



EROTICS AS A BRANCH OF PHILOSOPHY: THE LEGACY OF DIOTIMA OF MANTINEA

A ERÓTICA COMO RAMO DA FILOSOFIA: O LEGADO DE DIOTIMA DE MANTINEA

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The figure and discourse of Diotima of Mantinea in Plato's *Symposium* had a decisive influence on the Western tradition of women's thought and on the foundation of a "hidden" branch of philosophy: Erotics, that is, the philosophical consideration of love, sexuality, gender identity, interpersonal relationships and particularly relationships of *philia* such as friendship. Although Erotics was not established as one of the canonical subdivisions of philosophy, numerous texts and theories prove its existence from antiquity to the present day. Diotima and other female philosophers make it clear that the Western tradition of women's thought maintained a constant interest in the issues of Erotics. Making Erotics visible as a branch of philosophy situates the contributions of women thinkers in the philosophical canon, thereby transforming it.

Keywords: Women philosophers; Diotima of Mantinea; Erotics; history of philosophy; branches of philosophy; Western tradition of women's thought.

A figura e o discurso de Diotima de Mantinea no *Simpósio* de Platão tiveram uma influência decisiva na tradição ocidental do pensamento feminino e na fundação de um ramo "oculto" da filosofia: a Erótica, ou seja, a consideração filosófica do amor, da sexualidade, da identidade de gênero, das relações interpessoais e, particularmente, das relações de *philia*, tais como a amizade. Embora a Erótica não se tenha estabelecido como uma das subdivisões canônicas da filosofia, numerosos textos e teorias provam a sua existência desde a antiguidade até aos dias de hoje. Diotima e outras filósofas são a prova de que as questões da Erótica suscitaram um interesse constante na tradição ocidental do pensamento feminino. Tornar a Erótica visível como um ramo da filosofia situa as contribuições das mulheres pensadoras no cânone filosófico, transformando-o.

Palavras-chave: Mulheres Filósofas; Diotima de Mantinea; Erótica; História da Filosofia; Ramos da Filosofia; Tradição Ocidental do Pensamento das Mulheres.

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1. Women Philosophers: Notes Towards a Visible Tradition

For some decades now scholars have been urging the inclusion of women philosophers in the historical narrative of philosophy (O’Neill, 1998; Waithe, 1987–1991); more specifically, in the canon,² in books giving general overviews and in education, where their absence is increasingly unjustifiable. In the West, women philosophers have existed since the birth of philosophy in Ancient Greece and it would certainly be possible to outline a list including a good number of names.³ Nevertheless, it is still necessary to study the individual thought of these female philosophers in greater depth, situate it in its historical and philosophical context, trace its fortunes and devote due attention to what it conveys to us.

This paper sets out to make a small contribution to the transformation of the philosophical canon and the narrative of the history of Western philosophy. This is a task that should be inscribed in a more ambitious and urgent project (although that lies outside the scope of this article): formulating the canon from an intersectional point of view, i.e. one that would be both transnational and based on a gender and class perspective. The canon predominates, in fact, explicitly or implicitly, even when the thread of tradition is broken (Arendt, 2003, p. 314), surviving even in the era of de-canonization. With regard to the inclusion of women philosophers, I would like to draw attention to the verb “transform” used above, since it is not a question of forcing their theories into a set of already given structures, but of rethinking the structures themselves when analysing the form (or forms) and the contents of women’s philosophical thought. Currently, drawing up a list of female authors is clearly insufficient, as is tracing a segregated development. It is now imperative that we find a way to unite the fragments and articulate the genealogies in feminine philosophy while at the same time interpreting the ideas of each writer both in themselves and in dialogue with their historical and philosophical context.

An essential starting point for combining these two aspects was identified by Fina Birulés (2011, p. 11), who –developing on Hannah Arendt– reflects on the possible existence of a “hidden tradition” in women’s philosophy. According to Birulés, this “tradition” connecting women intellectuals’ thought is:

² The concept of the canon, which made its first appearance in the work of literary critic Harold Bloom (1995), has been extrapolated to various fields: the history of culture, art and philosophy, amongst others. Some time ago this idea became obsolete, although it is still difficult to dispense with it altogether.

³ One of the oldest is the *Historia mulierum philosopharum* by Gilles Ménage (2009).

A “hidden” tradition because there are few links between the great but isolated women who have asserted their will to think. And “tradition” because the same basic conditions of uprootedness, of lightness, have provoked the same fundamental reaction. (Birulés, 2011, p. 12)

For Birulés, what links women philosophers is basically their reaction to similar conditions; in other words, among them we find a similar way of approaching the act of thinking and the situation facing them in each case. This tradition is made up of “great” but “isolated” thinkers, she argues; an idea which calls to mind a tradition on the grand scale, built by outstanding women, by giants of philosophical thought. It is a “tradition of individuals” because there are few “influences” among them but, in contrast, considerable “coincidences”. Therefore the “continuity” of female philosophical thought was not consciously maintained (Birulés, 2011, p. 12). Birulés thus warns us of two dangers. Firstly, an essentialist and normative vision of feminine philosophical thought: in fact, there are no issues or topics that are the exclusive domain of women thinkers or to which they *should* devote their thought. Secondly, Birulés rejects the vision of women’s philosophy as a totality understood as such; instead, these philosophers formulated their thinking *singularly*, each making an *individual* contribution to philosophy. They wished to understand reality and the world they lived in and this relates each to their context and reveals the nuances in the multiple dialogues they give rise to with other male and female writers.

Here I would like to add one or two further considerations. First, the word “singular” should not be understood as perpetuating the *topos* of the *rara avis*, the *exceptional* woman (Rius, 1997, pp. 14–16); nor is it any longer possible to uphold a basic historical narrative made up of great atomized figures embodying closed, abstract words of theory. On the other hand, the opposite extreme, focusing only on microhistories, on history fragmented into a thousand shards, is also unworkable, since it prevents us from bringing together the minimum of unity which would enable us to understand history. Thus, the best approach to reconstructing this kaleidoscopic landscape while at the same time bringing out its richness and complexity is to build a narrative that combines the two tendencies, the macro and the micro, into a polyphonic synthesis (Burke, 2000, p. 252). The second question is that of the “hidden tradition”. Is it possible to trace a tradition of female thought that would not be *hidden* but *visible*? To do this we can point to Erotics as a subdiscipline of philosophy, in the awareness that “love is an enigmatic subject that cannot be articulated through the normative language of philosophy, and that compels us to approach it with the joyful openness of creativity” (Pagés, 2018, p. 98). Third, women philosophers do in fact occasionally reveal direct influences among themselves

through allusion, quotation and reference. One representative example is the *querelle des femmes*, an intellectual and cultural movement in which the arguments and demands around the female condition appearing in the writings of the women authors involved continued to reverberate for centuries (Gilleir, Montoya & Van Dijk, 2010; Kelly, 1988; Laurenzi, 2009; Segura Graíño, 2010, 2011). In this case, then, we can also identify a *visible* tradition.

The tradition of thought of the *querelle des femmes* should have a greater presence in general studies on the history of philosophy. It has a philosophical and political background in addition to its literary one, giving rise to interesting intertextual interconnections with, amongst others, the anthropological writings of the Renaissance. Comparison of Christine de Pizan's *Le Livre de la Cité des Dames* (1405) to Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's *Oratio de hominis dignitate* (1496) clearly shows this. However, the hegemonic view situates the *querelle* outside the history of philosophy, in the limbo of the unclassifiable. This, though, could certainly be formulated in another way, by asking the question: Does the thought of the *querelle* fit into any branch of philosophy, once situated in relation to its metaphysical, anthropological, ethical and political background? Not entirely, since feminine thinking often goes beyond philosophy while not losing sight of it (Pagés, 2018, p. 108). In particular, should we include theories of the female condition within the field of philosophical anthropology? This would be a possible choice, were it not that in the history of this branch of philosophy, "man" has always occupied both the positive pole and the "neutral" identity, representing the *anthropos* or universal subject, whereas women have been relegated to the negative pole of the unrepresented and unrepresentable, to a radical otherness (De Beauvoir, 2019, p. 47). From a feminist perspective, therefore, it makes sense to include the philosophical debate of the *querelle des femmes* in the branch of Erotics, because women's contributions to the *querelle* are first and foremost about love for themselves and for other women. Actually, this dialectical dialogue is not rooted in misogyny, but stems from feminine love, philogyny and sisterhood. The themes that emerge from this reflection rooted in love are: feminine identity, women's freedom and autonomy, girls' education, interpersonal relationships..., and they are defined in the first person singular and plural. These are central themes of Erotics as a branch of philosophy and provide a theoretical framework for analysing women's love for themselves.

To return to our previous discussion, it is absurd to confine the thought of women writers to specific issues and sever it from others, since both men and women *can* think whatever they like (Collin, 2006, p. 182). At the same time, it is clear that many female thinkers are interested in love and other themes that I have linked here to Erotics. Thus, it is not only necessary to *free*

this branch of philosophy from oblivion and ex-centricity, but also we must begin to analyse it rigorously and *freely* (Cavarero, 2014, p. 8). It is not the only topic that women philosophers have devoted their attention to (nor have all of them written about it), but it is one of the most important and recurrent. Some male philosophers, from Plato to Byung-Chul Han (2014), have also taken it up. If, thus, there are so many thinkers involved in the area, why have love and friendship not been deemed worthy of constituting a field of philosophical enquiry? I suspect that one of the reasons is precisely that it has mainly been developed by women. For the hegemonic masculine canon, what women write is not important and women's ideas have often been seen as not worth discussing. Women writers may have been well-known and memorable, but what comes down to us from them through the hegemonic tradition is above all men's astonishment at women daring to make what they thought public. Male writers did not think it necessary to go into detail; what they found extraordinary was that a woman should actually think and communicate her thinking. This is why we need to resort to circumstantial evidence to attempt an outline of this history that has been erased from history, using the existing fragments and lacunae, but also the writings that women thinkers have bequeathed us. Contemporary philosophical trends (Michel Foucault and Judith Butler are two outstanding examples) show that love, desire, friendship, sexuality, gender identity and relationships between people have the same value and interest as any other philosophical concern. Seeking the roots of this tradition of thought, we find Diotima and all the women philosophers who, in Western philosophy, have not always held the floor, but at least have always had a "voice".

2. Diotima: Eros as the Spur Towards Knowledge

Women philosophers have developed theories on Eros and *philia* from many different perspectives. One of the first recorded philosophical texts on Eros is Plato's *Symposium* (2008), in which Diotima of Mantinea, one of Socrates' teachers,⁴ is an important "voice". On the "voice" and the "female wisdom" represented by Diotima and on her as a "real woman" (Waithe, 1987, pp. 83–116) –curiously she is one of the few characters in the Platonic dialogues whose historical identity has been called into question (Nails, 2002; other perspectives on this issue: Galagarza Alfaro, 2018; Halperin, 1990)–, Anna Pagés writes:

⁴ Socrates' other female teacher was, according to the sources, Aspasia of Miletus (1994), another foreign woman, who was a hetera and teacher of rhetoric to sophists, philosophers, politicians and the most famous Ancient Athenian ruler, Pericles.

The interplay of questions and answers between Diotima and Socrates compels the philosopher to shift from the position of the questioner to the questioned. [...] The maieutic is shown to be a task for women, composed of utterances that are not directly listened to, and whose origin is the narration itself. The participation of Diotima during the dialogue invokes a crystal clear voice that decodes the whole. [...] Diotima only speaks. Like women. (Pagés, 2018, pp. 43–44)

Maieutics, one of the first modes of philosophy, is clearly linked to women. Male philosophers symbolically borrowed women’s ability to give birth and transferred this fertility to the sphere of knowledge (Cavarero, 2014). In the dialogue it is said that procreation through the body between men and woman is inferior to the procreation of spirits through beauty,⁵ a male homoerotic initiation leading to the contemplation of beauty in itself.⁶ Erotics forms part of the Greek *paideia*, the teacher/pupil relationship, a form of love different from that leading to marriage. Also, the irony of the *Symposium* is that in it, the most perfect erotic initiation is between a woman teacher and male pupil. Diotima takes the place of Socrates because she leads the philosophical enquiry. But she is also the absent participant, since she is the only one not actually attending the symposium. However, here we lack space to go deeply into Diotima’s role, as I focus instead on analysing a core idea in her speech: the nature and functions of Eros as an intermediary between ignorance and wisdom.

He is always midway between the two, just as he is between wisdom and ignorance. “The truth of the matter is this. No god pursues wisdom or desires to be wise because gods are wise already, and no one who is wise already pursues wisdom. But neither do ignorant people pursue wisdom or desire to be wise, for the problem of ignorance is this, that someone who is neither fine and good nor wise is still quite satisfied with himself. No one desires what he does not think he lacks”.⁷

Diotima’s contribution to the dialogue is to refute the view assumed by Socrates to be valid and commonly accepted, according to which Eros is the god of beautiful things and is himself good and beautiful. To support her argument and at the same time construct her theory of love, Diotima begins by calling binary logic into question, asking whether that which is not beautiful is necessarily ugly, and whether one who is not wise is necessarily ignorant.⁸ In this way the idea of an intermediate being or state arises; one which is neither one term nor its opposite, but which is found between the two and binds them together. Speaking of knowledge, she argues that there is something standing between wisdom (*sophia*) —or knowledge (*episteme*) —and ignorance: right opinion (*ortha doxa*). She adds that “right opinion, being

⁵ *Symposium*, 208e–209a.

⁶ *Symposium*, 211c.

⁷ *Symposium*, 203e–204a.

⁸ *Symposium*, 201e–202b.

incapable of giving a reason, is not knowledge, for how can knowledge be devoid of reason? Neither can it be ignorance, for how can ignorance chance on the truth?”.⁹ This is a paradoxical category in the Platonic theory of knowledge, since it links opinion (*doxa*) with truth (*aletheia*), although only knowledge (*episteme*) can lead to truth. The connection of opinion to truth is made through beauty, and its form of expression *par excellence* is myth:

However, although it is merely opinion, myth is a “right opinion” to the spirit (*alethés dóxa*) and for this reason (in the same way as love) it is a halfway state between ignorance and knowledge (...) precisely because –in the same way as love– it illuminates a transcendent, original and superior terrain. (Granada 1990, p. 36)

The philosopher should know how to use myth to enable spirits attached to the sensible world to leave behind their ignorance and take an upward step in the quest for truth. He has a rational spirit trained to grasp truth through abstract argument, and thus he dispenses with myth and remains in the sphere of theory. Hence the dialectical philosopher deploys a positive (not misleading) rhetoric that enchants his audience through the beauty of his language. Plato is aware of this magical aspect of language, through which “the enchanted spirit is detached from the sensible and attached with a loving tie to the transcendent and superior world to which myth opens the way” (Granada, 1990, p. 37). And, in fact, Diotima refers to the “spiritual man” (*daimonios aner*) or “daimon” as one who masters divination, prophecy and magic, and who is the vehicle for communication between the gods and humans.¹⁰ Then, when Alcibiades takes the floor, he identifies Eros with Socrates (Hadot, 1998, p. 54; Martín, 2019, p. 58), an idea already prefigured by Diotima when she claims that Eros is “a lifelong lover of wisdom, clever with magic and potions, and a sophist”;¹¹ i.e. he is both philosopher and sophist.

Eros is the one who loves, not the beloved,¹² the one who desires and not the desired, and directs his desire and love towards the good¹³ and the beautiful. Thus, Eros is neither sorcerer nor philosopher exclusively, but is the love “of procreating and giving birth in the beautiful”.¹⁴ Desire and love contain within themselves a dialectic of “lack” and “resourcefulness”, concepts related to the mythic birth of Eros: desiring and loving implies that one lacks what one wishes to possess and, at the same time, that one has the courage, drive and skill needed to seek what

⁹ *Symposium*, 202a.

¹⁰ *Symposium*, 203a.

¹¹ *Symposium*, 203d–e.

¹² *Symposium*, 204c.

¹³ *Symposium*, 206a.

¹⁴ *Symposium*, 206e.

one loves.¹⁵ The Eros described by Diotima is the desire that yearns for knowledge and has as its goal the contemplation of the beautiful, which is also the good. The ascent towards knowledge of beauty is progressive: from the love that is the admiration for the particular beauty of things (first material, then spiritual and intellectual) one advances step by step towards the universal idea of beauty. This is known as the Socratic-Platonic theory of love, but the subject of this discourse is Diotima. For her, the virtue that the rational soul should exercise is not intelligence, as Plato says in the *Republic*, but Eros itself, since desire is what spurs us towards knowledge. Logos has no vigour without the power of Eros (“Der Logos ist kraftlos ohne die Macht des Eros”; Han, 2015, p. 66). Without the energy that desire arouses, the ascent through knowledge cannot happen and, consequently, the spirit cannot achieve immortality.

3. Echoes of Diotima in the History of Erotics

Diotima’s speech brings a suggestive idea to the table: directly or indirectly, both her and many other women writers stress *philein* more than *sophia*. In the history of Western philosophy the emphasis has traditionally been placed on the noun, wisdom. They, in contrast, illuminate and give theoretical form to Eros through their ideas and experiences. It is true that wisdom has been an ideal and objective for women thinkers throughout history, and traditional iconography has personified the abstract idea in female form. However, if we combine the elevation of wisdom to an idealised, divine level with the hegemonic under-valuing of women’s capacities, not to speak of the multiple barriers to education faced by women for centuries, we can understand why, in general terms, wisdom is not only unreachable but also unthinkable for them. What could not be uprooted was Diotima’s symbolic legacy: Eros, the desire for knowledge, *l’ardeur d’apprendre* as Christine de Pizan called it (2009, p. 129). “Without lack there is no love; neither is there without another to aspire to. Diotima is really a metaphor of the possibility of going beyond oneself in the desire to find the unreachable answer to what we lack” (Pagés, 2018, p. 41). *Philein* is thus the desire to go continually further on the road to knowledge, this infinite path, aptly matched by the infinite desire spurring women to follow it.

To illustrate the historic echoes of Diotima’s ideas on the intermediary nature of Eros and his function as a go-between, I will focus on two women writers: Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179) and Marguerite Porete (d. 1301). Analysis of their writings shows that in the Middle Ages

¹⁵ *Symposium*, 203d.

the dichotomy between faith and reason as modes of knowing God was not in fact binary. Their separation is interrupted by an alternative, a third way of knowledge that has not been sufficiently acknowledged in the history of medieval philosophy. This is the way of love, discussed in depth by, amongst others, women mystics, who had a deep philosophical bent. Strongly influenced by the Gospel of John, their thought on love as a way of knowledge is an interest shared by the three women writers studied here. Christianity was the new framework within which it was formulated, but this does not erase the likenesses between them.

Hildegard of Bingen, then, deploys the terms of faith and reason within the conceptual scheme of her times, at the same time developing an interesting theory of *rationalitas* and *caritas*. In the ninth of her *Homilies on the Gospels*, Hildegard (2007) comments on the prologue to the Gospel of John, distinguishing between God's *rationalitas increata* and humankind's *rationalitas creata* (Chávez Alvarez, 1991, pp. 135–143). These are radically distinct due to the infiniteness of the former and the finiteness of the latter. God is omniscient and none of the *humanae scientiae* can ever penetrate the mysteries of His *Sapientia*. Discussing created reason, Hildegard makes a further division. On the one hand, reason has an analytical use (as in the scholastics) which consists in dissecting the object of study. On the other, human beings possess a rational capacity that does not split the object but understands it holistically, affording a more fitting apprehension of God as a whole and indivisible Being. This faculty is not reason, nor even its highest element, intellect; neither is it faith. What Hildegard seeks to define here is a different type of apprehension that, while it contains a major intellectual component, does not depend so much on human faculties as on God's grace. *Comprehension through charity* is a type of intellection that is infused with divine grace and that Hildegard associates with the Holy Spirit. In other words, the highest understanding of God is reached when He grants the gift of understanding in love and through grace.

Marguerite Porete offers a new formulation of this question in *The Mirror of Simple Souls* (1993). Love is an order of knowledge superior to reason and in which the soul undergoes an ascent-descent towards its own annihilation through its awareness of being nothing. The *Entendement d'amour* ("Intellect of Love") is a powerful form of intellection, fertile and unlimited because it unites the individual soul with God, and which Marguerite opposes to the *Entendement de Raison* ("Intellect of Reason"), a highly limited logical-discursive form of reason (Porete, 1993, p. 93; see Porete, 2001, p. 70, n. 12). Love here is not a spirit or a way of understanding God, but both Love and the soul are God: "I am God, says Love says, for Love is God and God is Love [1Jn 4, 16], and this Soul is God by the condition of Love. I am God

by divine nature and this Soul is God by righteousness of Love” (Porete, 1993, p. 104). The amorous union of the soul with God is a constant point of reference in women’s mysticism—with important nuances that should be carefully studied—which also features in the writings of the male mystics. One of Porete’s characteristic ideas is the split between love and desire: “Thought is no longer of worth to me, / Nor work nor speech. / Love draws me so high / (Thought is no longer of worth to me) / With her divine gaze, / That I have no intent” (Porete, 1993, p. 198). The act of desiring brings with it the affirmation of the individuality of the soul, of its will and the positivity of its being. In contrast, true freedom is reached by means of spiritual death, by letting oneself go in the arms of Love and reducing the soul to its greatest simplicity and annihilation; this is when it turns into a mirror reflecting the divine will and in its non-being becomes God. The theories of Hildegard and Marguerite are different, but one essential idea unites them: that there exists a way of thinking the divinity that is neither reason nor faith, but a form of intellection illuminated by divine love.

4. Conclusion

The main contribution of this text is to introduce a new theoretical and methodological framework for the analysis of the tradition of women’s thought. Instead of dealing with women thinkers in the history of philosophy, it proposes to focus on Erotics, an invisible branch of philosophy to which women philosophers have recurrently—though not exclusively—contributed. It is necessary to continue analysing the contributions of Diotima of Mantinea, Hildegard of Bingen, Marguerite Porete, thinkers of the *querelle des femmes* such as Christine de Pizan, Moderata Fonte and Lucrezia Marinella, as well as numerous other philosophers of all times. In addition to continuing to name them so that they do not fall into oblivion again, the legacy of women philosophers needs to be further explored. However, I do not believe that the study of their thought should be traced as a parallel history of philosophy. Nor should the analysis of their texts be forced to fit into the philosophical canon, a structure that was created without reckoning with women, without reckoning with otherness and diversity. In Erotics, which emerged from Diotima’s maieutic mastery, certain themes and concepts acquire philosophical dignity: love, the experience of the desire to think, women’s love for themselves and for their identity, interpersonal relationships as well as women’s freedom and autonomy, among others. Erotics as a branch of philosophy is a breach, a wound, in the walls of history, a

space won from freedom and consciousness. I invite you to continue defining it and enriching it with everyone's contributions.

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