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## Irigaray, Myth, and “l’entre-elles” (or how Montherlant’s *Reine Morte* could have saved herself)

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Henri de Montherlant’s play, *La Reine Morte* (*Queen after Death*), was based on the seventeenth-century Spanish drama, *Reinar despues morir* (*To reign after dying*), by Luis Velez de Guevara. What was initially intended to be a mere translation of Guevara’s play for the Comédie-Française inspired Montherlant to make several modifications and create a new work, which was to signal the beginning of the significant theatrical period in his writing career. Written in 1942, at a time when several French writers were turning to mythology in order to sidestep censorship during the German occupation<sup>1</sup> as well as to give a different perspective on modern problems,<sup>2</sup> the play has significant mythological overtones. Such mythical allusions become clear when we examine the relationship between the characters of doña Inès and King Ferrante in the play, a relationship that, as John Batchelor has pointed out,<sup>3</sup> is analogous to the one between Antigone and her uncle Creon. Given Montherlant’s penchant for mythology, this parallel is probably intentional.<sup>4</sup>

One might wonder how Montherlant’s play *La Reine Morte* and his use of myth tie into a discussion about violence. The title of the play (which was originally *La Reine Morte ou comment on tue les femmes*) and the murder of one of the main characters (on which I will later elaborate) certainly lend themselves to the topic. Moreover, Irigaray’s ideas on patriarchy and sacrifice, in particular her rereading of the myth of Antigone (with their violent connotations) are also applicable to Montherlant’s play.

To this end, a brief summary of the myth of Antigone would help lend clarity to our reflections.<sup>5</sup> Antigone is the product of the incestuous union between Oedipus and Jocasta. Her brothers, Eteocles and Polynices, were to share the rule of

the kingdom of Thebes by ruling alternately for a year upon their father's death. However, when Eteocles refuses to turn over the reigns of power to Polynices, the latter decides to enlist the help of Adrastus (king of Argos), in organizing an invading army to Thebes. Eventually the invaders are defeated, but not before both Eteocles and Polynices are killed. Thebes is now to be ruled by Creon, brother of Jocasta, and uncle of the fallen brothers. The new king decrees that Polynices should not receive a proper burial because of his treasonous campaign against the state. Anyone attempting to defy Creon's order is to be punished by death.

This edict is problematic for Antigone, who believes in divine law (which requires a proper burial for the dead), and its precedence over man's law. Despite her sister Ismene's fearful pleas, Antigone attempts to bury Polynices' corpse, but is caught in the act by Creon's guards. Although averse to punishing his niece, Creon is not willing to appear weak before the citizens of Thebes. Believing he must take action, he has her held captive in a cave. Antigone, not willing to admit her wrongdoing, eventually dies in the cave. Her grief-stricken fiance, Haemon, (who is also Creon's son), then kills himself.

For our discussion, it is important to reiterate a few key points from the myth of Antigone that Irigaray highlights and discusses in her works: 1.) Antigone wants to honor her mother's religious tradition, but by doing so, she commits an act of rebellion against her uncle Creon. 2.) This act of rebellion humiliates Creon, particularly on a political level. 3.) Creon maintains that he cares for Antigone, but if she does not recant, he will be forced to act, because non-action on his part will cause him even further political difficulties (namely, that he will be perceived as weak).

Clearly, the relationship between Inès and King Ferrante in Montherlant's *La Reine Morte* parallels that between Antigone and her uncle Creon. Although Inès and Pedro are married already (secretly), King Ferrante of Portugal wants the marriage annulled so that his son Pedro would be free to marry the Infante of Navarra (Spain). Therefore, Ferrante wants Inès to help him convince Pedro to marry the Infante, because marriage with the

Infante is an alliance that is "nécessaire au trône"<sup>6</sup> for an Iberian alliance against the invading Moors at that time. He even assures Inès that she can remain Pedro's mistress, however, Inès is not interested because she is not willing to share Pedro with the Infante (89). Like Antigone, Inès does not want to bend to the king because she feels obligated to respect a "higher" law (in the play, the sacrament of marriage), as well as her conscience. Ferrante (like Creon with Antigone), empathizes with Inès, and feels kindly towards her, admitting that she is "une femme bien aimable" (53). However, he grows tired of the situation, and when he learns that Inès is pregnant (a development that will render the possibility of getting an annulment from his adversary, the Pope, most unlikely), he finds himself in a predicament. Like Creon, Ferrante realizes he must take action, because his counselors accuse him of being weak (78), so he is forced to "annul" the marriage in the only manner now available to him—by ordering Inès's murder. Comments by Egas Coelho, one of the King's ministers, provoke this dramatic solution, because it is brought to Ferrante's attention that wherever Inès is,

elle sera un foyer de sédition. Le Prince  
groupera autour d'elle tous vos ennemis.  
Ils attendront votre mort, ou peut-être la  
hâteront, puisqu'il suffit de cette mort  
pour qu'Inès règne. Non: tout ou rien.  
Ou le pardon avec ses folles  
conséquences, ou la mort. (62)

In addition to the danger Inès poses to the king, Coelho further builds his case against her by underscoring her outsider status, and how she is not worthy of so much of the king's consideration and trouble:

Plus d'un monarque a sacrifié au bien  
de l'État son propre enfant, c'est-à-  
dire ce qu'il y avait de plus aimable  
pour lui, et Votre Majesté hésiterait à  
sacrifier une étrangère, une bâtarde

qui a détourné votre fils de tout ce  
qu'il doit à son peuple et à Dieu! (63)

To continue further the parallel between *La Reine Morte* and the myth of Antigone, it is important to highlight that Inès, like Antigone, is the product of a sexual union not officially approved/recognized by patriarchal law: being illegitimate, she is even more vulnerable here. Through Coelho's statements, the ease with which patriarchal society sacrifices people, women in particular, is evident. For this reason, Coelho suggests to the King that "[l]a mort de doña Inès, qui maintenant vous tourmente, c'est elle qui vous rendra libre. En cette occasion, la femme est comme la poule: tuez-la et elle vous nourrit" (67). By comparing her with a chicken, Coelho underscores that Inès has no significant human qualities. Therefore, one can kill her without any scruples in order to nourish the "body" of the state, (just as Christ's death "nourished" humankind). In this way, the female body is used in the cannibalistic economy of patriarchy.

These statements are particularly noteworthy, if considered from an Irigarayan perspective. In several of her works, Irigaray comments on the "carnivorous" sometimes "cannibalistic" quality of patriarchal society. According to her,

La culture patriarcale est une culture fondée sur le sacrifice, le crime, la guerre. Elle impose comme un devoir ou un droit aux hommes de se battre pour se nourrir, habiter, défendre leurs biens, et leur famille et patrie comme biens.<sup>7</sup>

Clearly, the role of possessions and duty are of particular importance in *La Reine Morte*. Ferrante, being the good monarch that he is, points out to Inès his earthly obligations:

la route, la carriole avec sa mule, les porteurs d'olives,—c'est moi qui maintiens tout cela. J'ai ma couronne, j'ai ma terre, j'ai ce peuple que Dieu m'a confié, j'ai des centaines de milliers de corps et d'âmes. Je suis comme un grand arbre

qui doit faire de l'ombre à des centaines de milliers d'êtres. (46)

This pronouncement serves to underscore the importance of the union he desires between Pedro and the Infante, and how he, as king, has a responsibility to ensure that it takes place, as it is in the best interest of his people. Inès's desires and her claims of love for Pedro, while moving, rank far behind the king's wishes.

To counter myth and sacrifice, Irigaray proposes women's sociality ("l'entre-femmes", or "l'entre-elles") as a possible solution to this patriarchal order, and its ensuing destruction. In *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un*, she explains that

Une longue histoire a mis toutes les femmes dans la même condition sexuelle, sociale, culturelle. Quelles que soient les inégalités existant entre les femmes, elles subissent toutes, même sans s'en rendre compte clairement, la même oppression, la même exploitation de leur corps, la même négation de leur désir.

C'est pourquoi il est très important que les femmes puissent se réunir, et se réunir "entre elles". Pour commencer à sortir des places, des rôles, des gestes qui leur ont été assignés et enseignés par la société des hommes. Pour s'aimer entre elles, alors que les hommes ont organisé *de facto* la rivalité entre femmes.<sup>8</sup>

Looking at the play through this Irigarayan lens, one cannot help but wonder if the sacrificial role that Inès ultimately takes in *La Reine Morte* could have been avoided if she had become a part of what Irigaray terms "un monde entre-elles" (a world among themselves). What is perhaps more tragic, particularly given the parallels with Greek myth, is that it appears Inès was given such an opportunity, but rejected it.

In an ironic turn of events, the Infante chooses to meet with Inès, who essentially, is her "rival", on the marriage market. Surprisingly, Montherlant's Infante (unlike Guevara's)<sup>9</sup> is not

threatened by Inès, nor does she wish her any ill will. On the contrary, it appears that her motives are benevolent, and even appear to approximate an Irigarayan ideal when she invites Inès to come with her to Spain:

Vous ferez partie de ma maison. Vous ne serez pas en sûreté tant que vous serez au Portugal. Mais, dès l'instant que je vous prends sous mon manteau, le Roi n'osera pas vous toucher [...] Mais il faut voir ce qui importe pour vous, si c'est le Mondego, ou si c'est d'être vivante. Suivez-moi donc en Navarre, et attendez. Ou le Roi mourra, et vous reviendrez et régnerez. Ou le Roi fera périr son fils.... (95)

Similarly, the Infante seems to be a proponent of Irigaray's argument for feminine space, and its security, declaring:

Ce n'est pas don Pedro, c'est vous que je veux sauver. Venez à Pampelune. Pampelune est comme la cour intérieure d'une citadelle, encaissée entre de hautes montagnes: et il y a mon âme, alentour, qui va de hauteur en hauteur, qui veille [...] La main du Roi ne pourra pas atteindre, par-dessus ces montagnes. Venez à Pampelune, même si ma cour est pour vous sans attrait. La sensation d'être en sécurité donnerait du charme à n'importe quel lieu, et vous retrouverez votre âme avec votre sécurité. (102)

As we can see, these statements indicate that the Infante's main interest lies with Inès, not with Pedro ("Ce n'est pas don Pedro, c'est vous que je veux sauver"). Secondly, she is offering protection to Inès ("dès l'instant que je vous prends sous mon manteau, le Roi n'osera pas vous toucher [...]") and "La main du Roi ne pourra pas atteindre"). Moreover, it would seem that following the Infante to this "monde entre-femmes" might allow Inès to eventually achieve some power of her own ("Suivez-moi

donc en Navarre, et attendez. Ou le Roi mourra, et vous reviendrez et régnerez").

Unfortunately, Inès does not listen to the Infante's suggestions. Citing her love for Pedro, Inès reminds us of Antigone, who refuses to pay heed to her sister Ismene's pleas, and, as mentioned earlier, the king has her killed. Throughout the play Ferrante has shown signs of deterioration, but the weight and guilt of this decision takes its toll, and he too dies soon after Inès. At the end of the play, we see his son Pedro remove the crown from his father's head, and place it on Inès belly (149).

One might surmise in light of Irigaray's arguments in favor of "un monde entre femmes," that if Inès had taken the Infante up on her offer, she might have avoided her untimely demise. Instead, by remaining alone against the patriarchal order, she allowed herself to be vulnerable, and as a result, an easy (sacrificial) victim. One cannot help but wonder if, when Montherlant wrote this play during the mid-twentieth century, he was not himself an unconscious proponent of a new order, a "*monde entre-elles*," headed by the vital young Infante, to replace the old one (represented by the moribund Ferrante). At the very least, Montherlant appears to have been drawn to "homosocial" orders and groups, particularly if we fast-forward to some of his later works (i.e. the male world of *La Ville dont le prince est un enfant*, and the female religious hierarchy of Port-Royal).<sup>10</sup> This *monde entre-elles* might have been an interesting alternative to patriarchy, as well as an option for women to combat violence—symbolic or otherwise—so that instead of being queens only after death (*des reines mortes*), they could be actual queens (*des reines vivantes*).





## NOTES

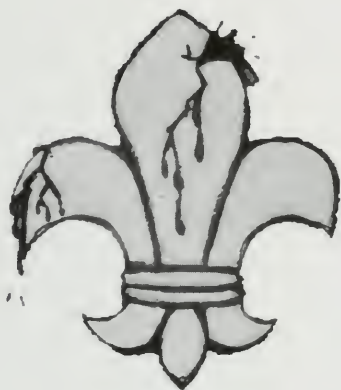
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- <sup>1</sup> Leo Weinstein, *The Subversive Tradition in French Literature, Volume II: 1870-1971* (Boston: Twayne, 1989):109-110.
- <sup>2</sup> Nicole Debrie-Panel, *Montherlant: L'Art et l'amour* (Lyon: Emmanuel Vitte, 1960): 85.
- <sup>3</sup> John Batchelor, *Existence and Imagination: The Theatre of Henry de Montherlant*. (St. Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland, 1967) :142, 98, 104.
- <sup>4</sup> Debrie-Panel, 86.
- <sup>5</sup> Thomas Bulfinch, *Bulfinch's Mythology*, ed. Richard P. Martin (New York: Harper Collins, 1991): 164-165.
- <sup>6</sup> Henry de Montherlant, *La Reine Morte* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988): 28. All subsequent citations from Montherlant's *La Reine Morte* come from this edition, and page numbers will be indicated in quotations.
- <sup>7</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Le Temps de la différence* (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1989): 23.
- <sup>8</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris: Minuit, 1984): 159.
- <sup>9</sup> Gisèle Féal, *La Mythologie matriarcale chez Claudel, Montherlant, Crommelynck, Ionesco et Genet* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993): 75. According to Féal, "[l]'Infante est chez Vélez une femme adulte, amoureuse de Pedro; à tel point que le drame apparaît parfois comme le duel de deux femmes. Montherlant, en faisant de l'Infante une toute jeune fille dédaigneuse de l'homme et disposée à protéger Inès, innocente totalement le personnage."
- <sup>10</sup> Pierre Danger, "L'Exile et le royaume: Le thème de l'exclusion dans le théâtre de Montherlant." *La Licorne* 7 (1983): 92-95.

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*The Poetics of Violence in French Literature and Society*



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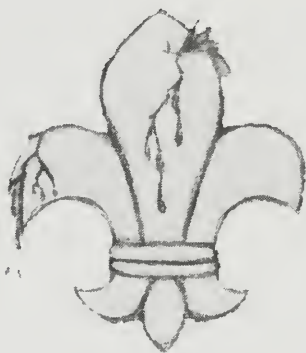
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*Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de  
rechercher si, par hasard, se trouvait ici  
l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.*

Rabelais,  
*Le Quart Livre*

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