Aspasia’s and Diotima’s Rhetoric:
Annotated Bibliography


While Glenn does cover large span of rhetorical history, this annotation focuses solely on Classical Greek women rhetoricians, namely Aspasia and Diotima (which coincides with the first two chapters of Glenn’s book). Glenn claims that by examining the history of rhetoric, we can see that rhetoric has always been subject to the relationship between power and language. She utilizes historical, feminist, and gender studies to examine women’s roles in the history of rhetoric. She makes the claim that scholars cannot just keep adding women in because it runs the risk of tokenism through “cameo appearance,” which does not undermine any canonical ideologies (9); instead, scholars must critically engage with women’s texts. Glenn proceeds to “engage” with Aspasia’s and Diotima’s speeches by summarizing them and offering historical context to understand them.


Halperin notes that Diotima is educating Socrates on love and male desires, instead of educating men on women’s desires; she is explaining men to men, instead of explaining women to men. He examines the gender-specific features of her speech to show why she is the expert and proper vehicle for this discourse. He finds that Diotima is a representation of femininity that further silences the actual feminine. Halperin ultimately argues that Diotima is Plato’s projection of women in order to define the masculine. Diotima is a mask for men so men may re-inscribe male identity through female difference/absence. This chapter may be useful in terms of considering gender-specific speech tropes and rhetorical methods, although it also initially began sounding essentialist. His conclusion complicates the essentialism because he finds men pretending to adopt feminine aspects to clarify male identity. In terms of rhetorical analysis of Diotima’s speech, this essay is mildly helpful.


Henry begins with the argument that most scholars examine Aspasia in terms of her sexuality and relationship with Pericles, and not as a rhetorician and philosopher. She provides biographical data on Aspasia and reviews classical texts that discuss Aspasia. Henry discusses how three classical plays by Cratinus, Eupolis, and Hermippus all portray Aspasia as a concubine, and that these were written in order to discredit Pericles and their son. Henry reads Plato’s use of Aspasia as a way to insult funeral orators. She ends with a chapter discussing Peter Abelard and Heloise because Heloise invokes Aspasia in her writing.

This article by the famous feminist examines Diotima with a slight focus on her actual rhetoric. Irigaray sees Diotima as approaching her argument not through traditional methods of deconstruction of terms to establish a synthesis, but as an intermediary method. Diotima will argue that love is something in-between opposites. Instead of beginning from established truths, Diotima will draw attention to the questionable nature of the truths, as an aspect of intermediary. Irigaray notes flaws in Diotima’s argument. She contends that Diotima’s switch from Love to procreation seems out of place and contrary to her previous line of reasoning (38), as well as where the argument seems to go off into another area (higher mysteries) than where it originally began. Overall, the scholar finds the first part of Diotima’s speech strong, but her second part has a weaker method as it takes on more meta-physics. This article is one of the few that begin to analyze Diotima’s rhetoric, yet the rhetorical analysis could be more engaged and expanded upon.


Jarratt and Ong begin with the typical question: did Aspasia exist? They then focus on the notion that Aspasia’s reputation as a seductress and woman of excess stems from gendered xenophobia. Since she was not from Athens (instead, one of the colonies), she is linked to qualities of the Oriental stereotype. The authors contextualize women’s roles in Athens to show how unique Aspasia’s influence was at the time. They point out the gendered contradictions in her funeral speech; she was a unique woman, and yet when she speaks through Plato’s writing she erases her role as woman, reproducer of men, to focus on Athens as the producer of men. They also argue that her speech is a way for Plato to ridicule those who would be persuaded by an outsider.


Krell begins with a discussion on Socrates’ view that knowledge is remembrance, and possessing a deep love of knowledge. Krell argues that people tend to overlook Socrates’ recreation of Diotima’s dialogue because it contradicts Plato’s doctrines and Western traditions (161). The article proceeds to examine Diotima’s arguments that love is related to wisdom, beauty, and good. Krell analyzes Diotima’s content, and summarizes her concept of knowledge. She argues that people change and knowledge changes as people learn it and knowledge changes individuals as they learn it. She explains its vacillating nature as knowledge can slip away, and we can recall it, and as we recall it we alter its state and learn it anew, therefore replacing old knowledge with new knowledge. She makes knowledge regenerative (each recalling creates a new generation—each memory of knowledge creates new knowledge). Similar to children who seem the same as their parents, recalled knowledge seems the same but it really is slightly different. Krell then questions who Diotima is and if her argument is to be trusted. He pulls other Plato dialogues and examines the key words of Socrates, and finds traces of Diotima’s arguments in his other dialogues. Krell’s article provides an understanding of Diotima’s content, and is another example of scholars engaging with the content and not focusing on how she constructs her argument.

Nye writes a rebuttal to Irigaray’s argument. Nye criticizes Irigaray for accusing Diotima of abandoning her beginning style of ironic attacks on Socrates’ dualistic, hierarchical categories (47). Nye believes Irigaray has misread Diotima when Irigaray claims Diotima shares a Platonist view of love. Initially, this scholar believes that Irigaray read a poor translation. Nye offers her own translation of the speech to contradict Irigaray’s interpretation. She further interrogates Irigaray’s analysis that Diotima’s argument moves vertically and hierarchically; Nye sees Diotima’s speech progressing from narrow to inclusive and fluid (48). Ultimately, she finds fault with the previous scholar’s choice of deconstruction to examine the text. She claims deconstruction is not the correct critical lens because Diotima is not arguing for a hierarchical logic and Diotima is also not trying to undermine authoritative logic (50). Irigaray wants Diotima to be subverting patriarchal texts. She wants her to be in a struggle of patriarchal semiotics, and using a distinct feminine style; however, this is counter-historical and inaccurate. Diotima was seen as a prophetess/priestess; her words carried authority. She finally contends that Irigaray wanted to see struggle, thereby disallowing that Diotima was arguing for interactional discourse. Nye’s article provides further rhetorical analysis in terms of Diotima’s argumentative structure, but because she is countering Irigaray, there are still areas where critical analysis with Diotima’s text could be expanded upon.


Swearingen explores Diotima as an example of women as “teachers, religious celebrants, and orators in classical antiquity” (25). She examines Diotima through postmodern feminist theory (specifically the notions of female writing through “the body”) to see how Plato presents Diotima as counter-argument for his support of ascetic love over heterosexual physical love. Swearingen believes Diotima is arguing the nature of love and its connection to divinity. This interpretation shows Diotima defending love as the vehicle of qualities that originate in the divine and transfer to humans, as well as the vehicle between human individuals. She also claims that Diotima’s speech relies on older sources of earlier Greek religion. The scholar also briefly touches upon the argument that some other critics present that Diotima and Aspasia are stand-ins for one another. Swearingen also opposes the scholars who liken Diotima to the Sophists, which by doing so is other scholars way of degrading the Sophists as feminine. She briefly brings up the notion that Diotima suggests a feminine collective consciousness which could be connected to Virginia Woolf’s writing. This article is valuable because Swearingen mentions a practical application and rhetorical exercise in making a connection between Diotima’s speech and Woolf’s writing; however, this is only mentioned in passing and could be elaborated upon.


Swearingen takes issue with scholars who uncritically claim that Plato appropriated women’s voice and rhetorical styles. She examines how Plato represents women’s discourse and the notion of feminine gender qualities in his writing. She finds that while many scholars contend that Plato presents misogynists or at the least negative views of women, those same scholars ignore his textual references that show positive female representations. Swearingen argues that the Oracle at Delphi still spoke coherently, was highly respected, and a part of Greek religious life during Plato’s writing. He shows women did have a voice, and offering non-hierarchical and non-combative modes of teaching. While historians and other scholars tend to depict women as passive, hysterical, and powerless, Plato’s representations of Diotima and Aspasia show women engaged in politics, philosophizing, and educating others. Swearingen closes with the acknowledgment that Plato might have appropriated women’s voices with the
representation of Diotima and Aspasia, but this is not as negative as one might think. By doing so, Plato was also preserving earlier teachings modes of instruction, and methods of argumentation. While this article is interesting and counters many negative assumptions about Plato’s representation of women, ultimately this article provides little assistance for my research.