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Frances Nesbitt Oppel. Nietzsche on Gender: Beyond Man and Woman

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Frances Nesbitt Oppel. *Nietzsche on Gender: Beyond Man and Woman*.
Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005. 221 pp. Hardcover: ISBN 0-8139-2319-0 $49.50; Paperback: ISBN 0-8139-2320-4 $18.50.

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Frances Nesbitt Oppel's *Nietzsche on Gender: Beyond Man and Woman* is a voyage into the discursive space between the dichotomies woman/man, women/men, female/male, and feminine/masculine. This haunting caesura to which Oppel refers is a place where her literary talents truly shine, especially in her efforts to help us re-imagine Nietzsche's metaphors in a manner that is more consistent with contemporary feminist philosophy. As Oppel discredits worn-out metaphors, she recasts them in way that is new and invigorating. What is more, she not only analyzes each of Nietzsche's texts but also listens to their tone.

Oppel makes the argument that Nietzsche's parodic style employs metaphors that produce an ironical reversal of meanings. One sentence in Nietzsche's aphorism 363 is enough to make this point: "For love, thought of in its entirety as great and full, is nature, and being nature it is in all eternity something 'immoral'" (*The Gay Science*). Oppel explains that the social-conforming speaker submits willingly to nature's inevitable triumph over culture. For Nietzsche, such passive acceptance of social conventions regarding love is immoral. These conventions, according to Nietzsche and Oppel, clandestinely produce what we come to think of as "natural" gender differences between women and men, while at the same time they conceal insupportable prejudices that lead to injustice.

Although the idea that it is "natural" for a woman to desire to be possessed by a man is immoral in Nietzsche's view, just why this idea is immoral is left up to readers. Concerned that her readers might miss Nietzsche's speaker's punch line, Oppel paraphrases the aphorism as "We humans would like to be moral, but love is nature, and nature is immoral—and that, folks, is the way it is." Say it, and it is so. Here Oppel hopes to spotlight an instance of classic Nietzschean reversal of meaning and takes Nietzsche's ironic "endorsement" of the idea as his final position. Instead of the meaning of the words themselves, it is the aphorism's overall tone that directs the readers to question the speaker's integrity. Then, as if unsure of her thinking, she asks herself whether the speaker's position on the subject is Nietzsche's final word. She wonders if her own rejection of the speaker's argument is the product of her own proclivities. Believing that the text actually conspires with her inclinations, Oppel concludes that aphorism 363 is a convincing example of Nietzsche's deployment of overstatement to make a point. She claims that the aphorism is "full of internal contradictions and pointed repetitions" of particular words and phrases, such as "this natural opposition" and "antagonism." This sort of rhetoric is enough to cause her to question the straightforwardness of Nietzsche's speaker, who also argues that woman's "faithfulness" in love is sustained only by man's perpetual state of desire. According to this stubborn speaker, the possibility that a man might entirely devote himself to a woman is "illogical"—in such a case, a man would not be a man but rather a slave. We are to understand from this speaker that woman can love only as a slave would and only in this way can she achieve womanly perfection.

Nietzsche wants readers to see the immorality of blindly following this conformist's sexism. Oppel's strategy works well here and makes a significant contribution to a fresh reading of Nietzsche's texts and of this passage in particular.

Surprisingly, what Oppel neglects to discuss is the title of the work in which the aphorism appears. In the "Translator's Introduction" of *The Gay Science*, Walter Kaufmann mentions that Nietzsche specifically chose the term "gay" (Ger. *fröhlich*, which means "joyous" or "merry," and which did not connote homosexuality in the nineteenth century) to suggest "a light-hearted defiance of [social] convention," morality and values. Why Oppel overlooks this obvious point in a book on gender we can only guess. Perhaps like Nietzsche, whose aphorisms are purposely written in such a way that they are left to our interpretation, Oppel intends for to us to speculate on her curious omission. This would be giving her the benefit of the doubt, since her style is never Nietzschean. The strategy of leaving conclusions up to readers, however, may better suit Nietzsche's oeuvre than Oppel's *Nietzsche on Gender*.

Although Oppel shows us how to interrogate our beliefs about gender, sex, and religion, she fails to address in any serious way the misuse of Nietzsche's ideas by the Nazis during World War II. She ought to have done more than merely imply that we need to recognize that our values are culturally relative and historically contingent; she should have clarified that as pragmatic and moral as they may appear at the time, our values can turn out to be preposterous and unjust. Even recent work by scholars such as Oliver Kelly, Anne G. Sabo, Luce Irigaray, Debra B. Bergoffen, Jacques Derrida, and Sarah Kofman, as well as Oppel herself, do not answer certain nagging questions related to the problem of moral contingency. Among these questions are: What can we learn from the historical misuses of Nietzsche's ironic strategy? To what degree are we accountable for propagating some of the ideas that have been associated with heinous war crimes like those perpetrated by the SS during World War II? How do we prevent such egregious wrongdoings in the future? In addition to joining the ranks of feminists and academics in re-tooling clichéd metaphors, we might also ask how our research could benefit the most disadvantaged. One response Oppel could make is that by aiding her readers to reconsider Nietzschean irony, her book does address the misappropriation of his ideas. On this count she is correct; my point is only that she needs to go beyond mere suggestion and make her point more explicit.

Understandably, to expect *Nietzsche on Gender* to answer all these questions is unrealistic. Under Oppel's guidance, we can at least work more confidently in conceiving a space "beyond 'man' and 'woman'" by revisiting Nietzsche's works. She is an able guide who inspires us to question to what ends we blindly continue to exploit certain words, phrases, and metaphors. Oppel ends her useful, but somewhat frustrating book, on a hopeful note that going beyond gender difference is not as threatening as we might think, and that the greater threat is failing to imagine beyond gender difference.