without these binary oppositions in play, the body is not separated from the mind and the spiritual is not separated from the
natural world. Therefore, spiritual growth is not cut off from the body and the practice of breathing is one which thus awakens the entire being.

Irigaray questions the validity of the language, spirituality or religion that is based on speech, suggesting that such structures which ignore the importance of breath, “soon become authoritarian as a result of immobilising and stifling breath” (Irigaray, 1996, p. 122). Here again, western dualisms come into play as words are given more priority than breath – that which comes from the body. Yet the breath is not the body and so for Irigaray the breath could be a bridge between the two; between earth and sky.

Irigaray urges us to acknowledge the connection that exists between the suppression of breath by language (language structured by the male symbolic), and the oppositional positioning of the surrounding natural world. According to Irigaray, until we learn to recognise the breath instead of replacing it with words, dialogue will continue to move away from poetic-telling, hymns and chants; all of which require the gaps of breathing, to pre-written texts which do not align the micro with the macrocosm.

Language is given over to ritual, repetition, a secondary attribution of values, speculation and to a logic unsuited to life and its breath. It has been uprooted from its engendering in the present, from its connections with the energy of my own and the other’s body, and with that of the surrounding natural world (1996, p. 123).

Irigaray points out that there are aspects in our own western cultural tradition which acknowledge the importance of the breath. For example, our creator God used his breath to create man and so too Jesus was born of a woman made fertile by the breath of the spirit (Irigaray, 2002b, p. 76). How ironic then that our contemporary culture separates the natural breath from the cultural breath; our corporeal from our spiritual (Roy, 2003, p. 22).

Irigaray’s project involves a bringing back of the breath, to promote a culture of breath, one which encourages the unity of body and mind, the corporeal and the spiritual. For Irigaray to breathe, to take responsibility for the use of language, to be the creator of the spaces and gaps that allow for breath, corresponds to the first autonomous gesture of a human living.
Irigaray identifies breathing by oneself as a release from the attachments to those we think we depend on to survive. It frees us from living according to the needs and desires of others, enabling us to re-unite with the spiritual in a way not previously possible for women. Irigaray sees it as the movement away from a socio-cultural placenta, one that separates and suffocates us rather than gives us life.

Leaving us passive at the level of breathing, bathing in a sort of socio-cultural placenta that passes on to us an already exhaled, already used, not truly pure air (Irigaray, 2002b, p. 74).

Therefore, Irigaray posits that we need to re-incorporate breath into our lives, rearranging language so that spaces and gaps are available for silence...for breath. This re-incorporation of breath into life re-connects the mind and the body, builds bridges that connect the spiritual and the corporeal, so as women we can live as spiritual beings, journeying towards our own divine horizons. This cultivation of breath, this cutting of the umbilical cord which attaches us to the socio-cultural placenta, therefore moves us into subjectivity, into difference.

Irigaray’s project on the divine then, is one which interprets and then utilises the main spiritual aspects of her tradition (Christianity), in a way which “renders them fruitful for a becoming divine of feminine subjectivity” (Irigaray, 2004a, p. 145). Basically she uses the old frames but changes the pictures inside, creating another possibility, another horizon, another divine. One example of Irigaray’s alternative perception of a Christian notion which leads to a positive representation for women is the notion of virginity. In Irigaray’s work the notion of virginity has nothing to do with maintaining a physiological hymen; rather she perceives it as the maintenance of a female identity. For Irigaray, Mary’s virginity is then read as the preservation of her identity, both as a woman and a mother.

Keeping one’s virginity means not losing oneself in the attraction for the other, nor letting oneself be ruled by the other, but without being aggressive, or simply critical towards this other. It is to give oneself a feminine mind or soul, an internal dwelling, which is not only physical but also spiritual: linked to breath, to speech, to the mind (Irigaray, 2004a, p. 161).
Irigaray's vision of divinity is a becoming without telos, a movement linked, above all, with love, self-love and love of the other” (Grosz, 1989, p. 162). Irigaray calls out for the establishment of another era of culture, one in which we will communicate to commune and where the divine manifests in relationships in which love flows between equals (Irigaray, personal communication, June, 2005). Love then begins to lead the way, replacing all the negativity that is so apparent around the world today. This shift from power relations to love opens up the possibility for partnerships to also shift from singular to multiple, from suppressive to supportive, from suffocation to breath. For this to take place freedom must prevail and the kind of freedom that is required, according to Irigaray, comes from connecting with the divine within. Irigaray’s work suggests that as each of us tastes the freedom that comes from experiencing the divine in meditation for example, a respect for life, the earth and all beings develops, a movement away from one truth, from a universal occurs and multiplicity then becomes the only possibility, this according to Irigaray is when true change can begin.

For Irigaray the pure love that is linked with becoming and what arrives from silence in meditation can manifest change. It seems as though Irigaray wants it to be understood that the issue of sexual difference and all the ripples of madness that flow from not accepting that it exists can be resolved when each individual begins the journey of divine becoming, taking the time to know thy self.

To become means fulfilling the wholeness of what we are capable of being, something Irigaray suggests never ends (Irigaray, 1993a, p. 12). To become divine implies a fulfillment of the potentialities of the woman’s being, which, according to Irigaray, is powerful enough to break down centuries of a tradition in which God is made in the image of men (Joy, 2003, p. 52).

Irigaray recognises the value of the divine ideal and the role it plays in creating a space for ‘free, autonomous, sovereign’ human individuals. However the image of God that is presented to us as our divine image and which is passed on by our Christian tradition is not the image Irigaray advocates in her work on the feminine divine as she claims that this God presented to us has been created out of man’s gender, resulting in a unique male god (Irigaray, 1993a, p. 61).

For Irigaray, this uniquely male God only serves as a divine horizon for male becoming, that is, a divine horizon for only half of humanity, with the rest of us
being delegated to the realm of ‘other’. “Thus Irigaray accuses religion in the west of being a patriarchy which has taken the divine away from women, she claims it has carried it off and made it an all-men affair” (Jantzen, 1999, p. 14).

The only diabolical thing about women is their lack of a God and the fact that, deprived of God, they are forced to comply with models that match them, that exile them, mask them, cut them off from themselves and from one another, stripping away their ability to move forward into love, art, thought, toward their ideal and divine fulfilment (Irigaray, 1993a, p. 64).

I understand God to represent for Irigaray a place in the distance that we can aspire to reach, an energy that inspires us to extend/expand ourselves continually. For Irigaray, “the core of our destiny is to generate the divine within us and among us, with our most valuable goal to go on becoming, infinitely” (Irigaray, 1993a, p. 60). If it is our task to reach our fullest potential as Irigaray suggests, we need a horizon to focus on, to head towards. Irigaray writes (1993a, p. 67), “We need a God in our image, a God that accommodates the entire dimensions of woman. As long as woman lacks a divine made in her image she cannot establish her subjectivity or achieve a goal of her own. If she is to become a woman, rather than desire to be a man, if she is to accomplish her female subjectivity, woman needs a God who is a figure for the perfection of her subjectivity.” Irigaray states that this female God is still to come.

Irigaray declares that within western traditions, there is no divine representation of female identity, leaving women without the means of positioning themselves in our culture as active subjects. She therefore encourages women to refrain from passively receiving the word(s) of the other (man), and encourages us to cultivate a language of our own, one which will create bridges rather than barriers.

So, when speaking of returning to traditional religious elements, Irigaray is not inviting us to simply rely on received formulas of worship which affirm a male-defined God, she is asking us to find a God in our own image, one that will provide us, as women, with a unique horizon of our own to journey towards (Grosz, 1989, p. 152).
Every man (according to Feuerbach) and every woman who is not fated to remain a slave to the logic of the essence of man, must imagine a God, an objective-subjective place or path whereby the self could be coalesced in space and time: unity of instinct, heart, and knowledge, unity of nature and spirit, condition for the abode and for saintliness. God alone can save us, keep us safe... Only the religious, within and without us, is fundamental enough to allow us to discover, affirm, achieve certain ends (Irigaray cited in Jantzen, 1999, p. 12).

Irigaray posits that it is vital women have their own horizon to move towards, suggesting that without it we remain paralysed, motionless, dependent, confined to being the other, none of which are worthwhile religious ideals. As far as Irigaray is concerned, “Any behaviour that does not assure a continual passage from the objective to the subjective, a perpetual subjective becoming, cannot be considered religious” (Irigaray, 2004a, p. 188).

Irigaray alerts us to the fact that as women, we need to do more than recognise that the existing religious symbolic of the west is completely inadequate in the development of women’s becoming. She urges us to disrupt this major component of the masculine, western symbolic, by way of developing a feminist religious symbolic; a divine horizon that will enable women’s becoming (Jantzen, 1999, p. 100). In order for this to manifest, Irigaray claims that we need to form a reciprocal woman-to-woman relationship with our mothers.

The mother daughter relationship is the dark continent of the dark continent. The relationship between mother/daughter, daughter/mother constitutes an extremely explosive kernel in our societies. To think, to change it, amounts to undermining the patriarchal order (1991d, p. 77).

As discussed in the previous chapter, Irigaray’s work emphasises the importance of the re-establishment of a maternal genealogy so that love between women can be uncovered. To aid in the construction of a female genealogy, Irigaray proposes that images of the mother-daughter couple be placed in both private and public spaces, offering an alternative to re-current images of the mother-son couple found in abundance (Roy, 2003, p. 20). Irigaray suggests that, “these current images depict the Virgin as alone of her sex, without a daughter or
love between them, without a way of becoming divine except through her son” (Irigaray, 1993a, p. 62). According to Irigaray, the omittance of representations of the mother-daughter couple reduces the possibility of women constructing their sexed identity. She suggests that this is due to the limited opportunity for women to access their origin and the complete removal of any opportunity to project themselves into the future (Roy, 2003, p. 19). Therefore part of Irigaray’s project is to reinstate female genealogies into our culture, making available the cultural filiations that link women with their spiritual mothers, significant female figures who play a major role in the construction of female identity (Roy, 2003, p. 19).

Irigaray turns to the Virgin Mary, a woman who herself was conceived without sin by her mother Anne (sin being a lack of respect for the female in us, in other women and in our genealogies, which is opposite to Irigaray’s notion of virginity) (Roy, 2003, p. 21). According to Irigaray, this makes Mary the spiritual ancestor and spiritual mother of Jesus before being his natural mother. This perception of Mary transforms her from a passive object to an active subject, she becomes a positive representation of a woman as she is moved beyond her maternal function and is aligned with her spiritual mother, Anne.

Irigaray also explores Greek mythology to uncover any traces of female genealogies, utilising myths like that of Demeter and her daughter Persephone, to demonstrate the importance of the re-establishment of these maternal genealogies.

The reconceptualisation of women is what Irigaray’s work is all about. Her project involves “reclaiming for women a history and context that have been covered over and destroyed by her burial in maternity” (Grosz, 1989, p. 119). To transform the mother-daughter relation and thus rejuvenate a rediscovery of the identities mother and daughter share, requires a major transformation of the social order, the symbolic order (Grosz, 1989, p. 124). This of course requires input from a female imaginary, to provide us with alternative perceptions of our world, which may enable women to accede into subjectivity.

So Irigaray calls for women to accede into subjectivity, resulting in the recognition that two sexes exist. According to Irigaray, as subjects we would then be active participants in the construction of our culture and society, resulting in the manifestation of a female symbolic, fed by a female imaginary. Irigaray’s concepts on sexual difference and divinity are so interlaced that it is difficult to decide whether the divine horizon preceedes and therefore aids the coming into
subjectivity or whether it is rather a manifestation of it. One thing is for certain, a
divine horizon must manifest, a horizon that is designed to suit the needs and
desires of women, opening up the path on which we can journey towards our
infinite becoming.
Chapter Five: Making Connections

The certainty that we are different unveils a horizon and discovers a source for speech (Irigaray, 2004b, p.33).

I have chosen this quote of Irigaray’s to open this final section of my thesis as it provides an example of the interdependent connections between the three concepts of language, sexual difference and the divine in one small sentence.

This investigation of the concepts of sexual difference, language and the feminine divine in the works of Luce Irigaray has reconfirmed for me the importance of viewing Irigaray’s work as circular/surrounding/including. Although I separated these concepts into chapters, certain themes re-appeared in each one, working to connect each concept with the others; the themes that I am referring to include women as subject, woman-to-woman sociality and a female symbolic and imaginary. These themes manifest in various forms, flow from various directions, are sometimes more obvious than others, are worked and re-worked in alternating ways and are presented in diverse manners, which when put together, create a multivalent masterpiece which presents us with a cavernous perspective on existence.

These elements craft connections between the concepts revealing their mutually supporting nature, confirming my initial suggestion that the reader of Irigaray needs to resist the urge to approach her work in a linear, almost phallic way, cutting it into fragments or pieces resulting in a destruction of the bonds and thus a weakening of the result.

Irigaray’s work provides us with an opportunity to walk our talk, to move away from the world of binary oppositions and to live, read, interpret and speak in a fluid, inclusive way, by offering alternative perceptions and meanings of language, the structuring of society and the divine. By not automatically categorising these concepts into separate compartments according to a Western, masculinist reading, we allow for bridges to be created between theses concepts which work to bind earth and sky, nature and culture, language and the divine. I believe that to separate Irigaray’s concept of the divine from that of language or sexual difference for example, is to fall prey to the lure of those social structures that are formed around western dualisms.
The move away from this set up of either/or, which works to maintain the positioning of the female in the lesser than category in this vertical oppositional framework our society is structured on, is critical. This point is evident within all three concepts that I have focused on in this thesis, with each concept providing another perspective, another angle from which to view the destruction which results from a social structure centred on western dualisms. This of course is not new to feminist knowledges however the ways and means that Irigaray provides to breakdown these dualisms are a unique aspect of her work; these include woman-as-subject and a woman-to-woman sociality.

The central concept which is revisited throughout Irigaray’s work is the notion of woman-as-subject. This concept is vital in the development of a positive representation of the feminine and thus plays a major role in Irigaray’s concepts of language and sexual difference, with both concepts exploring alternative ways in which women can accede into subjectivity. It then takes centre stage in Irigaray’s concept of divinity, where it is portrayed as a prerequisite for any divine journey. Irigaray’s notion of the ‘perpetual subjective becoming’ alludes to a divine journey that never really comes to an end. The subject continually becomes; extending, reaching and stretching towards that divine horizon which encourages difference and promotes liberation. The subject and the horizon work together to ensure this continual becoming thus without subjective status, Irigaray’s notion of becoming is difficult, if not impossible to achieve.

The Chapters

In chapter two I focused on Irigaray’s linguistic approach to language revealing the notion of language being sexuate, not neutral. This chapter exposed the fact that language is constructed by the masculine symbolic, a social structure which is formed around binary oppositions. This aspect of Irigaray’s work brings to light the fact that within language, the female and all things feminine are situated in the lesser than category, demonstrating that language works as a tool to maintain the vertical, oppositional positioning of male and female.

Irigaray’s work demonstrates that the change in the representation of the female from exchangeable object to speaking subject is imperative if a transformation in language and communication is to occur. Her work on language indicates that with subject-status women would be able to access the structures that make up the symbolic order in which truths and knowledges are fashioned, including that of
the production of language. For women, access into this space then, would allow for the development of language and communication based on the needs and desires of the female, removing the binary oppositions and thus the subordinate positioning of women.

In chapter three on sexual difference, the matter of western society being constructed by the masculine symbolic is raised once again, with the emphasis shifting away from language and focusing more on the representation of the feminine. This chapter demonstrates how the female is aligned with nature and is thus represented as an object which needs to be overcome rather than a subject that has access to symbolic space. Irigaray's work on sexual difference clearly demonstrates the homosexual nature of our culture, a culture which is wholly structured on the needs and desires of the masculine, emphasising once again the importance and the urgency of the recognition of women-as-subjects.

For me, Irigaray's work on divinity in chapter four brings it all together. It is in this work where the polarisation of immanence and transcendence becomes the focus, with the introduction of the sensible transcendent. The body and the spirit are re-united, transforming oppressive vertical opposites to liberating horizontal differences. Language still remains as a primary target for this transformation of western dualisms to take place, however, the angle changes, with Irigaray moving away from the linguistic and towards the spiritual with the introduction of her notion of the breath.

Irigaray sees the breath as a bridge between body and spirit, a tool which has the potential to re-unite, re-position and re-claim. To remove ourselves from the socio-cultural placenta that continues to feed us stale life is to re-unite our mundane with our spiritual, bringing an end to the detrimental split of body and spirit that has been used as a tool to deny women access into the divine for too long. Cutting this tie also allows for the re-positioning of ourselves as subjects as we re-claim that space in the symbolic order, allowing for the transformation of language from binary opposition to difference, resulting in the creation of female representation which actually does embody our needs and desires.

As Irigaray suggests, for women to achieve subjective status the western social order or symbolic order as we know it needs to be transformed, with the creation of a female symbolic and female imaginary being imperative. The presence of these concepts which have their roots in psychoanalysis are continuously felt
throughout Irigaray’s work on all three concepts discussed in this thesis. For example, within Irigaray’s work on language it is evident that language/communication is structured according to the needs and desires of the western, masculine symbolic order, so too her concept of sexual difference shows that the representation of women is created as a result of the binary oppositions that form the framework of this western symbolic order. As well, in her concept on divinity, the creation of a horizon which is suitable for women to journey towards can only manifest when transformation has occurred within the western, masculine symbolic order.

A transformation in the western symbolic order as we know it would see amongst other things, new possibilities in communication and new representations of women as subjects rather than objects and thus would permit love between mother and daughter, between woman and woman. Irigaray calls for the inclusion of feminine expression into the realm of language, as well as the recategorisation of women as women-subjects, both of which would allow daughters to communicate with their mothers without objectifying her and thus themselves in the process.

In her concept of divinity, Irigaray suggests that a woman-to-woman sociality is imperative in order for women to free themselves from the authority of their fathers and find their own collective identity. Irigaray posits that what women need in order to pull away from their objective status is a divine made in the image of woman. To achieve this, women need to accede into subjectivity, which requires changes in the symbolic and imaginary, providing us with new ways to communicate and new possibilities for divine horizons. This in turn encourages a perpetual subjective becoming, which ensures the continuation of the creation of an alternative symbolic and imaginary assuring the recategorisation of women.

So you see, like an endless river, these concepts of language, sexual difference and divinity flow to and fro, continuously touching and bouncing off one another. I believe that by recognising and thus exploring Irigaray’s concepts of language, sexual difference and divinity as interdependent aspects which feed into one another, we are provided with an opportunity to acquire a three dimensional understanding of Irigaray’s work, allowing us to witness its depth; inviting and enticing us to seek a deeper level from which to initiate real change.
References


