

January 27, 2004

Historicizing the Body: Aspasia and Diotima

Plato, *Menexenus*

Xin Lu Gale, "Historical Studies and Postmodernism"

Cheryl Glenn, "Truth, Lies, and Method"

Susan Jarratt, "Rhetoric and Feminism"

Plato, *Symposium*

Luce Irigaray, "Sorcerer Love"

Andrea Nye, "Irigaray and Diotima at Plato's Symposium"

Jan Swearingen, "A Lover's Discourse"

Greek Timeline—

Gorgias (483-376 BCE)

Pericles (494-429 BCE)

Socrates (470-399 BCE)

Plato (427 BC - 347 BCE)

Menexenus—considered one of the earlier dialogues

Symposium—considered one of the middle dialogues

believes transcendental truth exists and is accessible to humans; we recognize it because we knew it before birth when our souls were with the Divine.

Aspasia of Miletus (b. 490 BCE)

Miletus was a far-eastern Greek subject-ally (in what is now Turkey), very cultivated and philosophically renowned. Aspasia comes to Greece from Athens, and therefore, she is considered an outsider, a foreigner (a non-Athenian, citizen class Greek). She was also very well-educated, which was unusual for classical Greek women. Aspasia was linked with Pericles, an aristocratic democrat, who was really one of the founding proponents of Athenian democracy (they became companions around 451 BCE). Because of her association with him (he left his wife and two children), Aspasia was often called a *hetaera*, or courtesan.

During Aspasia's time, "the construction of gender ensured that women would be praised only for such attributes as their inherent modesty, their inborn reluctance to join males (even kinsmen) for society or dining, and their absolute incapacity to participate as educated beings within the polis; at a time when a woman's only political contribution was serving as a nameless channel for the transmission of citizenship from her father to her son (Keuls 90); and at a time when Pericles announced that "the greatest glory of a woman is to be least talked about by men whether they are praising or criticizing (Thucydides 5.46.2)" (Glenn 38)

Diotima of Mantinea ("Zeus worshipper from Prophetville" or "god-honoring")

A priestess-philosopher who only appears in one text: the *Symposium*. Another foreigner woman; both Aspasia and Diotima were, like the sophists, foreign born.

Mutilating the Body

In 415 BCE, right before the Greeks attacked Sicily, the mutilation of the herms occurred (All of the herms were castrated throughout the city).

Swearingen

She connects Diotima with ancient female-oriented religious rites (Sumerian priestesses such as Enheduanna 2285-2250 B.C.E. in "The Exhaltation of Innana"). Diotima is a link between those ancient women-centric rites and Ancient Greece.

Next to Swearingen's connections, Nye attempts to argue that Irigaray's reading of Diotima is false because she cannot apply psychoanalytic and/or deconstructivist tactics to the figure.

Questions—

Why debate whether Aspasia was a historical figure? What is to be gained from the debate between Gale and Glenn/Jarratt?

What ideas about the body emerge from Plato's dialogues? From the secondary texts on those dialogues?

What can we learn from both Aspasia's and Diotima's rhetorical styles?

What does it mean that these women were foreigners?

How does each rhetor, in the *Symposium*, engender love?

According to Plato's dialogues, can women be beautiful and virtuous at the same time? (see article on Plato in Fem theory and body)

Do we see these ideas about the body in contemporary world cultures?