

Diotima: A Woman Philosopher at Plato's Symposium.

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Plato's *Symposium* has attracted the attention of various sets of scholars: from experts in ancient Greek philosophy to scholars of Greek literature and historians of Classical antiquity. Notably, the dialogue has also inspired a lively debate among scholars studying women in antiquity and in the history of philosophy, feminist philosophers, and gender historians. The reason for this is the leading role of Diotima of Mantinea.

Set in 416 BCE, the *Symposium* is a dramatic work staging the conversation between Socrates and the elite of his time: the tragic poet Agathon, at whose house the dinner party is hosted, the legislator Pausanias, the physician Erixymachus, the comedy-writer Aristophanes, and a member of the Athenian aristocracy named Phaedrus. At Agathon's request, the participants take turns in delivering speeches in praise of *Eros*, Love. Socrates goes last. Yet, rather than interrogating his fellow guests, as one might expect him to do, Socrates decides to recount the lessons he received in the matter of love from the priestess and prophetess Diotima.

Diotima is thus introduced as the teacher of the wise Socrates, "skilled in this and many other subjects" (Pl. *Symp.* 201d). In the speech, she reportedly characterises Love as a mediator, an intermediate, something halfway ugliness and beauty, mortals and immortals, ignorance and knowledge. She then gives Socrates a genealogy of Eros as the offspring of Penia (poverty) and Poros (resource), who lacks beauty and immortality and yet strives to attain them. Specifically, love is what enables humans to produce, or beget, the beautiful. Diotima teaches Socrates that there are various kinds, or objects, of love – from the love of bodies and the love of souls to the love of what the soul creates, such as laws, institution, poetry, science, and knowledge, and lastly the love for what Plato names Beauty itself. Love, then, allows humans to ascend from physical attraction and the biological procreation of offspring to the intellectual and divine production of wisdom.

Besides the content of her teachings, what makes Diotima such an important and controversial figure is that she is one of the very few women, if not the only woman from Classical antiquity, credited with having philosophical ideas. The panorama of ancient Greek women philosophers is fragmented and difficult to explore. The primary difficulty is the lack of direct evidence: most women philosophers left no written works and the writings of those who did have not survived. All we know about these women amounts to indirect reports written by much later authors, all of whom are men. Moreover, these accounts tend to have a biographical focus and say more about how these female intellectuals lived rather than what they thought and how they contributed to the philosophical debates of their time. This raises the issue of how to access the ideas of women philosophers, when their contributions are mediated by the opinions (and biases) of their male contemporaries and successors.

The earliest case of female engagement with ancient Greek philosophy we have evidence for is that of the female members of Pythagoras' intellectual circles in the fifth century BCE. Yet the Pythagoreans did not write anything and those few texts that survive under the names of Pythagorean women are nowadays considered inauthentic forgeries. In the Hellenistic period, we find numerous women joining philosophical communities and involved in philosophical practice, such as Hipparchia, the wife of the Cynic philosopher Crates, who nonetheless left no written works either. Finally, in the late fourth century CE, the mathematician and Neoplatonist philosopher Hypatia of Alexandria became the head of the head of a philosophical school in Egypt. This makes her the most well-known woman philosopher from Greek antiquity. Yet, while it is well attested that Hypatia wrote philosophical treatises and commentaries, her writings are now lost. All this has led to the assumption that Greek philosophy was a predominantly – if not exclusively – male enterprise.

At first reading, Socrates' speech in Plato's *Symposium* might appear as a refreshing change. Not only do we come across a woman introduced as an intellectual authority and the educator of Socrates, but we also have a clear and detailed record of her original philosophical theories concerning love and knowledge. The

controversy, however, is far from over. Most scholars consider Diotima to be a literary figure and a mere mouthpiece for what in fact are Plato's own views. The debate concerning Diotima revolves around three questions: first, whether she really existed, if she is a historical figure or simply a fictional character; second, for what reason Plato chose her as the spokesperson for the theory of love in the *Symposium*; and third, whether her gender really matters.

That Diotima never existed was first suggested, not by Plato's contemporaries, but by Marsilio Ficino in the fifteenth century. The primary reason for this is that there is little to no evidence of Diotima's historicity beyond Plato. On the other hand, scholars like Mary Ellen Waithe and Alfred Edward Taylor have noticed that most characters in Plato's dialogues are historical figures, or figures whose authenticity is rarely called into question, and thus it would be odd for Diotima to be a mere figment of his imagination. Most scholars nowadays agree that, regardless of whether or not Diotima existed, she could hold a fictionalised role in the dialogue. The question is why Plato would include her in the dialogue. The reasons for this are twofold: first, Diotima may be there not simply as a woman, but rather as a priestess speaking about love as the intermediate between humans and the gods. Second, Peter Adamson has recently noticed how Diotima's gender might reinforce the gendered nature of Plato's arguments, focused on love, beauty, pregnancy, and procreation. According to Adriana Cavarero, Plato would then be appropriating a woman's wisdom, rather than preserving it. Stanley Rosen even describes the character of Diotima as a 'masculine woman', for she values intellectual production more than biological procreation. Notably, in response to this debate, Frisbee Sheffield has recently argued that, rather than being the mouthpiece for distinctively female ideas, Diotima shows how philosophy can be done by both men and women and therefore is beyond gender.

Overall, the scholarship goes from suggesting that Diotima is a real female thinker from antiquity and that her philosophical ideas were original and influential to arguing that Diotima's very contribution to Plato's *Symposium* is proving that philosophy was considered genderless and intellectual activity went beyond gender roles and distinctions. What can be said with a fair amount of certainty is that the character of Diotima shows how Plato believed women, or some women, to be capable of philosophising. What she taught and whether the theory of love is her own, unfortunately, is difficult to determine. Diotima is not present at the dinner party. Her wisdom is indeed recognised by the attendees, but once again reported and mediated by a man. Nevertheless, Diotima remains an illustrious and intriguing case of woman philosopher from the ancient world.