

Diotima's Eros

How Eros is connected to femininity and female language through
Diotima's presentation of his character

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INTRODUCTION

Plato's *Symposium* is set in 416 BCE in the house of Agathon, who decides in celebration of his first victory at a tragic competition to throw a party.¹ During the course of the evening one member of the group, Eryximachus, proposes that they discuss the nature of Eros.² The group proceeds to go around the room, each member of the party attempting to “ἔπαινον Ἐρωτος ἐπὶ δεξιᾷ ὡς ἂν δύνηται κάλλιστον,” “praise Eros as beautifully as he is able.”³ Seven men are recorded each giving a speech eulogizing Love, or Eros. Socrates' speech, the sixth, is different than the others because he is not actually giving his own interpretation of who Eros is and what the role of Eros might have in an intellectual life. Socrates instead recounts a lesson that he received from a woman named Diotima prior to the gathering. She is educated in the nature of Eros.⁴ Diotima is likely a fictional character whom Plato created in order to present this particular version of Eros. In making this character a woman, Plato shows the importance of a feminine perspective necessary in order to understand the nature of Eros. Socrates imitates the lesson that he received from Diotima in its structure and content rather than attempting to change it to make it more personal to himself. He, unlike the other partygoers, does not try and form a novel idea about Eros.

The informal nature of the *Symposium* allows each of the individuals to vocalize personal versions of Eros without any political or social consequences. The party unfolds throughout the evening organically, without any planning ahead of who the participants would be, or of the subject of discussion at the party. Socrates invites Aristodemus to the party as he is walking to Agathon's

¹ Gill, 1999, xvii

² Plato, *Symposium*, 177 b-d

³ Plato, *Symposium*, 177 d

⁴ Plato, *Symposium*, 201 d

house. “ἀλλὰ σύ, ἦ δ’ ὅς, πῶς ἔχεις πρὸς τὸ ἐθέλειν ἂν ἰέναι ἄκλητος ἐπὶ δείπνον; / κἀγώ, ἔφη, εἶπον ὅτι οὕτως ὅπως ἂν σὺ κελεύης.” “‘But now tell me,’ he said, ‘but how would you be willing to go unbidden to the meal?’ ‘Indeed,’ he (Aristodemus) said, ‘I would be willing to do anything that you ask.’⁵” Because the party is informal and the subject of discussion is brought up spontaneously, it does not appear that any of the speakers would have had an opportunity to plan ahead or prepare what their speech might be. “συνδοκεῖ καὶ ὑμῖν, γένοιτ’ ἂν ἡμῖν ἐν λόγοις ἰκανὴ διατριβή: δοκεῖ γάρ μοι χρῆναι ἕκαστον ἡμῶν λόγον εἰπεῖν ἔπαινον Ἔρωτος ἐπὶ δεξιᾷ ὡς ἂν δύνηται κάλλιστον” “And if in fact this seems to you also to be good, we indeed might pass the time in discourse. For it is my opinion for each of us to make a speech in turn praising Eros as beautifully as he can.”⁶ The lack of planning makes the different versions of Eros each presents closer to the identity of the individual presenting than a prepared speech might have allowed.

Throughout the rest of this paper, I look into the nature of Eros that Diotima presents, and discuss how this particular version of Eros is dependent on Diotima’s femininity. Diotima’s identity as a woman allows this version of Eros to embody ideas normally reserved for women through female language and metaphor. I attempt to understand Diotima’s femininity as it stands in contrast to the rest of the men in the party, and also as she functions in her role of a nurturing figure and teacher in the context of her lessons on Eros. Rather than comparing Diotima’s Eros to that of the other men, I look at the identity of Eros in conjunction with Diotima’s identity as a feminine voice in a male dominated discussion. I look at aspects of her language and process that I define as inherently feminine, and how these characteristics of her language stand in contrast to

⁵ Plato, *Symposium*, 174 a-b

⁶ Plato, *Symposium*, 177 d

male thought process and use of language within the text. To accomplish this, I look into Plato's understanding of Eros and the feminine through his portrayal of Diotima's identity and her understanding of Eros.

Location and spheres of power

Plato seems to have specifically chosen to make the location of the party, as well as the purpose for the gathering, an informal one. If Socrates had given his same speech in a more political, public setting, it might not have had the same power as it has in the private, intimate setting of the *Symposium*. Plato's attempt to make his writing accessible to his audience becomes tricky with the introduction of a female voice because of the limited exposure women had in public spaces in ancient Athens. Like Diotima has Socrates as a companion and mouthpiece, other women recorded in history are few and are usually accompanied by a male counterpart who backs up their opinions with his own. Aspasia and Pericles are an example of a well-known female intellectual and male counterpart in Ancient Athens. She was a courtesan-tutor figure whom Pericles associated himself with because of her in politics as well as rhetoric and oratory practices. Plutarch remarks "Aspasia, as some say, was held in high favour by Pericles because of her rare political wisdom."⁷ Like Diotima, she is a liminal figure in society whose opinions on politics and foreign relations are known but who does not have any power as a citizen within Athenian society. Because of this, her views and advice were important, but could only be enacted by a male political figure. Other thinkers besides Pericles, Socrates included, were known to have ties with Aspasia. Plutarch records that "Socrates sometimes came to see her with his disciples."⁸ But it was not just philosophers who sought her wisdom. Politicians and military leaders also regarded her with

⁷ Plutarch, *Pericles*, 24.4

⁸ Plutarch, *Pericles*, 24.4

admiration. “She managed as she pleased the foremost men of the state, and afforded the philosophers occasion to discuss her in exalted terms and at great length.”⁹ Her influence over powerful men shows that while her knowledge extended to many different aspects of society; she was unable to act upon her ideas and instead took the role of advisor to powerful men.

In ancient Athens, the domain of women was within the private parts of the home. They did not have a role in the public political or social scene of Athens, but they did preside over different cultural events such as initiation or birth rituals, death rituals and childhood. Matters involving political or philosophical thought were normally reserved for men in social settings, and women were not normally allowed to participate in this kind of activity. “By ancient Greek standards, it is surprising to find a woman adopting a position of authoritative wisdom.”¹⁰ The language that is used to talk about the two sexes remains divided because of this fact. By “adopting a position of authoritative wisdom,” Diotima creates the possibility for female language to be used in a philosophic context. Birth and death language have no place within a courtroom, a male space, while philosophical thought and ideas of virtue have no place in the private parts of the home, a female space. Plato, in the *Symposium*, attempts to break-down these boundaries between the male and the female in a way that would not immediately dismissed as outrageous and taken seriously by an ancient Athenian audience. The fact that Diotima is not actually at the party shows that Plato understood that the presence of an intelligent, outspoken woman would still not be appropriate at the party, but the fact that her ideas are present, and she is given credit, shows that Plato believed the conversation needed balance from all the male-authored versions of Eros.

⁹ Plutarch, *Pericles*, 24.1

¹⁰ Gill, 1999, xxix

Diotima's female voice also shows that Plato acknowledges that the feminine language required to present and comprehend this particular version of Eros has more meaning and power when coming from a woman rather than a man. However, Diotima is not an ordinary woman. Plato makes her out to be a figure capable of staving off a plague in Athens for 10 years through her wisdom.¹¹ Gill acknowledges her as a "priestess or prophetess"¹² which shows that she is more educated than the average woman in ancient Athens and somehow different from other women in her spiritual role. This 'otherness' and intelligence are qualities that allow her opinions and decrees to be taken seriously by the community at large, as Athens did when she helped them keep the plague at bay for a decade. While Diotima's voice was present at the party through Socrates, her inherent identity as a woman, albeit a powerful woman, would still not have been tolerated at an intellectual discussion in a location, and in a context that men presided over.

SOCRATES AND HIS SPEECH

Character of Socrates

Socrates' character that Plato presents never claims to be wise. Instead he claims to constantly be gaining lessons from others and in learning from experts in their fields, he gains a deeper understanding of various subjects.¹³ If he were to start from scratch with every subject he chooses to pursue, he would never learn the core lessons or truths of different crafts. He simply gains those truths and lessons from the masters themselves rather than learning them on his own. In his recounting the experience he had with Diotima, he does not claim this lesson of Eros as his own.

¹¹ Plato, *Symposium*, 201 d

¹² Gill, 1999, xvii

¹³ Plato, *Apology*, 21d

καὶ σήμεν γε ἤδη ἐάσω: τὸν δὲ λόγον τὸν περὶ τοῦ Ἔρωτος, ὃν ποτ' ἤκουσα γυναικὸς Μαντινικῆς Διοτίμας, ἣ ταῦτά τε σοφὴ ἦν καὶ ἄλλα πολλά... ὄνοῦν ἐκείνη ἔλεγε λόγον, πειράσομαι ὑμῖν διελθεῖν.

I shall try to go through for you the speech about Love I once heard from a woman of Mantinea, Diotima – a woman who was wise about many things besides this... She was the one who taught me the art of love, and I shall go through her speech as best I can on my own.¹⁴

He acknowledges that this version of Eros is from Diotima and that he is merely the messenger of her lessons. Evans views Diotima as a kind of spiritual figure as well. “Diotima is a sort of mystagogue, one who initiates individuals into her Mysteries and who mediates to humans information about the divine.”¹⁵ Evans brings up the idea of Diotima as a figure who initiates others into a deeper understanding of the divine. Her role as initiator can be viewed as a mediator between others, and therefore can be viewed as similar to Eros as he plays the role of mediator between humans and the gods. “The annual Mysteries celebrated at Eleusis draw from the experiences of women in a male-dominated society, and Plato knew that these rituals were an integral and familiar part of Athenian civic and popular religious practice.”¹⁶ By giving Diotima power as a mystic or prophet, Plato adheres to the preexisting cultural norms of Athenian society and places her in an appropriate context with the rest of the group. Plato validates Diotima’s teaching method as an integral part of initiating others into this form of Eros when Socrates uses the same techniques to teach others that Diotima used to teach him in the first place. “δοκεῖ οὖν μοι ῥᾶστον εἶναι οὕτω διελθεῖν, ὥς ποτέ με ἡ ξένη ἀνακρίνουσα διήκει.” “I think it seems to be easier for me to go through in this way, the same way that the foreign woman (Diotima) questioned me (around).¹⁷” Socrates does not change the structure of the lesson or the language

¹⁴ Plato, *Symposium*, 201 d

¹⁵ Evans, 2006, 2

¹⁶ Evans, 2006, 2

¹⁷ Plato, *Symposium*, 201 e

that Diotima first used when teaching him. By not changing the structure of her lesson, Plato shows that Socrates' version of Eros is inherently tied to the kind of thinking that has to occur and the kind of language that had to be used when Diotima first spoke with Socrates.

Structure of Socrates' speech

The speeches, their focus and their structure, reflect the identity of the individual giving them, and therefore we can assume that the questioning in which Socrates engages Agathon at the beginning of his speech is appropriate to the private setting of the party and important in understanding the version of Eros he talk about. By involving another person, Agathon, in his version of Eros through dialogue, Socrates makes his endeavor to help Agathon understand Eros a mutual effort between himself and Agathon. While Socrates remains in control of the line of questioning at all times, in order to teach a particular lesson, Agathon must be involved in the discovery of Eros. He is able to then integrate the newfound version of Eros that is realized at the end of Socrates' lesson into his own understanding of Eros and of how Eros participates in the world that he lives in.

The way that Socrates teaches his and Diotima's version of Eros allows the lesson to be universal not only because of the nature of Eros, but also because of the way that the lesson is taught. Socrates first had this discussion with Diotima, and he was then able to take that lesson and transfer it to Agathon. The lesson was not reliant on the dynamic between Diotima and Socrates, because Socrates was able to take on the role of teacher previously filled by Diotima and discuss the same topic with an entirely different person. This shows that the lesson of Eros can be taught to or by anyone, making Eros a universal archetype and the process of dialogue appropriate for anyone. By having first Diotima and then Socrates in the role of teacher, Plato shows that the

gender of teacher and student is irrelevant to a lesson if the lesson in question is in the form of a dialogue between a teacher and a student.

Diotima immediately takes on the role of authority figure over Socrates in her lesson that is maternal in nature by maintaining a nurturing and constructive presence throughout her speech. We see through Socrates imitation of her questioning process with Agathon, in that she allows Socrates to start to form his own opinions while also asking him to prove his opinions as true every step of the way. ἔτι τοίνυν, εἰπεῖν τὸν Σωκράτη, ἀπόκριναι ὀλίγα πλείω, ἵνα μᾶλλον καταμάθῃς ὃ βούλομαι. “Therefore, said Socrates, give me (set aside) a few more small things (answers) in order that you may better examine these things¹⁸.” Socrates attempts to set baseline truths with Agathon so that they may continue their discussion with some mutually accepted facts to build their discussion on while continuing to control the conversation at all times. Diotima questions Socrates in a similar way in order to set the parameters for her lesson while also remaining in control. She makes him question the preexisting ideas that he had and asks him to look for the truth rather than superficial assessment, even if it means moving away from the notions he had before his encounter with her. She asks him to evolve his ideas to fit a world that relies on truth and consistent claims. Some of the things that Socrates initially claimed to be true about the nature of Eros¹⁹ Diotima immediately calls into question because of their contradictory nature. For example, how can Eros be a god if gods are good and beautiful, but inherently Eros is seeking the good and the beautiful because he does not possess them?²⁰ The growth that she helps cultivate in Socrates is only successfully accomplished because of her nurturing, maternal identity.

¹⁸ Plato, *Symposium*, 199 e

¹⁹ Plato, *Symposium*, 202

²⁰ τὸ δὲ ποριζόμενον ἀεὶ ὑπεκρεῖ, ὥστε οὔτε ἀπορεῖ Ἔρως ποτὲ οὔτε πλουτεῖ, Plato, *Symposium*, 203 e

In the first section of Socrates' speech, he and Agathon participate in a line of questioning where Socrates asks Agathon questions in order that they might both have the same understanding on what Eros really is. “ἔτι τοίνυν, φάναι, ὦ Φαίδρε, πάρες μοι Ἀγάθωνα σμίκερ' ἄττα ἐρέσθαι, ἵνα ἀνομολογησάμενος παρ' αὐτοῦ οὕτως ἤδη λέγω.” “Then allow me, oh Phaedrus, to ask some small things (questions) of Agathon further, so that he might agree with the words as I say them.”²¹ Throughout his questioning, he systematically disproves all of the other versions of Eros that had been put forth in the text and accumulates a set of baseline truths that both he and Agathon agree on. In disproving many of Agathon's prior views on what Eros is, Socrates establishes some of the things Eros is and some that he is not. These questions Socrates poses to Agathon are similar to the ones that Diotima asks and Socrates answers during the interaction that Socrates had with Diotima prior to the *Symposium*:

σχεδὸν γάρ τι καὶ ἐγὼ πρὸς αὐτὴν ἕτερα τοιαῦτα ἔλεγον οἷάπερ νῦν πρὸς ἐμὲ Ἀγάθων, ὡς εἶη ὁ Ἔρως μέγας θεός, εἶη δὲ τῶν καλῶν: ἤλεγχε δὴ με τοῦτοις τοῖς λόγοις οἷσπερ ἐγὼ τοῦτον, ὡς οὔτε καλὸς εἶη κατὰ τὸν ἐμὸν λόγον οὔτε ἀγαθός.

For I spoke near these same things before her such as Agathon even now before me (does), how Eros is a great god, and is of beautiful things, and she put me to shame with the exact words I for my part (use) on him, showing that by my words he (Eros) is neither beautiful nor good.²²

Socrates acknowledges that the questions he just asked Agathon are similar to the ones that Diotima asked him. He recognizes that he had a similar understanding of who and what Eros was, prior to his interaction with Diotima, as that which Agathon had prior to his discussion with Socrates. Through Socrates speaks to Agathon “in much the same terms” as Diotima spoke to

²¹ Plato, *Symposium*, 199 b

²² Plato, *Symposium*, 201 e

him, Plato illustrates the fact that Socrates understood the importance of a dialogue between two people trying to understand Eros.

By recounting the lessons that he received from Diotima in Diotima's voice, Socrates attempts to be a conduit between Diotima and her lessons and the men present at the symposium rather than transforming Eros, or the teaching of Eros, into a masculine endeavor. Socrates protects the femininity that Diotima's Eros relies on by keeping the questioning and the language similar to that of Diotima's. In this essay, feminine thought and language are understood through the biological and social functions women have in society. Women act as nurturing figures who help others discover new ideas by asking specific questions and providing pieces of insight that steer a student in a particular direction. Feminine language is linked to women's biological functions of childbirth and care. Diotima's identity as a nurturing mother figure, in conjunction with her identity as a woman, is what allows her to first partake in feminine thought and indoctrinate Socrates into a feminine form of thought. Socrates does not claim to be able to embody the same maternal role that Diotima does, but he does attempt to embody a kind of nurturing role. He does this by imitating the lesson he received from Diotima and not changing any of the feminine language that she originally used in her lesson.

LANGUAGE

Defining "Female"

"Begetting," "pregnancy," "reproduction," "nurturing" and "birth" are all terms used to understand the state of Eros that Diotima talks about. Female in the English language relies on biological characteristics unique to women.²³ The specific ideas and words, "producing ova,"

²³ 1. Of, pertaining to, or designating the sex that produces ova or bears young. 2. Characteristic of or appropriate to this sex; feminine. 3. Consisting of members of this sex, Morris, 483

“bearing young” and “appropriate to this sex,” are biological ideas present in the English definition of female and are also present in Diotima’s version of Eros and her presentation of him. This same biologically based definition of ‘female’ reflects almost exactly the idea of “begetting” and “spiritual pregnancy” that intellectual thinkers take part in when they exist in the form of Eros that Diotima brings up. What a woman can produce in an erotic relationship is virtuous thinking as well as children, both of which are ways that individuals can attempt to achieve immortality. This idea of gaining a piece of immortality through procreation and philosophic thought is dependent on femininity because of the use of birth language and imagery.²⁴ Physically, having children is a way that an individual can attempt to achieve genetic and moral immortality. Intellectually, individuals rely on female language in conjunction with philosophic thought to structure their thought and create new ideas. In creating new ideas, an individual can begin to immortalize themselves through creating an intellectual legacy. A legacy can be in the form of children and grandchildren and so physical in nature, but a legacy can also be intellectual in nature. Both a physical legacy and an intellectual legacy require the same care and consideration to come into being. This is how birth language is important to both intellectual thought and physical processes.

One way that Plato shows the reader how he defines feminine and female is by illustrating ways in which Diotima is *not* male. Her differences are clearest in her language choice and the metaphors she uses in her lesson on Eros. Her definition of love is something that an individual actively participates in, rather than passively listening to like the rest of the lessons. Aristophanes looks to understand “ἔρωτος δύναμιν” “the power of love.”²⁵ Eryximachus looks to continue the

²⁴ Birth language includes words like birth, conception, labor and pain. The imagery associated with birth includes scenes such as a physical birth but also the emergence of a new idea as the result of discourse between two people. Both birth language and the imagery associated with birth are dependent on the biological definition of female.

²⁵ Plato, *Symposium*, 189 c

thoughts of Pausanias because “δεῖν ἐμὲ πειρᾶσθαι τέλος ἐπιθεῖναι τῷ λόγῳ” “there is need for me to attempt to lay out the conclusion to this reckoning²⁶” and so elaborates on the ideas of Pausanias rather than presenting an entirely new form of Eros. None of these men present an interactive view of Eros. Diotima embodies non-maleness by the interactive nature of her lesson. The first time that Diotima speaks, she is scolding Socrates.²⁷ καὶ ἦ, οὐκ εὐφημήσεις; ἔφη: ἦ οἶει, ὅτι ἂν μὴ καλὸν ἦ, ἀναγκαῖον αὐτὸ εἶναι αἰσχρὸν; ... ἦ καὶ ἂν μὴ σοφὸν, ἀμαθές; ἦ οὐκ ἦσθησαι ὅτι ἔστιν τι μεταξὺ σοφίας καὶ ἀμαθίας; “Do not speak well, she said, do you not believe that what is good must be with the state of being ugly?... And what is not wise stupid? Did you not perceive that there is something in the midst (in the middle of) wisdom and stupidity?²⁸” Diotima immediately calls into question the validity of Socrates’ view that Eros is good and beautiful and seems almost incredulous that Socrates could have such a one-sided view of the nature of Eros. Her question “Did you not perceive that there is something in the midst (in the middle of) wisdom and stupidity?” closely resembles the situation that Socrates, and later Agathon, now finds himself in; not skilled in the ways of Eros, but not entirely ignorant either. Only through their interactions, however far removed, do Socrates and Agathon understand Diotima’s Eros.

Femaleness, female language and metaphors

Women in Plato’s other works are portrayed as emotional individuals, unfit to be part of intellectual discussion because their minds are ruled by said emotions rather than intellect. In Plato’s *Phaedo*, a woman is seen being escorted from the room in which Socrates is talking because of an emotional outburst. “When Xanthippe saw us, she cried out and said the kind of thing that

²⁶ Plato, *Symposium*, 186 a

²⁷ Plato, *Symposium*, 201 c

²⁸ Plato, *Symposium*, 201 e – 202 a

women always do say: “Oh Socrates, this is the last time now that your friends will speak to you or you to them.” And Socrates glanced at Crito and said, “Crito, let somebody take her home.²⁹”

Before any philosophical discussion occurs, the only woman in the room is escorted out. While this conception of a woman prioritizes the seemingly irrational nature of women’s emotions, these emotions can be categorized by traits that they have due to their biological role as a mother.

Like the English definition of female, the definition of feminine also pertains to qualities and characteristics which are completely separate from male ideas.³⁰ In this paper, language that is normally associated with physical or cultural processes and functions of women such as childbirth, child care and pregnancy, are considered to be terms used in feminine language. Focusing on the second definition of feminine, and how this applies to the language that Diotima uses, helps the reader understand the third definition and how it applies to Socrates and his attempt to fulfill the normally female role of initiator and teacher. The second definition talks about qualities, not physical attributes as being feminine. This helps clarify the third definition and how it related to Socrates. While the definition of female is biological and therefore physical in nature, the definition of feminine has to do with qualities that can be present in either a male or female body. Socrates is able to embody feminine qualities that he learned from a female, Diotima, when he presents Diotima’s version of Eros. Feminine language can include subjects such as birth, death, pregnancy and nurturing in conjunction with teaching techniques that might be used in different initiation practices or educational forums like dialogue and metaphor. The feminine role

²⁹ Plato, *Plato: In Twelve Volumes*, 60a - Translated by Fowler

³⁰ 1. Of or belonging to the female sex. Said especially of members of the human species. 2. Characterized by or possessing qualities generally attributed to a woman; womanly. 3. Possessing qualities generally attributed to a woman, although belonging to the male sex. 4. Effeminate; womanish. 5. *Grammar*. Indicating or belonging to the gender of words or grammatical forms that are classified as female, Morris, 483

Socrates embodies is connected to the idea of nurturing and teaching, two ideas that have their origins in feminine language.

Diotima compares processes of a woman's physical body and processes of an intellectual mind, male or female, using this kind of feminine language. The dialogue, questioning, and thought processes in which Diotima participates and calls the men to participate, mirrors the physical processes of the female body, harkening back to the first definition of female and how it pertains to biology and sexual acts. She compares the intellectual to the physical by using words that normally describe or are reliant on physical functions of the female body. She describes the nature of Eros as “ἔρμηνεῦον καὶ διαπορθμεῦον,” which means “interpreting and carrying over.”³¹ ‘Carrying over’ in particular holds similar meaning to the role women fulfill in their roles with birth and death. While participating in these cultural roles, women act as a figure that carries an individual into life, and from life into death. In birth, the role women take is a physical one – they are physically bringing another life into being. In death, women embody a spiritual role as they oversee the transition of a person's life into death. Similarly, “τόκος,” meaning “childbirth” or “begetting” relates directly back to a biological function of the female body, but is used when describing someone's mind. Diotima uses this word when telling Socrates that “ἔστι γὰρ τοῦτο τόκος ἐν καλῷ καὶ κατὰ τὸ σῶμα καὶ κατὰ τὴν ψυχὴν” “for it is this begetting in a beautiful thing through the body and soul.”³² This “begetting” is what alleviates a soul that is “pregnant.” Diotima says that “πάντες ἄνθρωποι καὶ κατὰ τὸ σῶμα καὶ κατὰ τὴν ψυχὴν” “for all men are pregnant in body and in soul”³³. The act of ‘begetting,’ or of giving birth, which is a biologically female function, to a philosophical notion is what alleviates this spiritual and intellectual

³¹ Plato, *Symposium*, 202 e

³² Plato, *Symposium*, 206 b

³³ Plato, *Symposium*, 206 c

pregnancy that all men inevitably feel at some point in their lives. It appears as though this spiritual pregnancy only begins after a person participates in the pursuit of virtue and truth through philosophical thought. The use of these words – pregnancy, begetting, childbirth, labor pain – by a thinker like Diotima, a woman, acknowledges the female biological function that each word has, and looks to take the biological importance of these functions and apply them to a philosophical life, not just a physical. The fact that each of the men can participate in these normally feminine actions in an intellectual context shows that they can in some way also participate in female functions through their integration of Eros into their identities.

Diotima and Female Language

Diotima’s identity as a woman in conjunction with female words such as pregnant,³⁴ begetting and birth³⁵ link the ideas that she brings up in her speech about Eros, and feminine themes. Ideas such as “desire³⁶” and “begetting of beautiful things,³⁷” are dependent on, and find their origins within, feminine language and would not make sense or have the same significance without such feminine language in this text. “If we were to think about pedagogy as a vocation, a unique calling, metaphors of creation, birth and connectivity would be central to any human conceptualization.³⁸” Bursch understands the role of teacher and the processes of education through these metaphors which are dependent on female language and biology. Diotima too connects biological functions to philosophic ideas through feminine language. “ἔστι δὲ τοῦτο θεῖον τὸ πράγμα, καὶ τοῦτο ἐν θνητῷ ὄντι τῷ ζῳῷ ἀθάνατον ἔνεστιν, ἡ κῆσις καὶ ἡ

³⁴ κνέω, Plato, *Symposium*, 206 c

³⁵ τόκος, Plato, *Symposium*, 206 c

³⁶ ἐπιθυμέω, Plato, *Symposium*, 206 c

³⁷ τόκος ἐν καλῷ, Plato, *Symposium*, 206 b

³⁸ Bursch, 2000, 41

γέννησις.” “This matter is a divine thing for a mortal animal to do, conception and reproducing.”³⁹

Here Diotima is connecting female oriented language of conception and reproduction to novel

philosophic thought. “ἀλλ’ ἐγώ, ἡ δ’ ἦ, σαφέστερον ἐρῶ. κυοῦσιν γάρ, ἔφη, ὦ Σώκρατες,

πάντες ἄνθρωποι καὶ κατὰ τὸ σῶμα καὶ κατὰ τὴν ψυχὴν, καὶ ἐπειδὴν ἔν τινι ἡλικίᾳ

γένωνται, τίκτειν ἐπιθυμῶν ἡμῶν ἢ φύσις.” “All men are pregnant, Socrates, in body and in soul,

and whenever anyone comes into a certain age, we desire to (bring into the world) give birth.”⁴⁰

She talks about physical pregnancy as well as spiritual pregnancy, both of which can only be

alleviated by giving birth to something beautiful, whether that is through philosophic thought or a

child. Socrates is unable to move away from this kind of feminine language when talking about

Eros, which shows that the ideas that he speaks about and the language that is used cannot be

separated. By having this language in the voice of a woman, Plato shows that this kind of “spiritual

pregnancy” cannot be alleviated by male centered thought alone; a feminine, spiritual being taking

the role of nurturing teacher and spiritual midwife is the only way that these ideas can properly be

taught and the desire to alleviate spiritual pregnancy fulfilled. Bursch also acknowledges the

importance of the female presence of Diotima by bringing up the idea of creativity. “By making

the distinction between the perception (or aesthetic appreciation) of beauty on the one hand, and

giving birth to beauty on the other, Diotima links eros to creativity.⁴¹” Creativity becomes a female

idea when it is linked to the idea of “giving birth to beauty.” Bursch connects female birth and

creation language directly to the function of Eros.

Diotima as a Woman in Contrast with Male Voices

³⁹ Plato, *Symposium*, 206 c

⁴⁰ Plato, *Symposium*, 206 c

⁴¹ Bursch, 2000, 40

Diotima's identity as a woman is immediately thrown into the spotlight because the rest of the voices are male in the rest of the text. The other women that are seen in the text are in the role of servants and flute girls.⁴² Flute girls play a subservient role in ancient Athenian society and are brought into functions like symposiums to provide entrainment for the men present at the party. In this particular situation, not only are they not given a voice, they are also sent from the room because their presence lessened the intellectual atmosphere of the room. This fact immediately shows, that within Plato's *Symposium*, Diotima's views are to be taken seriously but also set apart and contrasted with the other views on Eros that are presented by the men. If Socrates had simply stated her views, without any indicating that their origin was a woman, those lessons would be more closely compared to the men's lessons and the feminine language used would not have as much power. It is Socrates' reputation that validates her femininity and makes her female identity important to the structure of her lesson.

Diotima, unlike a female character like Xanthippe is not portrayed as a figure ruled by her emotions. Bursch notes that with the introduction of Diotima in the *Symposium*, "we observe an image of a woman who not only renders a pedagogical service to Socrates but who also assumes the role of cultural healer,⁴³" two roles that are later addressed in this paper as being inherently female roles. With the acknowledgement of her identity as a teacher and a "cultural healer," Plato defines Diotima's female identity beyond that of an emotional individual.

Male Use of Female Language

To understand how Diotima uses female language and metaphors differently than the men, instances that feminine language appears in the other parts of the text cannot be ignored. Diotima

⁴² Plato, *Symposium*, 176 e

⁴³ Bursch, 2000, 34

uses feminine language and ideas in conjunction with her identity as a woman. By contrasting the way that the men use feminine words as well as metaphors, we can attempt to compare instances of the feminine presented by the men and woman within this text and understand the different ways that female language can be used. Phaedrus is the first speaker and he opens with the statement “μέγας θεὸς εἶη ὁ Ἔρως” “Love is a great god.”⁴⁴ “Love” or Eros and the phrase ‘great god’ are all masculine forms. Phaedrus immediately deemed the concept of love as well as the identity of Eros to be masculine. In his initial description of Eros, Phaedrus also brings up the idea that Eros does not have any parents. He takes the feminine completely out of the identity of Eros and specifically the creation of Eros. Phaedrus goes on to describe different kinds of love and places love between two men above any other form.

εἰ οὖν μηχανή τις γένοιτο ὥστε πόλιν γενέσθαι ἢ στρατόπεδον ἐραστῶν τε καὶ παιδικῶν, οὐκ ἔστιν ὅπως ἂν ἄμεινον οἰκήσειαν τὴν ἑαυτῶν ἢ ἀπεχόμενοι πάντων τῶν αἰσχρῶν καὶ φιλοτιμούμενοι πρὸς ἀλλήλους.

If in fact there was a means to make a city come into being or an encampment come into being of lovers and boys (they love), there could not be a better place for a man to inhabit, or they would keep away from all things causing shame and would pursue other things (that the other loves).⁴⁵

There is no mention of a female presence in this ideal form of society and apart from πόλιν, the words have roots in feminine ideas. Words like city and home both have feminine endings, but the lack of female presence in this form of society show that use of these words is in pursuit of a male endeavor. Through the use of grammar and the words chosen, the feminine is shown as having no place in this kind of society ruled by love and honor. Therefore, love and honor belong to the male rather than the female according to Phaedrus.

⁴⁴ Plato, *Symposium*, 178 a

⁴⁵ Plato, *Symposium*, 178 e

Phaedrus describes what the members of a society of lovers might be like,⁴⁶ and shows that there is no place for women or feminine language in a society ruled by love and honor. The only other instance where a woman appears in the rest of Phaedrus speech, she is in a position of lesser power and whose femininity has no impact on the nature of this kind of Eros. Phaedrus makes a remark about sacrificing one's self for the sake of someone that they love and he uses the idea that "even if she's a woman"⁴⁷ a lover will sacrifice them self for the sake of those they love. By showing that both men and women would participate in this self-sacrifice, that sacrifice can be understood as an innate quality of love that has no regard to gender. This is an instance that a woman can participate in love in the exact same context and have the same influence as a man. But in regards to her identity as a woman, femininity and femaleness have no power or influence over this version of love.

Pausanias follows Phaedrus with his account of Eros. His account of Eros begins with a female character, Aphrodite. His view is that there are two versions of Aphrodite, and therefore two versions of Eros. One is "πρεσβυτέρα" "older" and "ἀμήτωρ Οὐρανοῦ θυγάτηρ" "motherless, daughter of Uranos." The other is "νεωτέρα" "younger" and daughter of "Διὸς καὶ Διώνης" "Zeus and Dione."⁴⁸ The first, older and motherless, is known as Heavenly Aphrodite, while the younger Aphrodite, daughter of Dione, is known as Common. Heavenly Aphrodite does not have any roots in femininity. She has no mother and therefore her identity as a female has lost its importance. Her creation and birth are entirely dependent on the masculine and therefore the love that she represents is also male. The Common Aphrodite participates in a kind of love "καὶ οὗτός ἐστιν ὃν οἱ φαῦλοι τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἐρῶσιν" "this is the kind of love that cheap

⁴⁶ Plato, *Symposium*, 179 a

⁴⁷ ἀλλὰ καὶ αἱ γυναῖκες, Plato, *Symposium*, 179b

⁴⁸ Plato, *Symposium*, 180 d-e

(ordinary/paltry/vulgar) men feel.⁴⁹ Pausanias immediately takes the Aphrodite who has a mother and lessens her importance by stating that the love which she represents is reserved for the lowest people in society. By doing this, he illustrates that love directed towards and originating from women is lesser than that of men.

Eryximachus views love separate from gender entirely. He brings up the idea of beauty and harmony and how it pertains to medicine.⁵⁰ He attempts to understand Eros as a kind of “ἁρμονίας” “harmony” and “ῥυθμοῦ” “rhythm” of the body,⁵¹ two characteristics that take into account the body and the idea that the body participates in Eros, but leave out any mention of the sexes. He extends Eros, and the idea of harmony that Eros fosters, to the seasons and to agriculture.⁵² Again, this account presented by a man leaves out any mention of an important female presence and instead shows how Eros exists in the world as an unchanging entity.

Aristophanes does not discount the feminine entirely in his mythological account of Eros, but in the end still shows that a masculine form of love is the strongest there is. In his mythological account, he presents three different kinds of love: male-male, male-female, and female-female. While he does acknowledge that there are three different kinds of love, he states that the strongest and the best kind of love is the male-male love.⁵³ In doing this, he completely discounts the feminine and states that it is a lesser form of love. He states that the masculinity⁵⁴ within this male-male love is what makes it the best. By saying that male-male love is the best because of its

⁴⁹ Plato, *Symposium*, 181 a

⁵⁰ Plato, *Symposium*, 186 b

⁵¹ Plato, *Symposium*, 187 c

⁵² Plato, *Symposium*, 188 a

⁵³ Plato, *Symposium*, 191 e – 192 a

⁵⁴ ἀρρενωπία, masculine, manliness, Plato, *Symposium*, 192 a

masculine characteristics, he implies that femininity is a kind of weakness or pollutant in a love relationship.

Agathon describes the qualities that Eros has rather than giving a mythological account of his nature as Aristophanes did. While Agathon continually calls Eros “he,” Agathon does not ascribe him any particularly masculine or feminine characteristics, nor does he compare Eros to any Eros to any inherently male or female functions. This absence of sex makes Eros on one hand more universal to the human race as a whole, but also does not show how either men or women are supposed to operate within Eros. Agathon makes Eros out to be completely separate from humans by ascribing ideas like justice,⁵⁵ youth,⁵⁶ beauty⁵⁷ and righteousness⁵⁸ which not only distances Eros from mankind but also separates him from gender, both male and female.

Defining “Eros”

There are many different definitions of Eros in Greek.⁵⁹ It can mean, but is not limited to, “love,” “desire” and “passion.” These can be sexual definitions, as well as familiar or scholarly. Someone can think erotically by feeling passionately about something that they are thinking about, or they can be in an erotic sexual relationship. For someone to participate in philosophic thought, they must have an erotic relationship with the subject of their thought. Without thinking about a subject erotically, and so forming a kind of erotic relationship with that subject, they would not be

⁵⁵ δικαιοσύνη, Plato, *Symposium*, 196 c

⁵⁶ νέος, Plato, *Symposium*, 195 c

⁵⁷ καλός, Plato, *Symposium*, 195 a

⁵⁸ ἀρετή, Plato, *Symposium*, 196 b

⁵⁹ Liddel Scott, 695

ἔρως, ὠτος, ὁ, acc. ἔρων for
 A. “ἔρωτα” — *love*, mostly of the sexual passion, *love for one*, generally, *love of a thing*, *desire for it*, *loves*, *amours* generally, *desires*
 2. *object of love or desire*
 3. *passionate joy*
 II. *the god of love*

able to find its truth or understand how it is integrated into their own personal identity. Having an erotic relationship with an idea allows someone to add a new element of Eros into their identity. By participating in erotic thought, the feminine process of dialogue and conception starts between the individual and the idea. While thinking erotically is one way that someone can participate in philosophic thought, Gill believes that, "Socrates relies on the fact that the Greek word *eros* means (interpersonal) 'love' as well as 'desire' both in a narrow sense ('sexual desire') and in a broad one. He argues that love is essentially relational: that is, love is always *of* something."⁶⁰ The definition of Eros Socrates uses allows Eros to become a universal idea that is always being directed toward an outside subject. For Eros to exist solely within an individual's identity, it would be a purely solitary pursuit that would not require any collaboration or discussion between individuals. Plato goes on to show that for someone to be fully participating in Eros, the intellectual and the physical become one. For someone to be fully participating in Eros, they are no longer looking at the particular.⁶¹ Instead they are looking at how the universal understanding of Eros applies to the physical and intellectual as they exist together. By attempting to understand through Eros how the intellectual and the physical exist together, Plato removed gender from the idea of love and focuses on the intellect and how the intellect of an individual can be portrayed through the physical. By viewing the body as a tool for presenting intellect, gender becomes less important in understanding how Eros applies to humans. However, before moving away from gender entirely, through the inclusion of Diotima, Plato also shows that the inclusion of both male and female perspectives has to be completed.

⁶⁰Gill, 1999, xxviii

⁶¹Plato, *Symposium*, 211 c

Eros always requires another body outside of the individual to manifest itself in because love always has to be *of* something. “πειρῶ δὴ, φάναι, καὶ τὸν ἔρωτα εἰπεῖν. ὁ Ἔρως ἔρως ἐστὶν οὐδενὸς ἢ τινός; πάνυ μὲν οὖν ἔστιν.” “‘Now try to tell me about love,’ he (Socrates) said. ‘Is Love the love of nothing or of something?’ ‘It is very much indeed!’”⁶² By requiring two individuals to come together and to collaborate in order for Eros to be understood, Plato ties the discovery of Eros to birth and pregnancy language in the myth of Eros’ birth.⁶³ The idea of love having to be of something manifests itself as a new idea or as a child, one being the product of philosophic love and one being the product of physical love. Only a collaboration that has a resulting product can be considered to be participating in Eros.

Eros’ Character and the Feminine

The process of the birth of a child and discovery of a new idea can be compared. Two people participating in philosophic discussion are necessary to discover a new idea, and it takes two individuals participating in sexual intercourse to conceive a child. The discovery of a new idea can be painful, messy and jarring, just as in birth. Both the birth of a child and the discovery of a new idea are dependent on both individuals giving something of themselves to the other and to participate in the activity. In philosophic discussion, each individual has to use their opinions, morals and education in conjunction with the opinions of the other in order to form a novel idea, just as both a man and a woman have to participate in intercourse in order to create life. In both of these situations, each individual has to give a part of him or herself, which can be painful for both parties in both a physical and intellectual sense. In the *Symposium*, Socrates plays a feminine, nurturing role to others as he teaches his lesson about Eros. The other partygoers feel a kind of

⁶² Plato, *Symposium*, 199 e

⁶³ Plato, *Symposium*, 203 b

philosophic pain through confusion⁶⁴ as they begin to understand the implications in their own lives of the kind of Eros that Socrates is teaching.⁶⁵

Diotima tells Socrates the myth of the birth of Eros. This myth is the embodiment of this kind of philosophic as well as physical birth. While Diotima personifies Eros as well as his parents, the birth of Eros could also be viewed as purely intellectual. This myth, however, shows both the intellectual as well as the physical traits that a child, or an idea, takes from its creators. This can be analogized with the creation of an idea and how an idea that forms through dialogue takes form only with the help of both parties.

ὁ οὖν Πόρος μεθυσθεὶς τοῦ νέκταρος— οἶνος γὰρ οὐπω ἦν—εἰς τὸν τοῦ Διὸς κήπον εἰσελθὼν βεβαρημένος ἠΰδεν. ἡ οὖν Πενία ἐπιβουλεύουσα διὰ τὴν αὐτῆς ἀπορίαν παιδίον ποιήσασθαι ἐκ τοῦ Πόρου, κατακλίνεται τε παρ' αὐτῷ καὶ ἐκύησε τὸν ἔρωτα... ἅτε οὖν Πόρου καὶ Πενίας υἱὸς ὢν ὁ Ἔρως ἐν τοιαύτῃ τύχῃ καθέστηκεν. πρῶτον μὲν πένης ἀεὶ ἐστὶ, καὶ πολλοῦ δεῖ ἀπαλὸς τε καὶ καλὸς, οἷον οἱ πολλοὶ οἴονται, ἀλλὰ σκληρὸς καὶ αὐχμηρὸς καὶ ἀνυπόδητος καὶ ἄοικος, χαμαιπετὴς ἀεὶ ὢν καὶ ἄστρωτος, ἐπὶ θύραις καὶ ἐν ὁδοῖς ὑπαίθριος κοιμώμενος, τὴν τῆς μητρὸς φύσιν ἔχων, ἀεὶ ἐνδεία σύνοικος. κατὰ δὲ αὐτὸν τὸν πατέρα ἐπίβουλος ἐστὶ τοῖς καλοῖς καὶ τοῖς ἀγαθοῖς, ἀνδρείος ὢν καὶ ἴτης καὶ σύντονος, θηρευτὴς δεινός, ἀεὶ τινας πλέκων μηχανάς, καὶ φρονήσεως ἐπιθυμητὴς καὶ πόριμος, φιλοσοφῶν διὰ παντὸς τοῦ βίου, δεινὸς γόης καὶ φαρμακεὺς καὶ σοφιστής

Now Poros having been made drunk with nectar – for there was not yet wine – went into the garden of the God (Zeus) and weighed down with weariness, slept. Then Penia devised a plot of being with him (Poros) and having a child through him, and lying down (sleeping with) him, she became pregnant with Eros As he is the child of Poros and Penia, Eros happens to be in a certain state such as theirs. First, he is indeed always poor, and he is many things apart (far) from being soft or beautiful, such as many people suppose, instead he is hard, dry, barefoot and homeless, always on the ground without a bed, being on doorsteps and under the sky on the road sleeping, having in his bearing his mother's nature, always dwelling in the same house (living in) want. But on his father side he is plotting after the beautiful and the good, he is courageous and bold and eager, a terrible (marvelous) hunter, always weaving plaits/snares/devices, and is one who longs for wisdom and

⁶⁴ κινδυνεύω, Plato, *Symposium*, 201 b

⁶⁵ Plato, *Symposium*, 201 b

inventiveness, one who is loving knowledge all through his life, a master of sorcery and tricks.⁶⁶

Eros' parents are male and female, Poros and Penia. The myth of his birth brings to the reader's attention that he did not come into being from one single sex. Instead, his birth was dependent on both male and female participation. Diotima's version of Eros acknowledges the reliance that the philosophic birth of new ideas, through her story of Eros' birth, has on the feminine in a way that none of the men did or were able to accomplish. Her version of Eros' heritage and the traits that he inherited from his parents come equally from his father and mother. The traits he gained from his father, give him tools to accomplish the constant desire to gain more that he inherited from his mother. His birth and his identity are both dependent on both the male and the female participants of the encounter between Penia and Poros, just as the birth of a new child necessitates the union of a man and a woman.

Necessity of a Female Voice

For Plato to have included Diotima's opinion, the subject of Eros seems to require the acknowledgement and inclusion of a female voice to have a complete understanding of the subject. Bursch acknowledges the connection between Diotima's Eros and a female voice as well. "The representations of *pregnant soul* and *giving birth to beauty* are indebted to female experience, a strategic move that Plato thought necessary to break the hold of the predominant truth regime.⁶⁷" The fact that Plato included Diotima in this text says that her voice was necessary in order to understand this kind of love. Only by understanding Eros through a male voice, the predominant perspective of the time, and a female voice, which acts as a counterpoint to male language and ideas, can Eros become a universal idea. By having Socrates, a man, state the opinions of Diotima,

⁶⁶ Plato, *Symposium*, 203 b-d

⁶⁷ Bursch, 2000, 40

a woman, male and female perspectives are joined. Different versions of a male centered Eros are given prior to Socrates, but none that show the importance of both sexes equally or allow for their definitions of Eros to be universal across gender and therefore social status. By showing Diotima's femininity in contrast with the rest of the men in the party, Plato begins to show how male and female centered forms of thinking interact and how an idea cannot be fully understood until both a male and a female perspective are given on a subject. The full implications of feminine language are given power and credibility when spoken by a woman. Only an individual who has experienced things like birth or pregnancy, and has those functions intrinsically tied to their identity, can understand their significance. While it is unclear if Diotima is a mother or not, her identity as a woman and role as a teacher and initiator are still feminine. "Diotima links Eros to creativity,⁶⁸" an act that only women can participate in through pregnancy and birth and so could not be properly understood or presented by a man. While it is not made clear whether or not Diotima is a mother, her identity as a woman allows her to understand female language as it exists and is dependent on a woman's biology and her civic and cultural role in society. A man would not be able to understand the full significance of being "pregnant in body and soul"⁶⁹ because they do not really understand the physical changes, hardships and pain that a person goes through when they are pregnant.

QUESTIONING, EROS AND FEMININITY

Phallogentricity vs Feminine

The men present at the party deliver their different versions of Eros in a much different way than Diotima taught Socrates the nature of Eros. The men deliver the first five speeches that

⁶⁸ Bursch, 2000, 40

⁶⁹ Plato, *Symposium*, 206 b

describe the first five forms of Eros in what might be considered a more phallogocentric form. A phallogocentric account of Eros does not take into account the importance of both genders to create and participate in Eros as Diotima does. Instead, a phallogocentric account focuses on defined, unchangeable qualities of Eros. One account is that Eros from Phaedrus shows Eros to be one of the ancient gods whose character is unchanging throughout his existence. “οὕτω δὴ ἔγωγέ φημι ἔρωτα θεῶν καὶ πρεσβύτατον καὶ τιμώτατον καὶ κυριώτατον εἶναι εἰς ἀρετῆς καὶ εὐδαιμονίας κτήσιν ἀνθρώποις καὶ ζῶσι καὶ τελευτήσασιν.” “In this way I say that Eros is the oldest and most valued god and the most powerful in allowing humans to acquire excellence and good fortune, both in life and death.⁷⁰” When Phaedrus presents a powerful version of Eros, there is no growth or change in the character of Eros; it is fixed and unchanging.

While phallogocentric thinking and presentation take on a linear, unchanging form, feminine thought and questioning is illustrated through Diotima’s account of Eros. Feminine language can be understood by undeniable connection between female language and thought and questioning. Bursch, in attempting to understand questioning that makes up the first part of Diotima’s speech, acknowledges a kind of thinking that cannot be separated from Eros. “Can the act and process of questioning, for example, be separated conceptually, from the powers of Eros? No! As we shall see, Eros has consistently been represented as that which constitutes the process of questioning.⁷¹” We have already seen that Plato’s ultimate version of Eros cannot be separated from female language through the use of female language by Diotima in her lesson. We have also seen that questioning cannot be separated from the feminine because Socrates recounts Diotima’s lesson rather than transforming it, and now we see that Eros cannot be separated from questioning.

⁷⁰ Plato, *Symposium*, 180 b

⁷¹ Bursch, 2000, 31

The “process of questioning” that Bursch focuses on is a more feminine form of questioning and speaking, which allows the ideas to accumulate and in the end to bring them all together in a cohesive synthesis. What makes questioning between two individuals more feminine than phallogocentric is the thorough, caring, complete and collaborative aspects of the nature of questioning. This brings qualities of femininity and female biology into defining female thought. ‘Thorough,’ ‘caring,’ ‘complete’ and the collaboration between two individuals are all qualities necessary for the successful conception and birth of a healthy child. Just as a healthy child must not receive any trauma while it is in the womb, gestate for a full nine months, and receive genetic material from both its father and its mother, an idea has to receive care and consideration, as well as ideas from both parties before it can become a fully realized truth. The fact that “Eros has consistently been represented as that which constitutes the process of questioning” ties Eros to this form of questioning linked to femininity. While a person uneducated in Eros may only understand him through phallogocentric thinking, according to Diotima and her lesson, for an individual to participate in Eros, they must adopt a more female form of thinking and speaking which she demonstrates in her lesson to Socrates.

Femininity and Questioning

Diotima’s feminine form of thinking is first introduced to the rest of the group when Socrates tells the others that the way that she started to teach Socrates about Eros was through questioning.⁷² Questioning and the feminine cannot be separated within the *Symposium*. What makes questioning more feminine than masculine is the necessity of a caring authority figure to guide the one being questioned through to the conclusion. The takeaway from questioning is a genuine truth rather than a poorly thought through claim that cannot be proved or disproved.

⁷² Plato, *Symposium*, 201 e

The authority figure that Diotima embodies is a nurturing one that helps others be initiated into her version of Eros. Evans agrees that “In the *Symposium* it is the language of the Mysteries that Plato evokes at the end of Diotima’s speech, depicting a “leader” like a mystagogue conducting the “initiate” through the “rites of love.””⁷³ Evans lays out the roles of initiator, initiate and the ritual in which Diotima and Socrates are both participating. She goes so far as to show that Diotima is not only an initiator, but also a mystic leader ushering the men into the ways of Eros. Because she is female and taking on the role of initiator, this combined identity can be seen as a kind of mother figure. The reason that the role of initiator and Diotima’s female identity can be combined is that the role of mother, or initiator, cannot be separated from the female, and this kind of questioning requires a nurturing mother figure, or initiator, for others to come to a cohesive, universal conclusion. When the initiates conclude the rites of love in which the mother figure is overseeing, they can separate their understanding of Eros from the mother figure and attempt to form their own identity by incorporating the newfound version of Eros into themselves. Socrates attempts to make this split from Diotima when his role changes from initiate to initiator. He abandons his identity as a student and takes his new knowledge of Eros and applies it to himself, in doing so taking on the role of teacher. This is similar to the transition from adolescence to adulthood; while a child attempts to move away from their family and start their own lives away from the influence of their parents, the lessons that they got from their parents are part of their identity as adults. However, like Eros has qualities from Penia, the initiates will always have a part of the nurturing mother figure from their youth within their identity. By retaining the same structure of his lesson that Diotima had used in her lesson,⁷⁴ Socrates illustrates this tie between

⁷³ Evans, 2006, 6

⁷⁴ Plato, *Symposium*, 201 d

initiator and initiate that cannot be broken. Diotima shows the necessity of two people discussing the nature of Eros – herself the initiator and Socrates the initiate – in order to discover Eros. By taking on the role of initiator, Socrates is able to progress in his education of Eros and understand the feminine, nurturing aspect of the lesson that he was previously the recipient of.

DIOTIMA AS TEACHER AND INITIATOR

Plato shows that the incorporation of Eros into Socrates understanding of the world is complete when Socrates is able to move away from the role of initiate and take the role of initiator. Diotima’s lesson was a discussion and collaboration between herself and Socrates. Because of this, the concept of Eros that they both came away with was tied to not just Diotima’s understanding of Eros, but also Socrates. This is one reason that Socrates is able to successfully make the transition from initiate to initiator. They both came away from the encounter with a new understanding of Eros that they could not have found without engaging in dialogue with the other person. Dialogue allows an individual to “give birth” to an idea because birth has to happen in conjunction with beauty, this beauty being the intellect of the people engaging in dialogue.

ἀλλ’ ἐγώ, ἢ δ’ ἦ, σαφέστερον ἐρῶ. κυοῦσιν γάρ, ἔφη, ὦ Σώκρατες, πάντες ἄνθρωποι καὶ κατὰ τὸ σῶμα καὶ κατὰ τὴν ψυχὴν, καὶ ἐπειδὴν ἐν τινὶ ἡλικίᾳ γένωνται, τίπτειν ἐπιθυμεῖ ἡμῶν ἢ φύσις. τίπτειν δὲ ἐν μὲν αἰσχρῷ οὐ δύναται, ἐν δὲ τῷ καλῷ. ἢ γὰρ ἀνδρὸς καὶ γυναικὸς συνουσία τόκος ἐστίν.

All men are pregnant, oh Socrates, with reference to body and soul, and whenever anyone comes into a certain age, our nature is to desire to (bring into the world) give birth. Birth cannot happen on the ugly, but in the beautiful. The being with of man and woman is birth for both (body and soul).⁷⁵

The collaboration that Socrates and Diotima participate in when discussing Eros is “the being with of man and woman” that allows a philosophic “birth” to occur. This lesson itself is a spiritual birth for first Diotima and then Socrates.

⁷⁵ Plato, *Symposium*, 206 c

Diotima can take the role of female teacher of philosophic thought because she is a spiritual woman involved in cultural rites and rituals, wise enough to know how to delay a plague for a decade, and important enough in Athenian society for her council to be taken seriously enough to enact her advice.⁷⁶ Socrates is neither a woman nor is he a spiritual leader. Diotima in her role as initiator has to take part in a philosophical form of thinking and teaching, similar to the role that Socrates takes in contrast to the other members of the party. It seems as though living through the virtues and philosophical thoughts that Diotima initiates him into, Socrates is able to demonstrate a feminine form of thinking and teaching by embodying Eros. Because he has already passed through the initiation process with Diotima that he is now ushering the other men of the party through, he has assimilated a feminine role. Through embodying feminine thought, he can take the role of nurturing teacher. Socrates' ability to embody feminine teaching techniques harkens back to the similarities between Eros' role as mediator and Diotima's role as teacher. Socrates never claims any of the lessons or the words he uses to be his own. Instead he is simply the messenger between Diotima and the other partygoers for the lessons and words that he heard from Diotima⁷⁷ like Eros is between humans and gods.⁷⁸ From Diotima he learns about the nature of Eros' character and also about the importance of dialogue and female presence in order to understand the male and female aspects of Eros.

Universal Aspect of Diotima's Lesson

A male and female voice combined in the form of Socrates' recounting Diotima's lesson allows this version of Eros to become a universal form of Eros in a way that none of the other

⁷⁶ Plato, *Symposium*, 201 d

⁷⁷ Plato, *Symposium*, 201 d

⁷⁸ ἐρμηνεύον καὶ διαπορθμεύον θεοῖς τὰ παρ' ἀνθρώπων καὶ ἀνθρώποις τὰ παρὰ θεῶν, Plato, *Symposium*, 202 e

characters of Eros were able to accomplish. It is the inclusion and recognition of the female that allows Diotima's Eros to exist and to have the two sided characteristics that he has. To show this, Diotima, rather than simply defining Eros as the other men did, personifies him. This personification of Eros is the intersection between intellect and the physical and the male and the female. In order to illustrate the importance of a male and female presence, Diotima presents the myth of Eros' birth and shows the necessity of a male and female presence in his birth and in creating his character.

ἄτε οὖν Πόρου καὶ Πενίας υἱὸς ὢν ὁ Ἔρως ἐν τοιαύτῃ τύχῃ καθέστηκεν. πρῶτον μὲν πένης ἀεὶ ἐστὶ, καὶ πολλοῦ δεῖ ἀπαλός τε καὶ καλός, οἷον οἱ πολλοὶ οἴονται, ἀλλὰ σκληρὸς καὶ ἀυχμηρὸς καὶ ἀνυπόδητος καὶ ἄοικος, χαμαιπετὴς ἀεὶ ὢν καὶ ἄστρωτος, ἐπὶ θύραις καὶ ἐν ὁδοῖς ὑπαίθριος κοιμώμενος, τὴν τῆς μητρὸς φύσιν ἔχων, ἀεὶ ἐνδεία σύνοικος. κατὰ δὲ αὐτὸν πατέρα ἐπίβουλος ἐστὶ τοῖς καλοῖς καὶ τοῖς ἀγαθοῖς, ἀνδρείος ὢν καὶ ἴτης καὶ σύντονος, θηρευτὴς δεινός, ἀεὶ τινας πλέκων μηχανάς, καὶ φρονήσεως ἐπιθυμητὴς καὶ πόριμος, φιλοσοφῶν διὰ παντὸς τοῦ βίου, δεινὸς γόης καὶ φαρμακεὺς καὶ σοφιστὴς: καὶ οὔτε ὡς ἀθάνατος πέφυκεν οὔτε ὡς θνητός, ἀλλὰ τοτὲ μὲν τῆς αὐτῆς ἡμέρας θάλλει τε καὶ ζῆ, ὅταν εὐπορήσῃ, τοτὲ δὲ ἀποθνήσκει, πάλιν δὲ ἀναβιώσκει διὰ τὴν τοῦ πατρὸς φύσιν, τὸ δὲ ποριζόμενον ἀεὶ ὑπεκρεῖ, ὥστε οὔτε ἀποκρεῖ Ἔρως ποτὲ οὔτε πλουτεῖ

As he is the child of Poros and Penia, Eros happens to be in a certain state such as theirs. First, he is indeed always poor, and he is many things apart (far) from being soft or beautiful, such as many people suppose, instead he is hard, dry, barefoot and homeless, always on the ground without a bed, being on doorsteps and under the sky on the road sleeping, having in his bearing his mother's nature, always dwelling in the same house (living in) as want. But on his father side he is plotting after the beautiful and the good, he is courageous and bold and eager, a terrible (marvelous) hunter, always weaving plaits/snares/devices, and is one who longs for wisdom and inventiveness, one who is loving knowledge all through his life, a master of sorcery and tricks. His nature is neither mortal nor immortal, but he himself grows (lives) when cultivated, and dies (in the same day), but because he is his father's son, he contradicts and comes back to life, but the things he acquires always slip away, so Eros is never poor or wealthy.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Plato, *Symposium*, 203 c5-e4

According to Diotima and her myth about Eros' birth and nature, to exist in Eros, you must exist in a state of constant want and need expressed through a constant desire. It is not that a person is incapable of attaining good and beautiful things, but that they always desire more of what they are seeking because it is fleeting and cannot be held onto. These things being sought can be the good, the beautiful, or pieces of immortality through intellectual thought or procreation. Desire is always directed towards good and beautiful things, illustrated by the idea that spiritual pregnancy can only be alleviated by the good and the beautiful.⁸⁰ Not only will a person participating in Eros always seek to gain more of what they possess, they will also always have to work to hold on to those things already in their possession as those things could slip away if not constantly maintained. The way that Diotima says Eros works to attain the good and the beautiful, and so gain pieces of immortality, is through "a master of sorcery and tricks" and that like Eros, a person existing takes on his characteristics of being "courageous and bold and eager, a terrible (marvelous) hunter, always weaving plaits/snare/tricks, and is one who longs for wisdom and inventiveness, one who is loving knowledge all through his life."⁸¹ Just as Eros uses these things, a person can also use these same tricks to gain, and to keep, beautiful (καλοῖς) and good (ἀγαθοῖς) things.⁸² In using these tools, an individual can start participating in Eros as they gain beautiful and good things. As they start to love the universal rather than the particular, these objects of focus become metaphysical rather than physical, universal rather than specific.

It is the two part characteristics that make Eros have the nature that he does. If he only had the male characteristics of cleverness, immortality and wealth, there would be no desire or need to seek more, only with the inclusion of the traits he gained from his mother does he take on the form

⁸⁰ Plato, *Symposium*, 206 c

⁸¹ Plato, *Symposium*, 203 d

⁸² Plato, *Symposium*, 203 d

that he does. Without ugliness and poverty that he gained from his mother, there would be no need to Eros to exist in a state of constant desire. It is the inclusion of the traits he gained from his mother that makes Eros a being fated to constantly be seeking the good and the beautiful. By seeking out the good and the beautiful, only then can an individual participate in intellectual thought, the creation of new ideas and the quest for physical and intellectual immortality. Without the traits that Eros gained from his mother, Poverty, he would have no need to create both intellectually and biologically, which is a feminine idea.⁸³

FINAL QUESTIONS AND CONCLUSION

Why is it that it is a woman who gets the group closest to understanding the nature of Eros, and through Eros, immortality? Women are nurturing figures that bring new life into the world. The ushering in of new ideas which Diotima takes part in suggests images of birth, and birthing language is tied to the feminine. The idea of Diotima as a teacher, and the birth imagery her nurturing nature provides, are bound together throughout her lessons in her language and her actions. The reader sees Diotima bring into being the idea of immortality through her understanding of Eros and how Eros is inherently tied to a state of lacking and therefore desire. One way that this lack could be fulfilled is through having an erotic love with another individual and by having “τὸ αὐτοῦ ἀποβλάστημα” “offspring” with that person, whether that offspring are children or philosophical thoughts and virtues.⁸⁴ Women are the only sex that can accomplish both of these tasks, erotic love and bearing children, which could be one reason that Diotima is able to see Eros and love in this way.⁸⁵ By understanding and attempting to embody the role of a mother,

⁸³ The idea of creation goes directly back to the biological function women have of bearing children. By linking creativity to childbearing, intellectual creativity and novelty also takes on female characteristics.

⁸⁴ Plato, *Symposium*, 208 b

⁸⁵ Bursch, 2000, 40

a man can attempt to give birth to an idea and to express their creativity through an intellectual capacity.

Plato, through Diotima, looked to make this particular lesson of Eros a universal form applicable to any person participating in philosophic thought. He tries to demonstrate the universality of Eros by presenting Eros through feminine language and metaphor.⁸⁶ The other speeches that are seen in the *Symposium* all rely on a specific, learned, field of study, whether it was medical, anthropological or political. In contrast, Diotima's lesson relies on virtue, philosophical thought, femininity, and female language. These are ideas that any thinking individual, men included, can comprehend if they embrace the feminine within themselves.

Ancient women like Diotima understand and participate in femininity because they are biologically female, and therefore understanding feminine language is accomplished through participating in the biological, social and cultural functions of being female. Women in ancient Athens experience only the feminine because they are restricted throughout their whole lives to areas in civic and political life that are separate from. Men on the other hand have the opportunity to experience aspects of female civic and home life as well as participating in male life. By being raised by a woman in their early years, men experience more of the female realm than women experience of the male realm. Until a boy reaches puberty, he is not considered a man, and so does not have a voice in political or civic life. Instead of operating within male spheres of power, young boys spent their time with their mother and sisters, existing within a typically female sphere of power. By growing up around women, ancient Athenian boys are exposed to female life and gain some insight into what it means to be a woman and femininity. Because of this duality of

⁸⁶ I understand "feminine language and metaphor" to include words such as childbirth and conception and metaphors such as pregnancy and the caring role that a woman takes when raising a child.

masculinity and femininity within men and the biological tendency women have to be feminine, femininity becomes a way that common ground can be found between the sexes. By giving the lesson on Eros a feminine perspective and using feminine language rather than male language, understanding Eros becomes feasible to all humans. By using a feminine voice, the male and female characteristics within Eros' nature are also acknowledged. Plato attempts to formulate a universal version of Eros by acknowledging this crossover in ancient Athens of aspects of female identity within male identity and the lack of knowledge and experience that women have of the male identity.

When Diotima begins to tell Socrates the myth of Eros' birth⁸⁷, she takes on the more spiritual role of mystic. Bursch also views Diotima in a spiritual role. She describes Diotima as a “cultural healer⁸⁸” who also provides a “pedagogical service to Socrates.⁸⁹” While this mystic role is still viewed as feminine in ancient Athens, it is moving away from Diotima's identity as a maternal figure and moving towards the spiritual role that women hold in society. Diotima educated Socrates on the nature of Eros telling him that Eros is

δαίμων μέγας, ὃ Σώκρατες: καὶ γὰρ πᾶν τὸ δαιμόνιον μεταξύ ἐστὶ θεοῦ τε καὶ θνητοῦ... ἐρμηνεύον καὶ διαπορθμεύον θεοῖς τὰ παρ' ἀνθρώπων καὶ ἀνθρώποις τὰ παρὰ θεῶν, τῶν μὲν τὰς δεήσεις καὶ θυσίας

a great spirit, Socrates, for everything spiritual is between the mortal and the immortal... they interpret and carry over between the gods and men sacrifices and prayers.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Plato, *Symposium*, 202 b-e

⁸⁸ Bursch, 2000, 31

⁸⁹ Bursch, 2000, 34

⁹⁰ Plato, *Symposium*, 202 d-e

After stating that Eros is a spirit because of his role as messenger between gods and men,⁹¹ she takes on the role of messenger, or mediator, between Socrates and the divine truth of Eros' birth.⁹² The role of mediator is similar to the civic role that Athenian women hold over birth and death rituals. In ancient Athens, "women's customs included everything from magical practices, to initiatory puberty and childbirth rites."⁹³ When presiding over these rituals, women "lead" individuals participating in transitions into life as well as death. Women are the ones who usher others between different stages in life. By remaining within the confines of a maternal or a spiritual role, Diotima never goes against any of the preexisting roles that women hold in ancient Athens. Instead, she takes those roles and expands on them, incorporating metaphysical ideas (universal Platonic Love) and other aspects of her identity as a woman (mother and teacher) into them. She is participating in her cultural role as an initiator into "puberty and childbirth rites" when she takes on the role of spiritual midwife. She acts as a spiritual midwife for the men in their education about Eros and also to Eros himself as she tells the myth of his birth. Because the myth of Eros' birth appears to be a version of a myth that made up herself, she is acting as a midwife to Eros and to the myth of his birth. Rather than a physical stage of life, through Eros, these are philosophic and intellectual stages of life that she is presiding over. She is able to usher the other men into a new form of Eros, and in doing so, into a new kind of intellectual thought structured around the idea of Eros she describes. The men are able to transition to a new stage in their lives⁹⁴ because of the care that they receive from Diotima through her lessons.

⁹¹ Plato, *Symposium*, 202 d

⁹² Plato, *Symposium*, 203 b

⁹³ Evans, 2006, 4

⁹⁴ Plato, *Symposium*, 211 c

The version of Eros that Diotima presents through Socrates is tied to her femininity in a number of ways. The language that she uses in forming her idea of Eros as well as some of the traits Eros is imbued with are all tied to femininity. The role of spiritual midwife that Diotima takes between the men and Eros is similar to the mediator role that Eros takes between men and gods. By showing the similarities between these two characters, Plato shows the innate femininity that Eros has in his nature. Plato acknowledges the importance of a female voice by having Socrates recount his interaction with Diotima and giving her a voice within the context of the rest of the story. The character and myth that Diotima bases her lesson off of cannot be separated from the female figure Eros came from and formed his nature. Without Diotima's identity as a woman the nature of the character of Eros that she displays would be incomplete because the language she uses is tied to her female identity.

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