From “Phallus” to “Lips”: A Comparative Study of the Lacanian and Irigarayan Theories of Femininity

ZHAN Junfeng
South China Normal University

1. Introduction

Luce Irigaray, one of the three representatives of French post-feminism, is known for her critique of the phallocentric philosophy as well as psychoanalysis and for her formulation of an inspiring feminist theory of female subjectivity. But before she became a feminist theorist, Irigaray participated in Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic seminars and received training as a Lacanian psychoanalyst in the 1960s. The appearance of her doctorate dissertation on psychoanalysis entitled Speculum of the Other Woman in 1974, which offers a critical review of the phallocentric Western philosophical tradition from Plato to Freud and attempts a re-evaluation of femininity in the
feminist light, established her as one of the preeminent feminist thinkers and continental philosophers but got her expelled by the École Freudienne de Paris, founded and directed by Lacan, and ejected from her teaching post at the University of Vincennes.

From the initial affiliation to the eventual conflict, the brief history between Irigaray and Lacan seems to suggest that Irigaray is the rebel against and opponent of Lacan and the psychoanalytic school. But as it turns out, Irigaray went on with her psychoanalytic practice after the break with Lacan, whose theory continued to resound in many of her works. Accordingly, to encapsulate Irigaray's relationship to Lacan in antagonism would seem to be over-simplified. This paper, by a comparative study of the Lacanian and Irigarayan theories of femininity, focusing on the Lacanian metaphor of "phallus" versus the Irigarayan "lips", holds the opinion that both the Lacanian and Irigaray theories of femininity express their challenge to the definition of femininity within the patriarchal culture and their anticipation of a female subjectivity independent from the phallocentric parameters. The paper also asserts that the Lacanian psychoanalytic theory remains an important influence in Irigaray's theory, and that Irigaray rebels against not so much the Lacanian psychoanalytic account of femininity as the Freudian one, and against not so much the Lacanian theory per se as the Lacanian description of the phallocentric discourse.

2. The Phallic Function and Woman as the Not-Whole

In the Lacanian theory, the concept of the phallus is closely associated with the psychosexual development of a child. On the one hand, the phallus dictates the relationship between mother and child in the Mirror Stage, where "the phallus forbids the child the satisfaction of his or her own desire, which is the desire to be the exclusive desire of the mother". That is to say, no matter how hard the child tries to hold the mother's attention and demands her exclusive love, she always seems desirous of something outside the maternal bonds, so the child imagines that this mysterious object able to fulfill her desire should be the phallus. In this stage, the phallus is an imaginary object offered to the child as a promise of fulfillment of his or her desire provided that he or she breaks up with the mother. On the other hand, the phallus dominates the Symbolic Order as the transcendental signifier, imposed by the Name-of-the-Father on the child with the linguistic and gender difference and branding him or her forever as a lacking, or castrated, subject.
Through the acquisition of language, the child comes to realize the prohibitive function of the symbolic phallus and the fact that satisfaction of desire has to be postponed indefinitely. In brief, the phallus, imaginary or symbolic, dictates the formation of subjectivity in general and gender identity in particular. Both processes indicate the alienation of child and mother, who becomes a symbol of eternally lost completeness residing in the Other, unable to express herself and only serving as a complement to man's (namely, the father's and boy's) masculinity.

Two Lacanian works most clearly representing his understanding of the relation between the phallus and femininity are “The Signification of the Phallus” (1958) and “God and Woman's Jouissance” (1975). In his article “The Signification of the Phallus”, Lacan proposes that the phallus has its prototype in, but should never be reducible to, a penis and the phallus is the “privileged signifier” of the Symbolic Order and the “ratio of the Other’s desire”\(^{[3]}\). For that reason, both sexes desire for, but can never possess the phallus. For the sexual relation to work out, man pretends that he has the phallus in order to be attractive to woman, who hides herself behind a mask and pretends to be the phallus to attract him in return. Lacan concludes that a woman “rejects an essential part of femininity, namely, all its attributes, in the masquerade” and “[i]t is for what she is not that she expects to be desired as well as loved”\(^{[4]}\). Thus the Lacanian understanding of femininity in the 1950s is that in the sexual relation to man, woman has to cater to man’s fantasy of her by pretending to be who she is not for the purpose of being loved by him within the phallic economy. In this sense, rather than being inferior to man, woman is subjected to man and complementary to man’s subjectivity.

In “God and Woman’s Jouissance”, which initially delivered by Lacan in his serial seminars between 1972 and 1973, he takes a step further by declaring that “[t]here is no such thing as Woman”\(^{[5]}\). The reason is that, for Lacan, although the signifier “Woman” is presumed to designate the universal qualities of woman, its signification fails since woman is “not-whole” when situated within the phallic function of the Symbolic Order.\(^{[6]}\) In the sexual relation to man, woman rejects her femininity and masquerades as the phallus, or the substitute object called objet a, of man’s desire. So woman only exists as a fantasy of and an appendage to man in the Symbolic Order, the phallic function of which is unable to signify her subjectivity. As Lacan puts it, “a woman can but be excluded by the nature of things, which is the nature of words”\(^{[7]}\). But the phallic exclusion of woman is only one of the factors that render her “not-whole”. Lacan explains that “being not whole, she has a
supplementary jouissance\(^8\) compared to what the phallic function designates by way of jouissance\(^9\). This unique bodily jouissance of woman, making her not wholly within the Symbolic Order, is liberating for woman because it is "[a] jouissance beyond the phallus"\(^{10}\). Though Lacan complains that this feminine jouissance is so mysterious that even woman herself may not be able to explain it, he theoretically confirms the transcendence and uniqueness and of female sexuality, which used to be regarded as inferior to the phallic jouissance in the classical Freudian psychoanalysis.

3. The Lips, Plural Sexuality and Female Subjectivity

In *This Sex Which is Not One* (1977), a collection of her essays and interviews, Irigaray offers a close reading of some of the classical Lacanian texts including "God and Woman’s Jouissance" and many Lacanian concepts such as the Mirror Stage, the Symbolic Order, the Phallus etc. While she basically agrees with Lacan's post-structuralist revision of the Freudian theory and his diagnosis of woman’s subjection to man in the phallocentric Western culture, Irigaray says:

>[p]sychoanalytic theory thus utters the truth about the status of female sexuality, and about sexual relation. But it stops there. Refusing to interpret the historical determinants of its discourse [...] and in particular what is implied by the up to now exclusively masculine sexualization of the application of its laws, it remains caught up in phallocentrism, which it claims to make into a universal and eternal value.\(^{11}\)

It is clear that although Irigaray goes along with Lacan’s analysis of the femininity and sexual relation within the Symbolic Order, she expects that Lacan should have adopted a more dynamic and deconstructive attitude towards the phallocentric discourse, or else his diagnosis could be easily abused to perpetuate these maladies he points out. This comment demonstrates that Irigaray is both critical of and influenced by Lacan, whose account of the functioning mechanism of the patriarchal discourse that has excluded and limited femininity and that can be surpassed on condition that woman can make good use of her feminine jouissance has cleared the way for Irigaray in her pursuit of an effective deconstruction of the patriarchal culture and an reconstruction of femininity in its own right. So what is left for Irigaray to do is to continue cutting up the phallocentric discourse and enable woman to utter her femininity through recognition of her own bodily jouissance.
Echoing the Lacanian thesis that "there is no such thing as Woman", Irigaray asserts that in the phallocentric culture, woman is "only a more or less obliging prop for the enactment of man’s fantasies" and "she will not say what she herself wants; moreover, she does not know, or no longer knows, what she wants". In order to liberate herself, woman needs to above all have a clear notion of her own sexuality that is not "conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters" and then to find a way to express her pleasure. Since one of the most important masculine parameters in the psychoanalysis is literally the penis or symbolically the phallus that gives man the privilege and logic to speak his subjectivity and desire, Irigaray proposes the concept of the lips as the feminine parameter to counter the phallic hegemony and substantiate the feminine language.

In _This Sex Which is Not One_, Irigaray applies the image of the lips as a metaphor for the uniqueness of femininity independent from the phallocentric paradigm. The lips, as Irigaray expects, refer to both the female genitals and her speech organ. As the female genitals, the lips are endowed with several metaphorical meanings. Firstly, the lips as the characteristic female sexual organs enable woman to give a positive description of her sexuality without being undermined by the phallocratic discourse. In the Freudian theory, woman’s clitoris is equivalent to a castrated penis and it is only normal for her to feel her passive sexual pleasure through the intercourse with a man’s penis. While both the images of the clitoris and vagina are employed by Freud to designate the phallic jouissance that requires the passivity of woman in sexual intercourse, the lips are intended by Irigaray as a metaphor for the feminine jouissance that escapes the phallic economy and is more likely to be experienced in female autoeroticism. Secondly, unlike the phallus that signifies lack and alienation, the lips mean intimacy, immediacy and continuity. According to Irigaray, the two lips are "not divisible into one(s)" as they are "in continuous contact" and "caress each other". Thus the lips, being two, renounce the basic logic of the differentiating Symbolic Order that poses the phallus as the One and whole that exclude femininity as the other and not-whole and break the binary oppositions of sameness and difference, one and other etc that support the Symbolic Order. Therefore, the femininity defined by two of the lips help woman to elevate herself from the patriarchal domains, including the Mirror Stage — "[w]e live by twos beyond all mirages, images, and mirrors" — and the Symbolic Order — "[p]rior to any representation, we are two". Thirdly, the lips are employed by Irigaray as a tool to delineate the plurality of female sexuality and liberate feminine
jouissance from the confinement of the singular phallic module. Talking about the female sexual organs, Irigaray said, "she has at least two of them, but they are not identifiable as ones. Indeed, she has many more. Her sexuality, always at least double, goes even further: it is plural". If the penis is where man's sexual pleasure revolves, the lips are just two of the many sexual organs that figure in female sexual pleasure. According to Irigaray, woman's sexual organs are "more or less everywhere" and she "finds pleasure almost everywhere", including "[f]ondling the breasts, touching the vulva, spreading the lips, stroking the posterior wall of the vagina, brushing against the mouth of the uterus, and so on". Fourthly, the lips are also associated by Irigaray with woman's different approach to sexual pleasure from man. According to Irigaray, while man extracts pleasure from scopophilia, woman "takes pleasure more from touching than from looking". Compared with man, woman has a different way of "touching" herself, since while "man needs an instrument: his hand, a woman's body, language...", but woman needs no 'mediation' in autoeroticism. For Irigaray, "[w]oman 'touches herself' all the time, and moreover no one can forbid her to do so, for her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact". In psychoanalytic theory, the penis or phallus is superior to female genitals owing to its visibility. By preferring touching to looking, Irigaray gives the "absent, masked" female genitals the right to speak for themselves.

This metaphorical meaning of the lips as female genitals leads to another connotation of the concept "lips", the speech organ. Irigaray plays a pun on the lips by saying that "morphologically, she has two mouths and two pairs of lips". In her seminal essay "When Our Lips Speak Together" collected in This Sex Which is Not One, Irigaray uses these two connotations of the lips interchangeably. She attacks the patriarchal culture for its repression of woman's utterance of her pleasure and calls for an invention of the female "body's language". This feminine language, according to Irigaray, is to be invented through the embrace of two lips, either the speech organs or the labia, both having been intruded and separated by the phallus and the phallic language. "While our lips are growing red again", Irigaray says, "[t]hey are stirring, moving, they want to speak". Irigaray personalizes the lips and envisions their conversations - "[w]e must learn to speak to each other so that we can embrace from afar" and "[l]et's hurry and invent our own phrases. So that everywhere and always we can continue to embrace". Thus the lips, either of the mouth or the vulva, when spoken together, will allow women
to utter their pleasure, speak their language and delineate their subjectivity.

Irigaray’s theory of the lips and plural female sexuality is revolutionary, since she proves, although not without controversies, that female sexuality is essentially different from the male one. The Freudian theory of female sexuality is basically the theory of male sexuality disguised as the female version. Lacan points out the possibility of a transcendent existence of female sexuality but renders it too mysterious to be expounded. Irigaray elucidates the so-called unaccountable feminine jouissance and prepares herself for the construction of a positive femininity independent from the male parameters.

4. The Phallus, Lips and Problem of Essentialism

While Freud uses mainly the anatomical and physiological evidence to support his theory, Lacan filters out many of the anatomical elements of the Freudian theory with the post-structuralist linguistics. In “The Signification of the Phallus” Lacan claims the phallus is not “the organ – penis or clitoris – that it symbolizes”, but a pure signifier. Lacan continues to assert that the phallus becomes a signifier because of its visibility and turgidity. In other words, the phallus may symbolize the actual biological organ, but cannot be reduced to that and the phallus becomes a signifier owing to its relation to the penis. This explanation incurs many charges of essentialism. Toril Moi finds out the inconsistency in the Lacanian explanation of the phallus and suggests that Lacan should have replaced the phallus with a less controversial term, such as the finitude. In fact, Lacan’s usage of the concept of the phallus exonerates him from the accusation of essentialism. Since the phallus is a transcendental signifier, nobody, neither man nor woman, is able to have the phallus. In “The Signification of the Phallus”, Lacan holds the opinion that the sexual difference resides not in whether one is having or not-having the phallus, but in whether one is having or being the phallus. As a matter of fact, both of man’s having-the-phallus and woman’s being-the-phallus are but a “seeming”, or fake appearance. In “God and Woman’s Jouissance”, when talking about man’s pole or position designated by the phallic function of the Symbolic Order, Lacan says, “[o]ne ultimately situates oneself there by choice – women are free to situate themselves there if it gives them pleasure to do so”. Similarly, some men who are “just as good as women” can also “get the idea or sense that there must be a jouissance that is beyond”, which refers to feminine jouissance. Thus for Lacan, gender identities are not determined by one’s having or lacking the penis, but
decided by the joint force of discursive designation and individual identification with the designation.

Unlike Lacan, Irigaray goes back to the biological basis of female sexuality and situates her feminist theory on such morphological concepts as lips that "significantly, self-consciously oscillate between signifier and signified". For this reason many scholars labeled her as an essentialist. Irigaray addresses herself to this issue by arguing that:

"Trying to find or find anew a possible imaginary for women through the movement that brings the lips into contact [...] does not imply a regressive retreat to the anatomical or to a concept of "nature", nor is it a call to go back to genital norms—women have two lips several times over! It is more a question of breaking out of the autological and tautological circle of systems of representation and their discourse so as to allow women to speak their sex. The "at least two" lips no longer corresponds to your morpho-logic; nor does it obey Lacan's model of the "not all" to which the One is necessary."

In this explanation Irigaray states that her purpose of using morphological concepts such as the lips is not to endorse essentialism, but to strategically apply essentialism so as to break out of the confinement of the phallocentric discourse and give voice to female sexuality. Although she claims that a regression to essentialism is not her purpose, Irigaray still has the suspicion of reliance on the essentialism when she seeks to "find or find anew a possible imaginary for women" and "allow women to speak their sex". In other words, she may playfully use essentialism to disturb the phallocentric discourse, but it is not likely that she uses essentialism to facilitate the construction of a new femininity in a similarly playful manner. Many scholars acknowledge Irigaray's strategic application of essentialism to ridicule the patriarchal accounts of femininity. For example, Maggie Berg reads the metaphor of the lips in Irigaray's essay "When Our Lips Speak Together" as "an ironic rebuttal to Lacan's theory of the phallus". Ping Xu similarly argues that Irigaray in her work is "in fact mimicking the discourse that has always been fabricating essentialist and 'sexed' 'facts' and 'truth' about female (as well as male) sexuality". But the problem is that, these scholars tend to regard Irigaray's essentialist approaches to femininity as her strategy for her ridicule of other people's essentialism, but they do not consider whether Irigaray's essentialist account of femininity has its own worth apart from serving as the tool of deconstruction.
It is for this reason that I prefer to think that Irigaray’s stance in her proposal for a new femininity is not as radical as many scholars believe she is, or else she is at the risk of undermining her theory of femininity and sexual difference as she is subverting other people’s theory labeled by her as essentialism. For that reason Irigaray both mimics and imitates the Freudian approach to masculinity in her investment of femininity with a biological and physiological basis to rest on, and she is not so much mimicking as imitating Lacan’s post-structuralist approach to sexuality and gender identity in her attempt to transcend essentialism and elevate her account of femininity to a discursive level. She is building up a theory of female subjectivity parallel to the psychoanalytic account of femininity ranging from Freud to Lacan. As Lacan revises the Freudian theory, Irigaray revises her own theory. When she gives an essentialist account of female sexuality, she also lays down the possibility of deconstructing her own account with her post-structuralist stance. She is a contradiction in herself.

5. Conclusion

Just as the concept of the phallus is the central metaphor of the Lacanian theory, the figure of the lips is also pivotal to Irigaray’s theory. In the Lacanian framework, the phallus is the transcendental signifier of the Symbolic Order, indicating gender difference predicated on lack. Woman is the not-whole acting as the complement to man’s subjectivity, which posits femininity as nothing but a fantastical masquerade constituting the cause and substitutive object of man’s desire. But woman has the “supplementary jouissance” that is “beyond the phallus” and consequently, beyond the Symbolic Order, but according to Lacan, woman neither knows about nor can talk about that feminine jouissance\(^{36}\). Irigaray counters the concept “phallus” with its female counterparts, namely the lips, literally the female genitals where woman can locate her bodily jouissance through autoeroticism and figuratively the female speech organ enabling woman to speak her sex. Thus the figure of the lips is illustrative of woman’s plural sexuality characterized by excess and characterizing her unique subjectivity that is independent of the phallic economy and describable with her feminine language. In this light, Irigaray parodies Lacan’s concept of the phallus to substantiate the Lacanian prediction of a mysterious and even mystic feminine jouissance that equips woman with the ability to transcend the Symbolic Order and explore the possibility of bringing this liberated female subjectivity into real life.
Notes:

[1] In 1960s, French feminist movement began to transit from traditional feminism to the post-feminism. Traditional feminism had Simone de Beauvoir as its representative, aiming at countering the biological determinism of gender identities, denying sexual difference, pursuing gender equality pertaining to education, work and civil right. In addition, traditional feminism is highly critical of the classical Freudian psychoanalysis. The post-feminism, represented by the feminist group and intellectual circle called “Psychoanalyse et Politique”, critically inherits the Lacanian psychoanalysis, foregrounding sexual difference, and seeking for solutions to an independent female subjectivity from the linguistic, social, cultural and psychological perspectives. For more information about the post-feminism, see Mari Jo Buhle, *Feminism and its Discontent: a Century of Struggle with Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1998), 318-336.

[2] Jacques Lacan, qtd. in Jacqueline Rose, “Feminine Sexuality”, *Identity: a Reader*. Eds. Paul du Gay, Jessica Evans & Peter Redman. (London: SAGE Publications, 2000), 55.

[3] Jacques Lacan, “The Signification of Phallus”, *Écrits: A Selection*. Trans. Bruce Fink. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, 2005), 277-278.

[4] Ibid., 279.

[5] Jacques Lacan, “God and Woman’s Jouissance”, *The Seminar XX, Encore: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. Bruce Fink. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1998), 72.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid., 73.

[8] “Jouissance” in French literally means sexual climax, but is used by Lacan to refer to an excess or lack of pleasure that is often accompanied with pain. The feminine jouissance is excessive, supplementary and beyond the phallic function of the Symbolic Order. For more information about the Lacanian theory of the feminine jouissance, see Jacques Lacan, “God and Woman’s Jouissance”, in Jacques-Alain Miller, ed., *The Seminar XX, Encore: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1998), 64-77.

[9] Jacques Lacan, “God and Woman’s Jouissance”, *The Seminar XX, Encore: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. Bruce Fink. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1998), 73-74.

[10] Ibid., 74.

[11] Luce Irigaray, “Cosi Fan Tutti”, *This Sex Which Is Not One*. By Luce Irigaray. Trans. Catherine Porter & Carolyn Burke. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990), 102-103.

[12] Luce Irigaray, “This Sex Which is Not One”, *This Sex Which Is Not One*. By Luce Irigaray. Trans. Catherine Porter & Carolyn Burke. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990), 25.

[13] Ibid., 23.

[14] Ibid., 24.

[15] Luce Irigaray, “When Our Lips Speak Together”, *This Sex Which Is Not One*. By Luce
Irigaray. Trans. Catherine Porter & Carolyn Burke. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990), 216.

[16] Luce Irigaray, “This Sex Which is Not One”, *This Sex Which Is Not One*. By Luce Irigaray. Trans. Catherine Porter & Carolyn Burke. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990), 28.

[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid., 26.
[19] Ibid., 24.
[20] Ibid.

[21] Luce Irigaray, “Sexual Difference”, *The Irigaray Reader*. Ed. Margaret Whitford. (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1991), 170.

[22] Luce Irigaray, “When Our Lips Speak Together”, *This Sex Which Is Not One*. By Luce Irigaray. Trans. Catherine Porter & Carolyn Burke. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990), 214.

[23] Ibid., 212.
[24] Ibid., 215.

[25] Jacques Lacan, “The Signification of Phallus”, *Écrits: A Selection*. Trans. Bruce Fink. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, 2005), 275.

[26] Ibid., 277.

[27] For more information about Toril Moi’s critique of the Lacanian concept of the phallus, see Toril Moi, “From Femininity to Finitude: Freud, Lacan, and Feminism, Again”, in *University of Chicago Press* 29.3 (Spring 2004), 841-80.

[28] Jacques Lacan, “The Signification of Phallus”, *Écrits: A Selection*. Trans. Bruce Fink. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, 2005), 279.

[29] Jacques Lacan, “God and Woman’s Jouissance”, *The Seminar XX, Encore: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. Bruce Fink. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1998), 71.

[30] Ibid., 76.

[31] Maggie Berg, “Luce Irigaray’s ‘Contradictions’: Poststructuralism and Feminism”, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 17.1 (Autumn 1991), 57.

[32] Luce Irigaray, “The Poverty of Psychoanalysis”, *The Irigaray Reader*. Ed. Margaret Whitford. (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1991), 97.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Maggie Berg, “Luce Irigaray’s ‘Contradictions’: Poststructuralism and Feminism”, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 17.1 (Autumn 1991), 64.

[35] Ping Xu, “Irigaray’s Mimicry and the Problem of Essentialism”, *Hypatia* 10.4 (Indiana University Press, 1995), 77.

[36] Jacques Lacan, “God and Woman’s Jouissance”, *The Seminar XX, Encore: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. Bruce Fink. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1998), 74-75.
ZHAN Junfeng  B.A. (2002) in English (International Finance) from School of English for Business, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies. M.A. (2005) in British and American literatures from Faculty of English Language and Culture, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies. Ph.D. (2008) in British and American literatures from Faculty of English Language and Culture, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies. He is currently the lecturer at South China Normal University.