

Sexual topologies in the Aristotelian cosmos: revisiting Irigaray's physics of sexual difference

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Abstract Irigaray's engagement with Aristotelian physics provides a specific diagnosis of women's ontological and ethical situation under Western metaphysics: Women provide place and containership to men, but have no "place of their own," rendering them uncontained and abyssal. She calls for a reconfiguration of this topological imaginary as a precondition for an ethics of sexual difference. This paper returns to Aristotelian cosmological texts to further investigate the topologies of sexual difference suggested there. In an analysis both psychoanalytic and phenomenological, the paper rigorously traces a teleological and oedipal narrative implicit in the structure of the Aristotelian cosmos, in which desire for the mother is superseded by love for the father. Further, the paper argues that this narrative is complicated by certain other elements in the Aristotelian text—aporias involving the notion of boundary and the relationship between space and time, the fallenness of the feminine, and the ineliminably aleatory qualities of matter. The paper concludes that such elements may provide material for disrupting this teleology of gender, opening onto not merely an ethics of sexual difference, but providing space and place for a proliferation of non-normative, queer, transgender and intersex modes of sexed and gendered subjectivity.

Keywords Aristotle · Irigaray · Place · Physics · Gender · Psychoanalysis

In her reading of Aristotle's *Physics IV* in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Luce Irigaray maps out a sexually marked topology of containment: In this physics woman is the container for man. Her approach—at once feminist, post-structuralist, psychoanalytic, and phenomenological—treats this ancient physical and metaphysical

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architecture as a scenography, a topography, to be read, interpreted, and understood for what it discloses about a dynamics of sexual difference. This dynamics operates in the very structure of the world, but not just in the world; it is for Irigaray a fundamental feature of the psyche—of sexed existence under patriarchy—bequeathed to the West by classical antiquity, with profound ontological consequences for women. She concludes that woman contains, gives place to man, and therefore cannot, strictly speaking, exist in her own right. Irigaray mines the ancient text to disclose a sexual imaginary, at once phenomenological and psychoanalytic, in which the very topological and tropological formations of the physical cosmos enact and enshrine a reduction of sexual difference to a relation of containership. She counters that stultifying and suffocating scene with topological figures of her own, utilizing a range of tropes from the discourses of particle physics, fluid dynamics, the body's materiality, and rhetoric itself to create an alternate imaginary, a landscape for thinking, being, and acting, in which sexuate beings might be granted the possibility of both functioning as containers or envelopes for one another and letting one another be in their alterity. Irigaray is less concerned with a faithful reading of Aristotle's remarks than with calling for the possibility of a genuinely heterosexual relationship, that is, for the possibility of a relationship between sexually different beings that would not deny the ontological and ethical significance of such difference. Aristotle's writings on place exemplify this erasure by erecting man as the universal, leaving woman no place to be, no place in which woman, qua woman, might "take her place." Irigaray thus calls for a shift to an "age of difference," an epoch in which the sexes might each take their place, as well as an "ethics of the passions" through which we might give one another place, without eclipsing sex either as a way of being or as a mode of relationship.¹

This essay takes its cue from Irigaray and iterates her themes, undertaking a more extensive and rigorous examination of the Aristotelian text in order to see what further insights—feminist, queer, psychoanalytic, phenomenological—may emerge in relation to this patriarchal architectonic.² I take Irigaray's relatively schematic depiction of sexual difference in ancient physics and elaborate, deepen, and enrich it by grappling with the texts in their resonances and aporias, their tropes and their disavowals. I seek to show how the figuring of place in Aristotle's two realms, the sublunar and the celestial, may be understood in sexed terms and, furthermore, that a topological correspondence may be drawn between these realms and the different kinds of gendered attachment found in the successive stages of the Oedipus complex. The Aristotelian cosmos therefore may be interpreted as reflecting a developmental and teleological narrative of subjectification, the relations between lower and higher representing a passage from earlier to later, pre-oedipal to post-oedipal, maternal to paternal, with space and topology reflecting processes that change over time. However, the Aristotelian text also complicates this narrative in generative ways. By paying particular attention to Aristotle's theory of motion in its

¹ Irigaray (1993, p. 12).

² The paper also responds to Elizabeth Grosz's call for feminist theory to "explore non-Euclidean and non-Kantian notions of space [and] different 'pre-oedipal' or infantile non-perspectival spaces [that] may provide the basis for alternatives to those developed in dominant representations of corporeality" (1987, p. 11).

relation to both space and time, we will see that this developmental trajectory is interrupted, that the story might be read differently and also even reversed. In contrast with a developmental and teleological narrative, the relation between celestial and earthly can also be understood otherwise, as the story of an uneven fall into plural materiality, understood as feminine, supplemental, and symptomatic (the Greek *sumptoma* literally means “falling together”). The latter section of the paper shows how the symptomatic, aleatory, feminine motions of matter disrupt and interrupt the explicit Aristotelian account of motion as deriving solely from the masculine divine prime mover. In turn, such motions disrupt Irigaray’s reading of Aristotelian place as a static feminine container—the feminine here represents not just place, but also *displacement*. The symptomatic feminine thus opens a space to reconceive not only the ethical relation between the sexes, providing the space and interval called for by Irigaray’s critique, but may also disrupt the very developmental trajectories by which sexuation and gendering are guaranteed. Aleatory matter displaces the patriarchal narrative in which a clear separation between desire (for maternal place) and identification (with paternal exteriority) is the precondition for the division of the sexes into two. In this way, a space is opened up in this physics and ethics of sexual difference for non-normative bodies and sexualities, for queer, transgender, and intersex subjectivities, for a different configuration of sexual difference itself.

In Irigaray’s analysis, the concepts of Aristotelian physics correspond to the topologically experienced lived body in its sexual difference, and she illuminates these latent dimensions of that physics which is not by any means scientific in our sense, but rather, as Edward Casey has put it, protophenomenological.³ Woman has been reduced to a topology—she *is* place; as container or envelope, womb, matrix, vagina, she gives place to man, while she is placeless, lost, without any place: “I shall affirm that the masculine is attracted to the maternal-feminine as place. But what place does the masculine offer to attract the feminine?”⁴ This placelessness of woman, with its connotations of the abyss, of falling in a void, renders her threatening, terrifying. The analysis here takes us far beyond the Beauvoiran diagnosis of woman as aligned with or representative of nature: Rather, as topological, this territory is primordially existential. This abysmal threat, in turn, provokes a need for compensatory containment or fixation, which is effected by woman’s exclusion and entrapment in the role of place-giver. Irigaray discloses for us a gendered asymmetry in both topology and the motility of the contained with regard to the container, which means that desire, as it is expressed as locomotion-toward, remains the preserve of the masculine. Without her own “proper place,” woman moves without direction, wanders or falls, is *mise en abyme*, or, to shift with Irigaray to the language of contemporary physics, she merely spins about the center like an electron. Having diagnosed, Irigaray finds a topological solution: The masculine must offer a kind of place in return, toward or away from which the feminine might then be able to move: “If there is no double desire, the positive and

³ Casey (1997, p. 53). He also says here, “A complete consideration of place will have to take both matters into account: how place is “in itself” and how it is relative to other things.”

⁴ Irigaray (1993, p. 39).

negative poles divide themselves between the two sexes instead of establishing a chiasmus or double loop in which each can go toward the other and come back to itself.”⁵ Irigaray contends that both sexes should move, and both sexes should find place, containment, shelter with the other, without absorption into or annihilation of the other: “Between the one and the other, there should be mutual enveloping in movement.”⁶ At the close of her essay, Irigaray introduces the theme of the rotation of the universe in the Aristotelian discussion of place, noting that for him the cosmos itself does not change place but moves in a circle. She recalls Aristophanes’ speech in Plato’s *Symposium*, in which men and women were once one conjoint being, locked in embrace and moving in a circle. For Aristotle, by contrast, one sex claims to be the whole, constructing “his world into a closed circle.”⁷

To specify Irigaray’s critique of Aristotelian place more precisely in psychoanalytic terms, we can note that one of the dangers represented by the Aristotelian topology of container and contained is the danger of engulfment of the male subject by the maternal-feminine. Such a relation is described by Freud as the type of unmediated, pre-Oedipal object-choice called “anaclitic,” or attachment type, characteristic of the little boy’s love of his mother, rooted in the nutritional instinct of attachment to the breast.⁸ Irigaray’s call for an interval, a spacing between container and contained, is a call for a relation to the sexuate other that would be mediated on and for both sides. However, Irigaray does not acknowledge either the pre-Oedipal nature of this situation of containership and threat of engulfment, nor the conduit offered by traditional psychoanalysis as a mediation or resolution of this untenable situation, namely the familial drama of the Oedipus complex. As is well known, in this classic narrative of male subject development it is the father who appears as the third term and therefore under whose sign resolution is made possible. The father threatens to intervene into the little boy’s (and it is typically a little boy) dyadic bond with the mother, precipitating a struggle unto death, with the threat of castration or feminization as the father’s trump card.⁹ The little boy

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 9. Irigaray’s invocation of the chiasmus refers to Merleau-Ponty’s treatment of that figure in his essay “The Intertwining—The Chiasm” (Merleau-Ponty 1973). Another essay in Irigaray (1993) entitled “The Invisible of the Flesh,” also subjects Merleau-Ponty’s privileging of vision over the tactile to a thoroughgoing critique.

⁶ Irigaray (1993, p. 54).

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 54. We should also remember that according to Aristophanes’ speech in Plato’s *Symposium* it is love between men that is judged the highest and best, because it is driven by “boldness, manliness, and masculinity, feeling affection for what is like to themselves.” (1993, 192a).

⁸ Freud (1977, pp. 329, 426); also Freud (1960, p. 21).

⁹ The language of “struggle unto death” is not used idly here. Rubin (1975) has brilliantly demonstrated the socio-political dimensions of the Oedipus complex in its relationship to structures of kinship and sexual difference. Furthermore, although I am unable to develop this here, it is perhaps one of Freud’s most significant interventions into the history of Western philosophy that he makes possible a rendering of the Hegelian struggle unto death for pure prestige, and hence for subjectivity itself, in terms that disclose a hidden drama of sexual difference therein—the lord and bondsmen are refigured as father and son, and the mother/woman appear as mediating objects of exchange. This drama is not that of Hegel’s *Antigone*, in which the feminine survives only as irony in the life of the community and the masculine law of the polis supersedes all in ethical life (1977, pp. 266–289), but that of *Oedipus*, in which sexual difference itself is disclosed as fundamental to the reproduction of relations between men, which are sustained by and made possible by the mediation of the intergenerational exchange of women as objects.

fantasizes the elimination or death of the father. The father's law says, "Renounce your claim on the mother, for she is mine. If you do not, you will become like her, lacking, the object to be fought over and not a subject, not a player in this conflict. If you do, you will accede to masculinity." The struggle over the body of the mother is resolved when the little boy indeed renounces her, and accepts the prohibition. His subjectivity and masculinity are guaranteed by the assurance that, not now, but in the future, he may have one 'just like her': a woman of his own as a legitimate object of erotic desire.

The danger, or power, represented by the maternal-feminine is thus neutralized through the Oedipal drama in which she is reduced to a cipher of phallic power, through whom father and son can enjoy a mediated relationship, full of interval, allowing them both place and space without threat of obliteration.¹⁰ The spacing afforded by this resolution is also temporal: A deferral is introduced, a relation to futurity that is also a metonymic or analogic difference. In forcing the son to wait, not for his mother but for another *like* her in certain respects (and most assuredly with respect to her femininity, the very quality that makes her capable of possession), and for an intimacy, nourishment and containment that comes later, the father's law is also a giving of temporality, an assuredly masculine temporality.

Before proceeding further with this analysis, it is worth briefly considering the question of hermeneutics. Can we assess the validity of applying a psychoanalytic model to ancient Greek philosophical texts? Page duBois has observed that psychoanalysis, in its appropriation of Greek tragic themes, enacts a colonizing gesture which reduces a rich and multivalent field of representations of women and sexual difference in the ancient world to a crude schematism of presence and absence of the phallus. However, it is evident that such a reduction also operates within the Aristotelian text. As duBois notes: "[F]or both Aristotle and Lacan, the female body is defined in terms of metonymy. The female is the male, but lacking."¹¹ Clearly, the male subject is paradigmatic for psychoanalysis, and Irigaray is more than aware that psychoanalysis participates in a philosophical genealogy of schematic reductions of sexual difference. But her approach also offers

¹⁰ Silverman (1992, pp. 192–194) emphasizes that according to Freud's account in *The Ego and the Id*, for both boys and girls the Oedipus complex can be both "positive" and "negative"—little boys can identify with the mother and take the father for an object, and little girls can also "go both ways." Freud attributes this to the fundamental bisexuality of all individuals, and this certainly has value insofar as it gives a psychoanalytic account of the possibility of non-normative gender and sexuality; but the process—involving a primary splitting of desire and identification along sexed lines—nonetheless results in a quelling of bisexuality in the name of a fixed homo- or hetero- sexuality, and in early 20th century fashion directly indexes sexual orientation to gender identification. This account would also seem to imply that men are subject to exchange equally with women, which certainly flies in the face of the facts of the matter under patriarchy.

¹¹ duBois (1988, p. 30). Other than duBois and Irigaray, authors who have put psychoanalytic theory to work to illuminate ancient and classical texts include Jean-Pierre Vernant and Nicole Loraux, though these latter attempt to describe broader formations across multiple genres and disciplines, including literature, anthropology, and history as well as philosophy, that would characterize and diagnose something like "the Greek mind." The present study is by contrast limited to the philosophical and scientific writings of Aristotle.

the possibility of immanent critique, in that when deployed critically and to feminist ends psychoanalysis not only brings the questions of sex and sexual difference to the center of the philosophical stage, but also permits a disclosure of the precise topologies of the reductions at play and the symptoms produced by those reductions. It is in this spirit, and also with the observation that Oedipus was part of Aristotle's cultural and mythical milieu, that this reading of Aristotle and Freud, with and against one other, may take place.

If, then, we reframe Irigaray's diagnosis of the fate of sexual difference in Aristotle's account of place as a pre-Oedipal scene of anaclitic attachment, the question is raised of how, for Aristotle, this dyad may be resolved. Are the logic and dynamics of the Oedipus complex reflected in Aristotelian physics and in the constitution of the Aristotelian cosmos, and what does this reveal about the mechanisms of the erasure of sexual difference in the architecture of Western thought? Further, might we find hints of a destabilization of that architectonic, a destabilization with potential for enriching Irigaray's feminist project? These are the concerns that will occupy the remainder of this paper.

Returning to now to Aristotle's cosmos, and specifically to *Metaphysics* XII where the text as it were reaches its narrative and developmental peak, we may in fact observe a rather striking illustration of Oedipal resolution. Let us recall Aristotle's prime mover, the masculine signifier *par excellence*: unmoved and motionless, in relation to which the universe rotates out of love (*kinei de hōs erōmenon*).¹² The divine prime mover stands beyond the physical cosmos, outside space and time. It creates motion not through any exertion of its own, but through its passivity, through being loved (*erōmenon*). This love, although erotic, is not possessive, anaclitic, or sexually differentiated but rather mediated and identificatory; this love is precisely *homoerotic*. The moving spheres wish to be as much like the prime mover as possible, moving in perfect circles reflecting its perfection, and not desiring to close up the interval between them by occupying its place or seeking engulfment within it.

There is, here, a clear contrast between the anaclitic container-contained relationship between place and thing in the sublunary realm, and the identificatory, or narcissistic, object choice of the moving spheres in the superlunary realm. This distinction lends itself explicitly to a reading in terms of the Oedipus complex: a pre-Oedipal relationship with an engulfing mother versus a post-Oedipal outcome of identification with the father.¹³ What has transpired in the interim? How is this mediation achieved? Reading Aristotle's cosmos via the developmental narrative, we may conjecture that the dangers represented by unmediated, sexually differentiated containment in the sublunary world are resolved in the "higher" realm by a suppression or subjugation of the maternal-feminine. The matrilocal scene in which entities move towards their proper place and rest in containment is mediated by the introduction of a third term, that of the father, or the prime mover.

To develop this psychoanalytic reading of the dynamics of the Aristotelian heavens, it will be helpful to draw on Kaja Silverman's account of the negative

¹² Aristotle (1935, 1072b4).

¹³ Freud (1960, p. 22).

Oedipus complex in the context of the development of the superego. According to Freud's *Ego and the Id*, the parent one ends up identifying with becomes the blueprint for the superego, where an image of that parent is set up within the ego and functions as the source of moral imperatives. As Silverman notes, the situation for the male subject is explosive, for if the son tries to become the father, the superego prevents it "by decreeing: 'You may not be like [your father] ... you may not do all that he does; some things are his prerogative.' The paternal law thus promotes the very thing that its severity is calculated to prevent, a contradiction which must function as a constant inducement to reconstitute the negative Oedipus complex."¹⁴ In other words, the strength of the prohibitive moral law of the father is such that it threatens to push the son's identification away from the father and onto the mother, while an erotic relation is established with the father. This haunting of paternal identification by *eros* is reflected by Aristotle's use of that term, rather than the more chaste *philia*, in his description of the affective relation between moving spheres and prime mover. In the Greek context, of course, there is nothing surprising about erotic relations pertaining between masculine subjects, especially in the rarified world of the male citizen where erotic relations between older and younger citizen, lover and beloved, are hierarchically formalized. The works of Plato constantly dramatize these relationships in the figure of Socrates and his various young interlocutors, although any explicit suggestion of homoerotic love between men is notably absent from the Aristotelian corpus. In the Aristotelian heavens, however, we can see that the Greek hierarchical ordering of lover and beloved, active and passive parties, is reversed; the heavenly bodies are the lovers and the prime mover is the *eromenon*, the beloved.¹⁵ While the divine prime mover, the good as such, exerts a powerful legislative moral force, it does so via an erotic passivity, by being a place-holder *beyond* the cosmos rather than by occupying any specific place or space *within* the cosmos. The paternal prime mover, here figured as love *object*, may point to possibilities beyond the prohibitive either/or of sexual difference decreed by both positive and negative Oedipus complexes, in which one must identify with one parent and desire the other. The Aristotelian heavens are driven by a force that is both identificatory and erotically desiring, that queers the Oedipus complex, so to speak, but from which women, the feminine, and sexual difference as such, have all but been eliminated. By contrast with Irigaray's analysis, for Aristotle it is not the woman that spins about the center like an electron, but the masculine heavenly bodies that rotate in a relation of pure, homoerotic identification with a metaphysical father.¹⁶

In this narrative, then, we have traced a developmental movement from the local motions of the sublunary realm—rectilinear motions toward goals or places—to the

¹⁴ Silverman (1992, p. 194).

¹⁵ This role-reversal finds a certain prefiguration in Plato's *Symposium*. Toward the end of the dialogue, Alcibiades is describing his fruitless attempts to seduce Socrates. Socrates remains resistant and impassive in the face of Alcibiades' advances, and this resistance combined with Socrates' inner beauty so frustrates Alcibiades that he claims, "[W]hile deceiving [young men] into thinking of him as the lover, [Socrates] brings it about that he is the beloved rather than the lover" (222b).

¹⁶ It is important to note that while the Aristotelian prime mover is a patriarchal divinity, it is not a demiurge or creator. "Father" in this sense functions metaphorically rather than literally.

broader, higher, and more perfected circular motions of the celestial realm. In the heavens, the feminine no longer has any place at all, not even as a giver of place. The woman-mother is superseded and the relation between subject and paternal function, now understood as that between heavenly body and divine prime mover, is mediated at her expense, at the price of her disappearance.

In this move from world to cosmos, what has become of place? There is interval, to be sure, between the heavenly bodies and their beloved, the divine prime mover, but is there a giving of place? For Irigaray, the desire for place is intimately connected with a quest for the divine. She asks:

Can the quest to infinity for the mother in women result in a quest for infinity in God? Or do the two quests intersect ceaselessly? With place indefinitely switching from the one to the other? Modifying itself moment by moment. Or even transmuting itself from one envelope to the other? I become for God the container, the envelope, the vessel, the place for which I quest? Nonetheless the split between first and last place still has to be resolved.¹⁷

Irigaray thus suggests a certain interchangeability between woman and the divine as givers of place, with divine infinity substituting for the abyssal falling of placelessness, just as woman/mother may do. The quest, desire itself, is a striving for a last place, a future place, but nostalgia for the mother's womb, the first place, can substitute for this desire. Further, for Irigaray, place as containership, as envelopment, as a place to dwell but precisely not of engulfment, is necessary for all of us, both men and women:

Once there was the enveloping body and the enveloped body, the latter being more mobile through what Aristotle termed *locomotion* (since maternity does not look much like "motion"). The one who offers or allows desire moves and envelops, engulfing the other. It is moreover a danger if no third term exists. Nor only to serve as a limitation. This third term can occur within the one who contains as a relation of the latter to his or her own limit(s): relation to the divine, to death, to the social, to the cosmic. If a third term does not exist within and for the container, he or she becomes *all-powerful*.

Therefore, to deprive one pole of sexual difference, women, of a third term also amounts to putting them in the position of omnipotence: this is a danger for men, especially in that it suppresses an interval that is both entrance and space between. A place for both to enter and exit the envelope (and on the same side, so as not to perforate the envelope or assimilate it into the digestive process); for both, a possibility of unhindered movement, of peaceful immobility without the risk of imprisonment.¹⁸

The divine, here, is one figure (along with death, the social, and the cosmic) for a necessary limit, a third term beyond the two sexes that is required by both if there is to be mutual, open containership between sexually different beings. Are there

¹⁷ Irigaray (1993, p. 35).

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 12.

resources in the Aristotelian text for figuring such a limit? How can we more precisely understand the relationship between the divine prime mover and place?

It is clear that in its lack of materiality, in its rationality, its full presence and actuality, the Aristotelian prime mover is rigorously masculine and not interchangeable with the woman-matrix in any form. However, as the good, and as the object of desire, it is also the telos of all motion and action in the cosmos. Temporally ahead of us, always out of reach, the paternal divine stands apart. Free of all matter, thought thinking itself, it is pure abstraction without incarnation, exemplary of that version of the divine which excludes the feminine. It is not something we could call with any accuracy a “place.” Like the Oedipal father, the prime mover thus gives time and frames futurity without giving place. The Oedipal father guarantees to the son that the place that is woman will, eventually be forthcoming. What, though, is the fate of the woman in the Aristotelian cosmos? The prime mover provides no such guarantee of place, but feminine place is indeed to be found below, in the sublunary realm, if the heavens are renounced and the body-subject succumbs to its desire for proper place and falls to earth.

Aristotle’s analysis of *topos*, place, in *Physics* IV, rests on four primary axioms. (1) It contains a thing, but is not part of the thing contained; (2) it is neither less nor greater than the thing contained; (3) it can be left behind by the thing contained and is separable (*choriston*) from it, and (4) all places are characterized by being up or down: “[B]y nature each body travels to or remains in its proper place (*oikeios topos*) and it does so in the direction of up or down.”¹⁹ The “proper” of the proper place, *oikeios*, has none of the connotations of legitimacy or rigidity of the English, but rather denotes the homely hearth, the feminine sphere of the household, the *oikos*, which, like *hupodochē*, Plato’s word for the receptacle in the *Timaeus*, denotes a certain hospitality, a welcoming into the home. Objects thus travel by nature toward their homes, toward the sphere of the maternal and the feminine, and arrive there to repose in rest. Despite this haunting of *topos* by the Platonic receptacle (also more famously figured as *chōra*, space), place is not the receptacle as such: It neither receives Form nor participates in it, but is always separate and separable from that which it contains. It is essentially topological, enveloping and containing, and both depends on and participates in an essential difference, a boundary and limit, between container and contained. After dismissing both matter and form as suggestive but unacceptable candidates for place, Aristotle settles on the following definition: Place is the “primary motionless boundary of that which contains” (*to tou periechontos peras akinēton prōton*).²⁰

In fleshing out his definition of place as a boundary of that which contains, Aristotle explains that, “[A] place is together with (*hama*) the thing [contained], for the limit [of that which contains] coincides with (*hama*) that which is limited.”²¹ This formulation raises the difficulty of the relationship between place qua containing boundary and qua that which is exhausted by the thing contained. To what extent is the boundary separate from its contents, and to what extent do they

¹⁹ Aristotle (1929/1969, 211a1–6). Unless otherwise noted, the translation is Apostle’s.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 212a20–1.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 212a30.

coincide? *Hama*, a small word relied upon to do much work here, may be translated as “at once, at the same time with, together with.” Translators have taken pains to point out the difficulty with this passage, because for Aristotle the coincidence of place and thing, between that which limits and that which is limited, is, as Wicksteed and Cornford put it, “the error he is anxious to refute.”²² Casey describes how the limits of Aristotelian place and thing act together: “Not only can one limit not exist without the other, but each actively influences the other, helping to shape a genuinely conjoint space, a space of mutual coexistence between container and contained. This co-constituted, coincidental, compresent double limit is what defines place in its primariness.”²³ The confusion regarding the translation of *hama* in Aristotle’s text may be related to the paradoxical, aporetic, or chiasmatic nature of boundary itself as both separating and joining, and in particular to the difficulty involved in describing the outermost boundary of the universe. Aristotle argues that the cosmos itself is a place, but is not in a place, because “heaven considered as a whole ... is nowhere and in no particular place, that is if there is no body which contains it; yet with respect to the way in which it is in motion, its parts do have a place, for they are consecutive to each other.”²⁴ The universe does not locomote: Beyond it there is no place from which or toward which to move. An entity moving in circular motion, it contains parts that can be said to have place with respect to each other; its plurality, articulation, and motion ground the possibility of place for its parts. However, there is still a perplexity regarding the outer boundary of the universe, which despite its rotating spatial relation to itself is not itself contained by anything.

Aristotle’s use of *hama* here, an expression that is ambiguously temporal (“at the same time as”) and spatial (“together with”) can be read as symptomatic of this difficulty, in the Greek sense of *sumptoma*. *Sumptoma* is itself a chance occurrence, a coincidence, literally a “falling together,” from *sum-*, together, *piptō*, to fall. *Hama* traverses the boundary between the exterior, the non-place, and interior place, its ambiguity bringing us down toward the feminine and to the possibility of stasis and rest. What is outside the cosmos is, after all, motionless and not in time, whereas time, for Aristotle, is itself dependent upon motion, following on from motion, an affection or *pathos* of motion.²⁵ The unmoved mover that is the source of circular motion, and thus periodicity and the possibility of measurable time, is located here, beyond the cosmos, but does not provide the containment of place. The symptomatic boundary we are speaking of here, then, must both distinguish between and articulate the temporal and the eternal, the moving and the motionless, the possibility of place-giving and the non-place. The masculine prime mover, beyond

²² Aristotle (1929, p. 315, note b). Apostle simply glosses over the problem, stating “The inner boundary of a containing body coincides with the shape of the contained body, if the latter is contained primarily, as in the case of can full of water” (Aristotle 1969, p. 248, n48).

²³ Casey (1997, p. 58). Casey further develops the notion of a double limit in the Aristotelian understanding of place, and argues (p. 63) for a distinction between a boundary, *horos*, which he says belongs to the place or container, and limit, *peras* belonging to the contained. The force of this distinction is somewhat vitiated by Aristotle’s use of *peras* to describe the boundary of place in his definition.

²⁴ Aristotle (1929/1969, 212b9–11).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 212a19; Aristotle (1934, 251b28–29).

the cosmos, thus gives time, and not place, while the maternal-feminine within the cosmos gives place, but in its stasis and closing up of space-between, does not give time. *Hama* provides the place, space, interval, boundary, where one may cross over into the other. As Derrida notes of the appearance of *hama* a little further along in *Physics* 4, it “is neither spatial nor temporal It says the complicity, the common origin of time and space, appearing together as the condition for all appearing of Being. In a certain way it says the dyad as minimum.”²⁶ So even when the explicit description threatens to founder in incoherence and impossibility, *hama* works to reinscribe a foundational dyad, almost without either ourselves, or Aristotle, noticing it—as Derrida puts it, “He says it without saying it, lets it say itself, or rather it lets him say what he says.”²⁷

The aporetic founding of space–time, reliant on the ambiguity of the insignificant *hama*, separates the divine from the cosmos and the entities within it. What is more, as both limit *and* spacing, it gives a certain androgyny: the possibility of approach, of the intimacy of the hearth, of repose, as well as the necessary distance to keep engulfment at bay. Is there space, or time, here for a different relation to divinity, one that might give place or corporeality: an opening for the feminine? The descending order of the Aristotelian cosmos—prime mover; motion of heavenly bodies; periodicity and time; motions and cycles of the sublunar realm; proper place—one following on from the other, is disrupted by the *hama*, which gives space and time *together*, at the same time. This progressive falling from the highest to the lowest, from pure masculinity to the material femininity of the earth, literally relies on a *sumptoma*, a falling *together*, a symptom that may itself be read as feminine.²⁸ The *hama*, then, gives space and time together: It spaces and temporalizes, giving both interval and boundary. As such, it is the indeterminate condition of the possibility of place. In its irreducible duality, between corporeal cosmos and the divine, it corresponds to the Irigarayan sensible transcendental, the possibility of an always-open sexuete place.

Aristotle’s divinity does not provide a place, but exists beyond an untraversable boundary that permits no locomotion toward, no approach, inspiring instead the circular motion that emulates the circularity of thought thinking itself, in a relation both erotic and identificatory. It provokes or incites desire through its superlative, nonmaterial existence, and as an abstract telos that is never arrived at, but always

²⁶ Derrida (1982, p. 56). The passage discussed by Derrida is *Physics* 4, 10 218a on the *aporai* or difficulties presented by the concept of time.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

²⁸ Green (1992) demonstrates the association of the feminine with downward motion across many different texts, including the distinction between ruler and ruled in the *Politics*. We should briefly also note that contrary to this reading of *sumptoma*, Aristotle in the *Physics* explicitly disavows the identification of downward motion with chance: “The up-direction is not any chance direction but where fire or a light object travels, and likewise the down-direction is not any chance direction but where heavy or earth bodies are carried” (1969, 208b20). In *De Generatione et Corruptione*, however, it is clear that up and down do not carry a simple equal-and-opposite valence, but that up is more noble than down. In a discussion of the nature of the simple bodies or elements he says, for example, that “fire alone—and to a greater extent than the rest—is of the nature of ‘form’ (*tou eidous*), because it naturally tends to be borne towards the limit” (Aristotle 1955, 335a18–20). There is a hierarchy of value here along the vertical axis, and downwardness is clearly the inferior direction.

ahead and always ideal, it provides the opening of time. On earth, the proper place, the domestic hearth, the feminine matrix is all too approachable, resulting in a closing up of interval, a stifling engulfment, a stasis, a stoppage of time. Both the prime mover and the proper place are motionless (*akinēton*), and non-temporal, and thereby provoke the locomotion of objects—the prime mover by setting them in motion and the proper place by providing a place of rest. Aristotle defines rest as a privation of motion, and in the sublunary realm it is feminine place that furnishes the possibility of this privation. While Casey observes that the Aristotelian notion of place thus explains motion and rest and their relationship “economically and effectively,”²⁹ there are also profound consequences for the topological and temporal figuring of the masculine and the feminine. The material motionless feminine provides intimacy and interiority, yet stops time; the immaterial motionless masculine provides spacing and interval, and inaugurates time. In a sense, place is the feminine sublunary counterpart of the motionless prime mover of the heavens, providing a passive, containing, immanent, material counterpoint against which sublunary motions can be defined—both the natural motion of things toward the up and down, their *oikeios topos*, their bosom, hearth, and home, and motion by force or by chance, motions that prevent objects from gaining their proper place, which is always posterior to motion by nature.³⁰ Feminine place therefore functions as a passive, feminine, material, sublunary counterpart to the masculine, active, immaterial unmoved mover in the superlunary realm. As a local end or telos towards which objects tend to fall or rise, not by desire or love, but simply by nature, the proper place itself appears as a supplement, a symptom, a fallen earthly substitute for the masculine divinity of the heavens.

By contrast with the perfection of heavenly motions, the motions of our world are far from perfect and far from simple. Not only must Aristotle account for the natural motion of objects toward their proper places, but also motions against nature, the aleatory motions of force, accident, spontaneity, and chance, the kinds of motions inherent in a material world full of vagaries and vicissitudes, of plural phenomena and causes. Of course for Aristotle the sublunary world obeys a certain teleological order: In their teleological striving the cycles of nature and generation emulate the circular motions of the heavens in time if not in space. But this ordered world is also subject to the unexpected vicissitudes of matter, giving spontaneous and unpredictable disruptions of that order, accounted for by Aristotle through a constellation of non-essential causes such as *tuchē* (luck, chance), *automaton* (chance, spontaneity), *bia* (force) and *sumptoma* (chance, coincidence).³¹ Motion toward proper place occurs according to nature (*kata phusin*), a potential tendency that is actualized if a hindrance is removed, such as a stone falling when dislodged from its perch. Motion by force (*bia*), on the other hand, occurs against the natural tendencies of things, such as a stone thrown up in the air.³² According to Aristotle, this motion by force only

²⁹ Casey (1997, p. 68).

³⁰ Aristotle (1929/1969, 215a2–3).

³¹ These are discussed as supplementary causes in *Physics* 2. Bianchi (2006a) gives an extended analysis of chance and spontaneity as feminine symptoms.

³² Aristotle (1934/1969, 255b14–24).

appears by contrast with the natural motions of things toward their proper places: It is secondary, parasitic, unpredictable, only occurring by chance and not through one of the four essential causes.

These motions that occur contrary to the natural tendencies and cycles of nature disrupt Aristotle's teleological cosmos. They are inherent in matter, in corporeality, and as such they are inherently feminine; indeed in *Generation of Animals* Aristotle locates the cause of a female offspring as an error in reproduction, a failure of concoction, a disruption rooted in matter diverting the smooth transmission of masculine form from father to son, throwing it off course and transforming it into its feminine opposite.³³ These observations reveal that the Aristotelian feminine not only provides place, but also *displaces*. The matrix is not only the site of containership, of circumambience, but also of making other, of difference, of sexual difference. In this symptomatic moment in the Aristotelian cosmos, femininity marks *both* motion against nature issuing from the unpredictable vicissitudes of matter and plurality of causes in the sublunar realm, *and* the proper place, the *oikos*, the hearth and home toward which the motions according to nature move. The capricious, forceful, disruptive qualities of matter act upon things to push them out of their place, putting them at odds with their place. Such motions, opaque and unpredictable, immune to reason and knowledge, vitiate the Aristotelian promise of the feminine proper place, the safety of rest and repose.

Seen one way, these symptomatic disruptions of the feminine provoke a response that would quell them, neutralize them, a fastening down of the feminine manifested in all the hierarchical gestures of metaphysics that debase the body, matter, and women. Akin to Irigaray's observation that without a place of her own, woman represents an endless falling into an abyss, these unpredictable, restless motions also ground a justification for making woman the not-all, the lack, the other of the same. However, they also ground a different order of motility, one not dependent on structure of stasis and motion-toward, but that importantly utterly bypasses, indeed has no relation to, the masculine source of motion that is the prime mover. These motions also provide another sort of spacing, another sort of temporalizing, another sort of interval. Once again, in the language of Irigaray, they keep open the threshold between the masculine and feminine, inoculating against engulfment. In their materiality and corporeality, they also give a different periodicity, that of animate matter not moving in cycles in identification with the abstraction of thought directed toward itself, but (and perhaps this is to risk a certain essentialism along with Irigaray) the rhythms of breath, of blood, of corporeal femininity, the sensible transcendental.³⁴

In force, chance, spontaneity, coincidence, then, we may discern the nascent possibility of both place and interval, of the possibility of the partially open

³³ Aristotle (1942, 767b3–15).

³⁴ This depiction of such feminine, material motions is reminiscent of, though not equivalent to, Julia Kristeva's heterodox appropriation of Plato's notion of *chora* as a presymbolic maternal dimension of language, that of "rupture and articulation (rhythm), [which] precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality, and temporality" (1984, p. 26). For a more strictly Platonic account of *chora* and its wandering feminine motions, see Bianchi (2006b).

feminine place, a new configuration of space–time, that Irigaray proposes as necessary for the flourishing of sexuate beings and an ethical relation between them.

The ethical relationship called for by Irigaray does not merely implicate the relations between man and woman, but also woman’s relationship to herself, not to mention the relationships given by the metaphysical, theological, philosophical and physical topologies within which we think and live, which condition the possibilities of our experience of our worlds, our understanding and experience of embodiment, sexual difference and sexuation in general.³⁵ According to Casey, the Aristotelian place-container is necessarily closed: For it to be even partly porous would be “disastrous, since the contents would then flow out and lose their place.”³⁶ However if we take into account the devalued aleatory motions inherent in matter we see that, against the grain, the Aristotelian container must, like the two lips, be also partly open. It has, or rather *is* a threshold—mobile, temporal *and* spatial; via this threshold it may transform itself into the contained, find its own place, and, in accord with the topology of the chiasmus, still return to itself. Freeing the dyadic topology of container and contained from the opposition of stasis and mobility, and the opposition of woman and man in this way offers the chiasmatic possibility of a restless reconfiguration of relationship of the one to the other, indeed the possibility of a restlessly unpredictable reconfiguration of sexual difference itself.

I began this paper with an interpretation, inspired by Irigaray, of the modes of locomotion in Aristotle’s sublunar and celestial realms as representing pre- and post-Oedipal modes of relation. The sublunar relation between the object and its proper place was read as the anaclitic attachment of child to mother’s body, while the relation of the celestial body to the prime mover was read as identificatory attachment to the father. In this way, through this lens, the Aristotelian cosmos appeared as a motile, spatial representation of a psychoanalytic developmental narrative of subject formation. Following this account, I examined various problematic disruptions or *aporiai*, points of difficulty arising in Aristotle’s text. First, the identificatory relation was shown to be not only mimetic, but also erotic. The post-Oedipal masculine subject of the Aristotelian heavens does not obey the prohibitions of the father’s law, or rather the father’s law is configured differently to permit eros and mimesis to appear together. Although the subject is rigorously masculine, and the relations here are strictly homoerotic, the compresence of eros and identification means that one need not be forsaken for the other, and that contrary to the Freudian account these modes of relation may coexist, albeit in the rarified and noble realm of the male Greek citizen. The father does not envelop the son, but remains always apart, at a distance. He may be emulated, desired, loved, but the space between them can never be diminished. He cannot hold, contain, or provide a place to dwell. The paternal divine does not give place.

It is only in the earthly realm, within the material cosmos, that place may be given, and the maternal-feminine appears as the giving of place. The heavenly bodies transmit motion downward, to the sublunary realm. And it is only here,

³⁵ See Young (2005) for a key instance of phenomenological work which thinks through sexual difference and embodiment along these lines.

³⁶ Casey (1997, p. 325).

where multiple causes and plural forces both with and against nature prevail, where heavy objects fall and light objects rise on a vertical axis, that proper place can take its place or even properly exist. On a close textual examination of the difficult question of the coincidence and relation between a thing and its place, and of the question of the boundary of the outer limit of the cosmos, we find that hierarchical ordering in which time follows on from motion in space is only made possible by an ambiguity, by the insignificant simultaneity given by the *hama*, by the symptomatic coincidence of the co-inciding, the falling-together, of space and time. The proper place then appears as the sublunar counterpart of the divine prime mover, the degraded feminine supplement, toward which earthly things tend. Pursuing Aristotle's typology of motions and causes found in nature, we find further that parasitic upon and supplementary to the motion of things by nature toward their proper place, there are further motions, unaccountable and aleatory, that act against nature, and against teleology. Falling further from the perfection of the divine, we once again find the feminine symptom: restless, deviating, disrupting, displacing.

Reversing the narrative of Oedipal development, we now find a narrative in Aristotelian physics of a symptomatic fall from masculine perfection to feminine degradation. But as we have done so, we have also discovered another scene of space and time, another scene of motion, and perhaps, also, an opening toward another scene of sexual difference. These interstitial, displacing motions of materiality may pose an abyssal threat, of a ceaseless state of being-not-at-home, and yet we may also glimpse in them something of the non-self-sameness of life inherent in matter, another source of motion far from the perfect circularity of the prime mover, another species of divinity: corporeal, living, breathing. As a closing gesture, I would like to ask how in foregrounding this narrative of a fall, of the faltering mis-step, of interruption, ambiguity, displacement, and symptom, we might further throw light on the processes of Oedipalization and subjectification with which we began this investigation.

If the feminine gives both proper place *and* displacement, how can we read this into the scene of anaclitic attachment, of the nutritional relation to the breast, of the engulfing envelopment of pre-Oedipal attachment to the mother? Certainly, the breast is not always there when the infant wants it; in fact the infant's earliest experience is of privation of the maternal body, and the story of development is in large part the story of the infant's attempts to master that privation. But in the specific crisis that is Oedipalization, might the kind of displacement, openness, ambiguity and simultaneity we have caught sight of in the Aristotelian cosmos make it possible to envision different configurations of identification and desire? Could desire persist for both the mother and the father, or if not them, then "ones like them"? Could identification persist with the both the mother and the father, *hama*, at the same time, coinciding, in the same place? Could the processes of gender identification, of bodily ego formation, be subject in this complex to many kinds of opaque, unpredictable displacements and reconfigurations?³⁷

³⁷ As Salamon (2004) suggests in the context of a psychoanalytic and phenomenological account of transgenderedness: "[A]rguably psychoanalytic theory's most important insight about the relation of the subject to his or her body... is that bodily assumption, and hence subject formation itself, is a constant and complex oscillation between narcissistic investment in one's own flesh and the 'necessary self-division

The fall into sexual difference signaled by Oedipus, its renunciations and compromises, its non-negotiable either/or, is inevitably and structurally a tragic narrative. It is not my intention here to thwart this tragedy by calling for a comedic delirium of gender profusion in its place. Rather, the point is that the developmental and narrative processes by which we become sexuate beings (biological, psychical, social, historical, and so on) are always already subject, constitutively, to endless displacements and deviations, minute and large, and these are not insignificant and require attentive theorization.³⁸ Here, then, we might complicate and deepen Irigaray's project, disclosing that an ethics of sexual difference and a space-time and topology in which such ethics may flourish cannot be restricted to a scene between and among two already constituted sexes, man and woman. The place that Irigaray calls for, for women among themselves, and for women and men in relation to each other, in turn is subtended by a taking place, giving place, and displacement: processes of sexual differentiation and deferral that are the *sine qua non* of sexual subject formation, formation of subjects as sexuate and sexual beings, and which might give myriad possibilities for admixtures of desire and identification, beyond the regime of two.

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Footnote 37 continued

and self-estrangement' (to borrow a phrase from Butler) that is the very means by which our bodies are articulated" (p. 119).

³⁸ Butler (1990, 1993, and 2004) and Grosz (1994)'s stress on the proliferative capacities of both sex and gender is particularly relevant here (Butler emphasizing the performative dimensions of such proliferation and Grosz the corporeal). In a more directly biological register, Fausto-Sterling (2000) presents extensive and exemplary documentation of the many vagaries of becoming sexed, also taking into account the psychical, social, and political phenomena involved in this complex and dynamic process, and arguing for the acknowledgment of an entire spectrum of possible and livable positions beyond the duality of "man" and "woman."

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