Book Review: In the Beginning, She Was

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In this recent book, Luce Irigaray questions the work of the Pre-Socratics at the root of our culture. Reminding us of the story of Ulysses and Antigone, she demonstrates how, from the beginning, Western tradition represents an exile for humanity. In the Beginning, She Was reworks themes that are central to Irigaray's thought: the limits of Western logic, the sexuation of discourse, the existence of two different subjects, and the necessity of art as mediation towards another culture. Reviewed by Megan O'Branski.

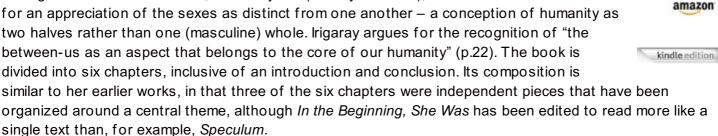


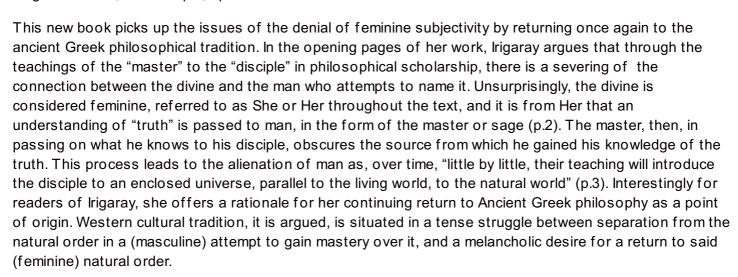
In the Beginning, She Was. Luce Irigaray. Bloomsbury. October 2012.

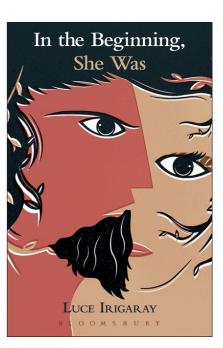
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One of the most prolific contemporary intellectuals, particularly in feminist philosophy, Luce Irigaray has spent much of her long career examining the gendering of philosophical discourse. In doing so she has critiqued a significant number of thinkers, from Plato to Kant to – perhaps most famously - Freud and Lacan. To oversimplify her work, one of the points Irigaray has argued in many texts is that the exclusion of the feminine from discourse was necessary for its existence, and it is this issue that is picked up once again in In the Beginning, She Was. As a result of this exclusion, against the masculine subject, the feminine is posited as a lack or a void - the Other.

With In the Beginning, She Was, Irigaray continues unraveling some of the issues she raised in her previous works, notably those in Speculum for the Other Woman. She focuses once again on the ways in which philosophical discourse produces certain subjects (namely masculine) through the exclusion of other, non-subjects (namely feminine), and calls







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In the fifth chapter, "Between History and Myth: the Tragedy of Antigone" Irigaray returns once again to the Sophoclean tragedy, but now with a more quixotic bend. She reveals more autobiographical information in this chapter than she has before, particularly surrounding her experience of "exclusion from socio-cultural places because of my public assertion of a truth that has been repressed...and that thus disturbs out usual order" (115). Though a bit hyperbolic at times – Irigaray refers to herself as "excluded from society" (115) – the author's positioning of herself in the Antigone myth is fascinating. Her willingness to be so forthcoming with these negative experiences is a bit jarring, and feels out of place in a philosophical text making it, of course, all the more appropriate that a disruption of the "normal" philosophical order should be done by Irigaray. Her experience appears to have given her a more empathetic understanding of Antigone's tragedy, and she argues that Antigone's need to bury her brother in defiance of Creon is a need to maintain the "natural order" and respect for the divine that is violated through the mastery of man. Antigone disrupts the patriarchal order as laid out by Creon in order "to maintain cosmic harmony" (122) by burying her brother in defiance of the king's decree. Antigone's resistance is driven by her need "to obey a higher order, unwritten laws, which the new order, embodied by Creon...intended to abolish" (118). She embodies the subjugated feminine divinity that Irigaray attributes to "Nature", and her opposition to Creon is effectively an attempt to bring this feminine, Her, back to subjectivity.

The main contention I would raise with *In the Beginning, She Was*, and indeed that has been repeatedly raised with much of Irigaray's work, is that it privileges heteronormative assumptions of both masculine and feminine subjectivity. Irigaray also begins with an understanding of the male and female as being inherently and diametrically opposed to one another. I take considerable issue with her starting position, which seems to me rooted in biological determinism. To my mind, the question that arises when reading both her earlier works and this most recent piece, is where those subjects who do not fit precisely within the heteronormative matrix reside. Irigaray's foundational assumption, here and elsewhere, that what is left over from primary identification and constructed as "the Other" can then be interchangeably conceptualized as "the feminine", is not wholly convincing. In her discussion of "between-us", I was left wondering where alternative conceptions of masculinity and femininity would fit into her analysis, to say nothing of, for example, the intersexed subject.

Readers familiar with Irigaray's other works will note with a bit of relief that *In the Beginning, She Was* is arguably far and away the most readable of Irigaray's works to date. Irigaray's written word is lyrical, almost ethereal, and yet she remains, in this work, able to coherently deliver her ideas to her audience. This book would be a good choice for readers interested in Irigaray's philosophy generally, but is perhaps best understood having read her earlier publications. A familiarity with *Speculum of the Other Woman* would be very helpful before engaging with *In the Beginning, She Was*.

Megan O'Branski is a third year PhD candidate in the School of Geography, Politics, and Sociology at Newcastle University. She received her BA in Political Science from the University of Connecticut in 2009. Her research focuses on the intersection of performativity, gender, and the weaponization and brutalization of the body in ethnic violence. Further research interests include sexuality, security studies, and zombies. Read more reviews by Megan.