

2007

Mind Over Matter, Matter Over Mind: Phallusophy and Diotima

Anna Juan
Bucknell University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.bucknell.edu/chr>

Recommended Citation

Juan, Anna (2007) "Mind Over Matter, Matter Over Mind: Phallusophy and Diotima," *Comparative Humanities Review*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 9.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.bucknell.edu/chr/vol1/iss1/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Bucknell Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Comparative Humanities Review by an authorized administrator of Bucknell Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dcadmin@bucknell.edu.

Mind Over Matter, Matter Over Mind: Phallusophy and Diotima

Anna Juan
Bucknell University

Men get laid, but women get screwed.
—Quentin Crisp

The age-old notion of the “reign of the phallus” has presided over much of the course of human history and pre-history. Women joyfully embracing Bacchantic practices and cavorting with satyrs in various images of ancient Greek art attests to that fact; and the women of today who do not earn the same “dollar” as their male colleagues, for example, serve to continue that tradition. However, within Plato’s *Symposium*, there resides a progressive mind among the sea of Y-chromosomes in the guise of Diotima, a woman who teaches Socrates the “art of love.” Not only does she infiltrate the male sphere by her mere feminine presence, but she also acts as the figure that makes reachable what the men have placed upon a pedestal: the possibility of “reproduction” through Love. With regards to the maleness of the philosophic profession, she aims to universalize the concept of Love. It is no longer solely a male venue, but one which can be of use to the whole of human race, rather than focusing on the “reign” of men who aim to define it specifically.

The *Symposium* itself is a phallic practice: men match their wits by using eloquence of language and argument as they make merry in the midst of wine, women, and song. It can be paralleled with a typical

American Super Bowl party (sans the nonexistent brevity of ancient Greek pontification which would probably ruin the game!) As a woman, Diotima supposedly represents the insatiable sexual drive of women, which is a risk to the balance of a sophrosyne-practicing male majority. However, Diotima does not present an invasive threat to the masculine setting of the symposium. Rather, she serves to speak on behalf of her belief pertaining to the nature of Love. Thus, she enters the symposium as challenging the realm of men already: she offers discourse on a topic that they have chosen, while keeping a distance from the physicality of her Being as a temptation to them. She takes into account the others' arguments in a passive-aggressive fashion; she calmly questions, rather than using her sexuality as possible power over them.

In her argument, Diotima aims to characterize Love by means of "reproduction and birth in beauty" (Plato 53). Reproduction, here, must be discussed by Diotima herself: the female, in her possession of a womb, is the only one able to see to it that reproduction is carried out. Men simply supply the means of being able to engender. They will always lack the ability to physically understand birth. Reproduction, Diotima says, is ongoing: "it is what mortals have in place of immortality" (Plato 54). So, if "a lover must desire immortality along with the good," then Love is eternally connected to virtue, whose reward is immortality. She also speaks about possibility of a "virtuous man" to reproduce. He "conceives and gives birth to what he has been carrying inside him for ages," (Plato 57) which is the idea, inspired by the beauty of a subject. Diotima acts as a contrast for the male here, in the sense that she represents what they are trying to imitate.

There is an instance of Lochrie's "queer practice" here: the male wishes to take on "various strategies by which makes, in many different cultures, arrogate to themselves the power and prestige of female (pro)creativity" (Halperin 285). Halperin presents the possibility that the male desires to have a vagina. It seems to be a reversal of the "penis envy" that is attributed to Greek women of the time, who were obsessed with filling their "vaginal void", depicted as jumping joyfully into baskets full of obscenely large phalloi. Diotima's insistence on the importance of the ejection of the construct of Love (in this case, the idea), its birthing, further strengthens the aim of Diotima to bring the two sexes together. One would err in saying that she gives the female any more access to the male world; rather, she denigrates the status of men in their desire to be like the women that they are so determined to subjugate and control.

Diotima can also be viewed within Galen's lens of the human being during ancient Greek times, which is exemplified by the one-sex model.

He compares the difference between female genitalia with that of the eyes of a mole.

The eyes of the mole have the same structures as the eyes of other animals except that they do not allow the mole to see. They do not open, “nor do they project but are left there imperfect.” So too the female genitalia “do not open” and remain an imperfect version of what they would be were they thrust out. (Laqueur 28)

Hence, the male and female that are presented here appear as a “freakish variety” (Laqueur 28) of each other. It is important to note that Diotima is a “freakish variety” of Socrates himself; she speaks through his voice and, in essence, acts as his contribution to the symposium. Another incidence of “queering” takes place: she plays the role of the man without physically being there; here, Socrates acts as the “thrust out” organ for the (feminine) internalized idea. Halperin’s theory of the “active” and “passive” roles can be applied in this situation.

sex was not conceived as a collective enterprise in which two or more persons jointly engaged, but as an action performed by one person upon another; sex therefore effectively divided, classified, and distributed its participants into distinct and radically opposed categories (“penetrator vs. “penetrated”) (Halperin 266)

Here, conversely, the theory is reversed: Diotima is the active speaker, while Socrates is the passive vessel.

It is also important to note that Diotima does not mention women as her subject; it is not Plato’s aim for her to speak for women in general (Halperin 295).

Nothing in herself, “woman” is that pseudo-Other who both makes good what men want and exempts men from wanting anything at all; she is an alternate male identity whose constant accessibility to men lends men a fullness and totality that enables them to dispense...with otherness altogether. (Halperin 297)

It is true that Diotima is defined within the male realm of the symposium, and she only appears to give her argument. She does not proposition Socrates as Alcibiades does, but demonstrates a reserve that is uncharacteristic of the typical female depiction of the time. She contrasts with the Bacchantic figures of the flute girls as an entity that Socrates himself respects for her intelligence and offer of teaching. Diotima is actually never discussed without mention of Socrates: they seem to appear as a whole. This occurrence in itself does indeed prove Halperin’s argument, but also promotes the idea of universality in the sexes. Some theories that

Diotima never existed prevail, but it is in her existence as the Other that is merged with Socrates, the one who defines her, that makes the construct powerful. Diotima is within Socrates (whether imagined or as a memory), and femininity cannot heretofore be considered a separate individual from him, which essentially implies a merging of the sexes.

The one-sex model, conclusively, is rather ambivalent. If “the vagina [is] an eternally...unborn penis [and] the womb a stunted scrotum,” then is it not possible that the penis can represent an inside-out vagina? (Laqueur 28) In turn, one must consider whether or not this bi-conditional inversion proves to be a detrimental aspect within this argument: does it not follow that if women are simply inverted men, then are they not simply abnormal men who want to be penetrated by their normal selves? Both sexes have an inherent desire to be penetrated when this bi-conditional is applied: men have their “phallic void” as possessors of an inverted vagina, thus paralleling the supposed characteristic of women having an unquenchable sexual vigor. Again, equalization occurs within the one-sex model, which hearkens back to Diotima’s aim to lessen the disparity between the sexes.

The issue that naturally follows, then, is the discrepancy between male desire for women and for Athenian adolescents. How would the (supposedly) gender-universalized man now choose between the woman, who would fill his hypothetical “phallic void” and the young boy through whom he must birth his brainchild? The man must bear in mind his own attempt at practicing *sophrosyne*; after all, they must uphold their social status, and the fact that sex is not a private thing. The later example of the *lex Julia* exhibits this societal “problem”: the penetration of a male is punishable by death, and a woman is only protected by the law depending on her degree of usefulness to the whole of society. A similar phenomenon of the male as desiring to control the female productivity and activity is again manifested in this attempt to hold back the desire of the female. Males are protected by the law only until they are penetrated—they then become women who cannot practice *sophrosyne* and will no longer positively contribute to the polis.

This, however, does not reconcile the inevitable choice that is made by any “virtuous man.” The lack of availability of the role of pederast to the woman therefore hands her the short end of the leash in that, despite the equalizing of gender attempted by Diotima, they still do not possess the power to give knowledge. They simply engage in “erotic desire [consisting] of excitation brought on by pregnancy and climaxing in the ejaculation of a baby” (Halperin 281). Oddly enough, reproduction (which places them in a state that men cannot attain) is the very element in their

sexuality that does not allow them to fully complete the circle of equalization.

One must consider the how well the phallus is “reigning” with respect to the arguments that have been put forth. There seems to be a dichotomy between seeming to reign and the façade that the phallus hides behind. Socrates, who, in essence, taints Diotima’s discourse with the presence of his maleness, is in turn castrated by her femaleness. A double “castration,” happens here. The “reign of the phallus” is made effeminate in paralleling with women, but it is important to remember that the female does not grow a phallus in response. She remains “the penetrated”: she is “both active and passive at once, both [a subject and object] of desire” (Halperin 270). Despite the fact that Diotima participates in pederasty in the case of Socrates, she remains only behind him, contaminated by the sheer usage of his voice as hers: she is still the Other. However, the fact that the female Other, defined by the normative male, continues to exist outside the realm of defined “authentic femininity” (Halperin 297) still prevails. It has yet to occur: this is its advantage over the male. Their masculinity is already defined, while femininity has yet to truly challenge its supposed “reign.”

Works Cited

- Halperin, David et. al., eds. “Why Is Diotima A Woman? Platonic Eros and the Figuration of Gender.” *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990.
- Laqueur, Thomas. “Destiny is Anatomy.” *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990.
- Plato. *Symposium*. Trans. Paul Woodruff, Alexander Nehamas. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989.