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ABSTRACT

Because canon formation directly influences curriculum construction, classical Greek rhetorical studies must make an assessment of how women's presence in these historical discourses has been at best marginalized, at worst erased. The structural oppression of women as a class and the institution of slavery need to be included in school curricula as standard issues. Representations of Diotima, Socrates' teacher, as a mythical figure constitute a case in point. Mary Ellen Waithe's work on Diotima argues that Diotima is an historical person and thus counters standard scholarship which excludes women thinkers from the canon of philosophical discourse. Both Waithe's article and Plato's "Symposium" should be included in classical rhetoric seminars in a way that places Diotima on the same plane as Socrates. Reader response theory, which posits that the act of understanding meaning in texts is affected by the predisposition of the reading mind, supports this demand for a revision of curricula. The erasure, marginalization, and ridiculing of a figure such as Diotima can be seen as a historical disempowerment of women as readers, writers, and speakers. Training in the history and production of discourse must explore the relationship between language and power in a way that allows women students to see themselves in the texts they study. (Contains 16 references.) (SAM)

Kathleen Ethel Welch

Paper presented at the 1992 Speech Communication Association. "Excavating Diotima: Rehistoricizing Pre-Aristotelian Classical Rhetoric." For the Panel "Representations of Woman/Women and the History of Rhetoric: Classical Rhetorical Theory and Practice," Chicago.

Any revision in the canon of classical rhetoric must be driven by theoretical changes in text construction and by an understanding of the discursive practices of the disciplines that mobilize these texts and constructions. These theories and disciplinary practices perpetuate ways of reading and, more importantly, ways of writing and speaking (that is, the production of discourse). It is not sufficient merely to add texts and writers, to expand a list of important writers and their texts. Rather, the new texts and constructions must be made self consciously and must be done so by including accounts of the previous constructions. John Guillory has written that "The problem of the canon is a problem of syllabus and curriculum, the institutional forms by which works are preserved as great works." (240, "Canon," Critical Terms for Literary Study). The problems of syllabus and curriculum are central for reconstructing classical Greek rhetoric so that it accounts for structures of power that excluded women in ancient

Greece and for accounting for the ways that female and male readers now interpret written texts and textualize the central ideas that are classical Greek rhetoric.

An important example of this kind of project has taken place with recent work on the Sophists. Publications by C. Jan Swearingen, Sharon Crowley, John Poulakos, Takis Poulakos, Edward Schiappa, Susan Jarratt, Jasper Neel, and others have provided new means of interpretation for this era so important in western versions of the histories of ideas and particularly for histories of rhetoric. The dialogue/dialectic/strife/reexamination conducted by these critics has enabled the Sophists not only to enter the canon of classical rhetoric texts in primary ways (as opposed to secondary ways or as the obligatory preface to the real material of Plato and Aristotle) but has resulted in the reconstruction of Greek classical rhetoric itself, and, just as importantly, an examination of the bases of traditional constructions of classical Greek rhetoric. This work on the Sophists is vital, but more interpretations on individual ones are needed, as Schiappa has argued, including their ideologies and the histories of their individual receptions and how these histories have been made to change. This work is now taking place with a stimulating amount of disagreement. One way of gauging the success of this movement will be to see how institutionalized the new work on the Sophists will be. The weight of Aristotelian-dominant classical rhetoric continues to be a burden.

In the same way that the Sophists are being incorporated into

standard publications and seminars, the historicizing of classical Greek rhetoric can take more elaborate account of how ordinary women operated and were operated on. Just as importantly, this material must be conveyed in course work and needs to become part of ordinary knowledge as well. In other words, it needs to exist outside the confines of particular subdisciplines. In a second move, classical Greek rhetorical studies must take more elaborate account of how representations of women have been presented as mythical and so not as important, an issue I will elaborate on below. In a third move, the structural oppression of women as a class and the institution of slavery need to become centerpieces of the study of classical Greek rhetoric and not merely as withered "additions." These additions too easily appear as afterthoughts. Eva C. Keuls has advanced this project substantially with The Reign of the Phallus: Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens, as have other feminist scholars. We have a problem now with the institutionalizing of these issues, in other words, with working them into school curricula and syllabi as standard issues.

A useful example of the second move mentioned above is the strange case of Diotima, Socrates' teacher. Where is Diotima now in the canon of classical rhetoric? She is almost not even marginalized. She is frequently dismissed as a "legendary" person or perhaps a superhuman person (in other words, not like any ordinary women) and made to be a character made up by Plato the writer who persistently constructed his characters from historical people. I want to suggest three ways to rethink Diotima as she is

deployed in the disciplines of communication, English, and classics. (In each of these disciplines, she will be appropriated in different ways; however, there will be some overlap as well). 1) the basic scholarly apparatus on Diotima needs to be improved. The Oxford Classical Dictionary provides a standard example of the current reference problem. In five lines on Diotima, an unsigned writer mentions in three lines and in four ways that she is not "real." This writer assumes a no-nothing stance encased in the appearance of objectivity. The best apparatus I am aware of is Mary Ellen Waithe's entry "Diotima of Mantinea" in A History of Women Philosophers Volume 1, Ancient Women Philosophers, 600 B.C.-500 A.D., published in 1987. In this important article, Waithe promotes the idea that Diotima is a historical person, partly because of Waithe's project to reinscribe the history of women in philosophy. In making her argument, Waithe supplies rhetorical studies with ample material, as C. Jan Swearingen has pointed out; Waithe shows us ways to compensate for standard references such as the OCD that marinalize or erace women thinkers and do so as if it were normal, natural, and inevitable, or as a part of physis and not nomos. In the area of the available scholarly apparatus, then, some basic work on rewriting needs to be done. The Encyclopedia of Rhetoric, to be published by Garland Press, promises to take care of a number of these problems by recognizing the centrality of women and feminism in rhetorical studies. In other words, the physis of this situation has been restructured.

2) Another move that I suggest is the inclusion of the

Symposium in classical rhetoric seminars in a way that places Diotima on the same plane as Socrates. After all, we have nothing of Socrates from himself; we have Plato's version primarily (although not exclusively). We have, then, Plato's Diotima just as much as we have Plato's Socrates. We can position Diotima in a way that privileges her work. The issue of whether or not she is a historical person becomes then another issue for discussion. In other words, Diotima may be retextualized so as to be more central. Since the Symposium is partly a companion piece for the Phaedrus, its inclusion would not be difficult to accomplish.

3) The third move that I suggest is that Waithe's article on Diotima be included with the study of Diotima in the Symposium. This study would highlight the interpetive problems that are associated with studying her work and with the ways that it has been appropriated.

I will include the second and third strategies in a classical rhetoric seminar in 1993. We will read not only Symposium (along with Gorgias, Phaedrus, and the seventh letter), we will highlight Diotima as a central figure and will include Waithe's article as a way of looking at the reception Diotima has received, particularly Renaissance constructions of her as a mythologized character created with no historical correspondence at all. The issues raised by Waithe that can be usefully appropriated by students of classical rhetoric include:

1) the importance of establishing Diotima's historicity. While, as I have mentioned, it is important to Waithe's argument

that Diotima be regarded as a historical person, that importance does not hold for classical rhetorical studies. What does matter is her being positioned as an important construction. We in rhetoric can bypass the issue of historicity, after acknowledging it, to say that in this central dialogue of Plato there is a construction of not just a female teacher but a female teacher who resides on a pedagogical hierarchy higher than does the revered Socrates himself. This positioning is extraordinary and should be studied as a rhetorical issue. What are her rhetorical strategies? How does she deploy language as an issue in power?

2) Waithe's examination of much of the reception of Diotima is itself an important lesson on how reception in various historical eras creates "truths" that subsequently take on historical reality. One question that arises subtextually in Waithe's treatment is the question of dismissing Diotima because she is a woman but using the pretext that she is nonhistorical, fantastic, legendary, and so on. Waithe conducts a meta-analysis of standard appropriations of Diotima; her way of conducting that analysis is a useful one for students to follow, whether or not her conclusions are accepted.

In the final section of this paper, I want to redirect these issues of hierarchy, history, and gender to the daily issue of working with our students, all of whom live and study, as do we, in gendered worlds. One useful way of treating this problem is by appropriating some issues of reader response theory from the discipline of English to take account of some frequently-unseen

problems in the study of classical rhetoric. While much of this theory is written for responses to literary texts in the standard sense -- extraordinary written language as opposed to ordinary written language, or written language that contains some hard-to-define aura of the special -- some of the tenets worked out there can be applied to texts of classical rhetoric, including the Symposium. Nan Johnson describes it this way in a Rhetoric Review article: a "basic assumption of reader-response criticism" is "the premise that the act of understanding of the meaning of textual features is affected by the predisposition of the reading mind" (152-153). Johnson works as well on the theory of Louise Rosenblatt, one of the earliest reader-response theorists, who first published her work on this topic in 1939. (A particular irony resides in the fact that much reader-response theory eraces Louise Rosenblatt's contribution to this material in favor of male critics.) We need to teach our students that "the predisposition of the reading mind" (Johnson 152-153) must now include questions of gender and the erasure of women, whether they are historical, fantastic, ordinary, or anything else. In other words, the universalized reader -- the white, male, middle class, bookish decoder whose values, ideologies, and desires underlie many of the assumptions of standard readings -- needs to be elaborated on. One elaboration is how various groups of late twentieth-century readers of texts such as the Symposium are treating exclusions of women. The recognition of the instability of texts should help in placing women within the intersubjectivities of interpretation and

not as favored bystanders.

If the text is not a monolithic object that contains transmissable knowledge but is part of what some response theorists term transaction or transformation, and if women sometimes (but not all the time) comprise particular discourse communities that differ from the interpretive communities of men, then those communities need to be appropriated more fully in classes on historical rhetoric. In this way, the erasure or marginalizing or even the ridiculing of a figure such as Diotima can come to be seen as an historical way of reading that worked to disempower women as readers, writers, and speakers. It is crucial that women readers see themselves in the texts they study, and it is crucial that they and male students be taught ways to recognize and account for erasures. However, this move alone is not adequate. The relationship of language and power that governed classical rhetoric needs to replace the model of study that privileges interpretation that does not lead to anything. As Jane Tompkins points out in "The Reader in History," ancient language linked "language with power" (203) and action; we link it in the twentieth century with interpretation, or a search for meaning. This stance is one of the things that is wrong with the discipline of English. It has privileged interpretation (in reader-response theory two of the favored words are "transaction" and "transformation") and it stops there, as if interpretation will automatically lead to a different interaction with the world. This stance is one of the reasons that English studies so frequently continue to be comprised of courses

in having transformations that do not affect material reality. As Tompkins puts it, the reader-response preoccupation with "meaning" makes them as formalist as the critics they sought to depose, the New Critics who found "meaning" in texts and not in readers. She argues that reader-response theorists -- including Norman Holland, David Bleich, Wolfgang Iser, and Stanley Fish -- remain committed to "meaning" and so work from the same assumptions as the formalists.

The move that needs to be made is to use the techniques of theories such as those found in reader response writers and to move back to the classical rhetorical emphasis on language as power out in the world and language as activity. In the first half (the transformation half), Norman Holland, quoted by Johnson, states: "All of us, as we read, use the literary work to symbolize and finally to replicate ourselves. . .We interact with the work, making it part of our own psychic economy and making ourselves part of the literary work as we interpret it." (p. 154 Johnson, quoting Holland in "A Transactive Account of Transactive Criticism," 1978). In this half, repositioning Diotima to become more important and making Waithe's intepretation more accessible can follow Holland's account. These moves will enable women students of rhetoric to "symbolize" and to "replicate" themselves, making it an aspect of our "psychic economy." But that move is not enough. The next aspect, the issue so important in classical rhetoric, is to link language with power and action. The beginning of that power and action lies in the production of discourse. Articulation --

particularly in writing and in speaking -- is the central issue here. The problem with all the reader response theorists -- with the prominent exception of Bleich -- and with other theoretical groups in English -- is that they do not account for the production of discourse. The writing of standard academic essays and -- if the students are fortunate -- speaking in class discussions are very limited kinds of production of discourse. This production is not adequate. The students need more opportunities for the production of discourse and training in how to make it effective. The topic of the trivialization and erasure of specific women (whether historical constructions or wholly fictional constructions) is one that we need to address in classical rhetoric seminars and at the undergraduate level as well. It is, simply, a topic that can no longer be suppressed. The case of Diotima provides rich resources for understanding the operations of classical rhetoric and for better enabling our students to understand the centrality of action and power in language and its remarkable suppression in the twentieth century.

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