

# When The Goods Get Together

by Luce Irigaray

« Des marchandises entre elles » [When the goods get together] was first published in *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* [This sex which is not one] (Minit, 1977). This translation by Claudia Reeder was first published in *New French Feminisms*, ed. and intro. by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron [Amherst : University of Massachusetts, 1980].

The trade that organizes patriarchal societies takes place exclusively among men. Women, signs, goods, currency, all pass from one man to another or — so it is said — suffer the penalty of relapsing into the incestuous and exclusively endogamous ties that would paralyze all commerce. The work force, products, even those of mother-earth, would thus be the object of transactions among men only. This signifies that the *very possibility of the socio-cultural order would necessitate homosexuality*. Homosexuality is the law that regulates the socio-cultural order. Heterosexuality amounts to the assignment of roles in the economy : some are given the role of producing and exchanging subjects, while others are assigned the role of productive earth and goods.

Culture, at least patriarchal culture, would prohibit then the return to *red blood*, and even sex. *The result is the sovereign authority of pretense which does not yet recognize its endogamies*. For sex, and different sexes, would exist only as prescribed by the successful conduct of (business) relations among men.

Why then consider masculine homosexuality as an exception, while in fact it is the very basis of the general economy ? Why exclude homosexuals, when society postulates homosexuality ? Unless it is because the « incest » at work in homosexuality must be kept in the realm of pretense. And so it is, exemplarily so, in father-son relations which assure the genealogy of patriarchal power, its laws, its discourse, its sociality. These relations which are operative everywhere can neither disappear — in the abolition of the family or of monogamic reproduction, for example — nor be displayed openly in their pederastic love, nor be practiced in any other way but in language without provoking a general crisis. A certain symbolic order would come to an end.

« Other » — masculine — homosexual relations would be equally subversive and thus, forbidden. By interpreting openly the law of social functioning, they risk indeed the displacement of its horizon. Moreover, they bring into question the nature, the status, the « exogamic » necessity of pro-

ceeds from trade. By short-circuiting the commercial transactions, would they also expose what is really at stake in such dealings ? Masculine homosexual relations devalue the exalted worth of the standard of value. When the penis itself becomes simply a means of pleasure, and indeed a means of pleasure among men, *the phallus loses its power*. Pleasure, so it is said, should be left to women, those creatures so unfit for the seriousness of symbolic rules.

Trade relations, always among men, would thus be *both required and forbidden by the law*. These masculine subjects would be traders only at the price of renouncing their function as goods.

All economic management would thus be homosexual. The management of desire, even the desire for woman, would also be homosexual. 'roman exists only as the possibility of mediation, transaction, transition, transference — between man and his fellow-creatures, indeed between man and himself.

If this strange status of the aforementioned heterosexuality has been able to pass unnoticed and can still do so, *how can one account for the relations between women in this system of trade* ? Except by affirming that as soon as she desires (herself), as soon as she speaks (herself, to herself), the woman is a man. Within this system of trade, as soon as she relates to another woman, she is a *male* homosexual.

That's what Freud demonstrates in his analyses of female homosexuality. [1]

A female homosexual's choice can be determined only by a « virility complex. » Whether it is the « direct prolongation of infantile virility » or the « regression toward the former virility complex, » it is *only as a man that the female homosexual can desire a woman who reminds her of a man*. Thus, in their relation one to the other, female homosexuals « play indiscriminately the role of mother and child, or of husband and wife. »

Mother : phallic power; the child : never anything but a little boy; husband : man-father. Woman ? « Doesn't exist. » She borrows the disguise which she is required to assume. She mines the role imposed upon her. The only thing really expected of her is that she *maintain, without fail, the circulation of pretense by enveloping herself in femininity*. Whence the error, the infraction, the misconduct, the torture which female homosexuality entails. How can female homosexuality be diminished ? By reducing it to « acting like a man. »

Thus the female homosexual, Freud's at any rate, « clearly adopted the masculine pattern of behavior vis-a-vis the object of her love. » « Not only had she chosen an object of female sex, but also she had adopted vis-à-vis the object of her love a virile attitude. » She became « a man

and, putting herself in her father's place, she took her (phallic) mother as the object of love. » Her fixation on « the lady » is nevertheless explained by the fact that « the slimness of this lady, her harsh beauty and coarse manners reminded [Freud's patient] of her own brother who was slightly older than she. »

How can one account for this « perversion » of the sexual function. assigned to a « normal » woman ? The psychoanalyst's interpretation is no easy matter. Female homosexuality seems to be a phenomenon so foreign to his « theory, » to his (cultural) imaginary, that he can only « disregard the psychoanalytic interpretation. »

In order that science not be too shaken up by this embarrassing question, Freud has only to attribute it to an anatomico-physiological cause : « The constitutional factor is, in this case, of undeniably decisive importance. » And Freud will be on the watch for anatomical indices which justify the — *masculine* — homosexuality of his « female patient. » « The girl's physical characteristics certainly did not deviate from the womanly pattern. » She was « beautiful and well proportioned, » and « had no menstruation problems either, » but « she had, it is true, the tall bearing of her father and pronounced features rather than femininely gracious ones. » These features, in addition to her « intellectual qualities which indicate a virile character, » « can be considered as indications of somatic virility. » In certain cases, however, « the psychoanalyst is in the habit of forbidding himself a thorough physical examination of his patients. »

Otherwise, what would Freud have found as anatomical proof of the — *masculine* — homosexuality of his « female patient » ? What would hit unavowable desire of disguise have made him « see » ? In order to cover over his/these fantasies with an objectivity which is always anatomico-physiological in nature, he speaks only of « probable hermaphrodite ovaries. » And... he sends the girl away, advising her to « continue the therapeutic endeavor with a female doctor, if she still considered it worthwhile. »

Nothing about *feminine* homosexuality has been mentioned. Neither the girl's, nor Freud's. The « patient » even seemed absolutely indifferent to the progression of the cure, although « intellectually she participated a great deal. » *Could it be that the only transference concerned is that of Freud himself ?* Negative transference, as they say. Or rather, denied transference. How could he possibly- identify with a woman who moreover was of « bad sexual reputation, » had « loose morals, » and « lived quite simply from the traffic of her charms » ? How could his « superego » have permitted him to be « quite simply » a woman ? That would have been the only way however, not to prohibit his « female patient's » transference.

Thus female homosexuality escaped the psychoanalyst. That does not mean that what Freud writes is simply inaccurate. The dominant sociocul-

tural economy permits « female homosexuals » only the choice between a sort of *animality* that Freud seems to disavow or the mime of *masculine models*. The interplay of desire among women's bodies, sexes, and speech is inconceivable in the dominant socio-cultural economy.

Female homosexuality exists, nevertheless. But it is admitted only in as far as it is prostituted to the fantasies of men. Goods can only enter into relations under the surveillance of their « guardians. » It would be out of the question for them to go to the « market » alone, to profit from their own value, to talk to each other, to desire each other, without the control of the selling-buying-consuming subjects. And their relations must be relations of rivalry in the interest of tradesmen.

*But what if the « goods » refused to go to market ? What if they maintained among themselves « another » kind of trade ?*

Exchange without identifiable terms of trade, without accounts, without end... Without one plus one, without series, without number. Without a standard of value. Where *red blood* and *pretense* would no longer be distinguished one from the other by deceptive packaging that masks their respective worth. Where use and exchange would mingle. Where the most valuable would also be the least held in reserve. Where nature would spend itself without exhaustion, trade without labor, give of itself — protected from masculine transactions — for nothing : there would be free enjoyment, well-being without suffering, pleasure without possession. How ironic calculations, savings, more or less ravishing appropriations, and arduous capitalizations would be !

Utopia ? Perhaps. Unless this mode of exchange has always undermined the order of trade and simply has not been recognized because the necessity of restricting incest to the realm of pure pretense has forbidden a certain economy of abundance.

## Notes

[1] Cf. « Psychogénèse d'un cas d'homosexualité féminine » [The psychogenesis of a case of female homosexuality] *Névrose, psychose et perversion*, P.U.F. English translation in The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1920) vol 18: 146-72. and Pelican Freud Library, vol 9.