

# Not to Be Spoken

An Essay on Feminist Rhetoric & Gendered Space

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### Not to Be Spoken: An Essay on Feminist Rhetoric & Gendered Space

In the 5th century B.C. Thucydides recorded the Funeral Oration of Pericles, in which Pericles is attributed to making one of the most famous and frequently repeated viewpoints in Greek history, “the greatest glory for a woman is not to be spoken of at all, either for good or ill.” Most historians, scholars, and rhetoricians have taken that ode seriously, and the rhetorical traditions and contributions of women have long been ignored in classical scholarship. Over the past several decades, the study of feminine rhetorical traditions has gained a renewed focus thanks to both the feminist and gender studies movements. Historians and feminists alike frequently grapple with questions about how to remap the rhetorical narratives of a class of people as marginalized and removed from public participation as the women of Ancient Greece. As we reevaluate the hierarchies created by a masculine/feminine binary in ancient times, it is often necessary to filter the rhetorical landscape (both figuratively and literally) in search of new geographies where the contributions of feminine communication may have settled themselves. Doing so could portend new insights regarding the gender binary and how the roles of masculine and feminine frequently interacted with each other. This essay will consider the concept of “space” and how gendered space can help to understand the contributions of feminine rhetorical practices in ancient times.

The concept of “space” is important in rhetorical frameworks because it consists of both physical and non-physical modes of understanding. Rhetoricians usually consider space as a metaphor meant to describe the cultural landscape of laws, customs, and beliefs that form the

geographies of our lives (Mountford 41). Within the realm of gender studies space can mean actual physical locations, characteristics, body movements, and cultural or material arrangements (42) that interact with or represent the power dynamics of gendered bodies. According to the latter, standard gender roles are constantly reinforced in the world around us. The location and positioning of the perceived male in a female “space” sets the scene for all kinds of interpretations based on social contexts. Annette Giesecke, a specialist in the historical representations of ancient Greek landscapes states, “The gender of a place, or rather our perception of it, is fluid and tied to culturally determined, often unstated assumptions on the part of both actors and observers about what constitutes male and female activities” (188). Giesecke's work indicates that physical locations are informed by the masculine/feminine gender binary, which is significant when attempting to understand the historical practices of ancient women because so many of the ways women communicated and made meaning within society were restricted.

The society of ancient Athens was divided into a series of social hierarchies that applied to both public and private spaces. The home was considered the proper space for women, but the extent of how divided males and females were within this space is something scholars have conflicting opinions about. According to Susan Jarrett, “Scholars such as Gaston Bachelard held up the home as an idealized image sketched as a purely masculinized view of a “safe womb-like nest” (Jarrett, 15). Bachelard’s viewpoint of the home was an ideal masculine space used as a storing place where a wife would be nothing more than a possession. This is contradicted by Michael Jameson, an archeologist, who finds “there is no way to determine if specific parts of the house “belonged” specifically to women (or men) and that most of the chores associated with feminine work (such as weaving, childcare, cooking, etc.) would take place in the large central courtyard – a space associated with masculinity and men’s typical coming and goings” (Jarrett, 15). This coincides with the work of

Michael Scott who points out that “Xenophon regarded women as the *Queen Bees* of the household... women were more visible in the variety and importance of the roles they played within ancient society” (Scott, 40). The portrait of the Athenian wife living a cloistered harem-like existence diminishes when replaced by a view of home as a distinctly feminine territory. Defining the home as “feminine” space makes sense considering that women spent most of their time in the home while men frequently came and went in their activities. Men left to tend to fields, participate in speechmaking, attend to city affairs, or make war. The home was a place of return and refuge for men, but for women, it was a primary domain.

While the seclusion of women in the home may be accurate regarding some features of life within Hellenistic Athens, there were some outdoor spaces frequently associated with the practices of women. The women of 100 years earlier had more freedom than those depicted in the time of Plato or Socrates, and frequently traveled without escorts, they participated in dancing, singing, and practicing cult religions (Jarrett, 14). Jarrett explains,

“One of the developments of the seventh century – crucial for the formation of the *polis* – was the establishment of cults and the building of temples...sites for religious practices in three different relations to the city... the acropolis (around which the city organized itself)...the suburban (located on the margins of the city)...and the extra urban sanctuary situated at a distance from the city to be out of the daily routine but close enough to be accessible. (17).

Such a place would become a perfect setting for feminine prose where women would contribute to the rhetorical tradition.

In the sixth century, the female poet and lyricist named Sappho established herself as a well-known and historically significant contributor to the oral traditions of women. Sappho’s lyrical

ballads detailing the comings and goings of women. Her songs detailed women's experiences moving from childhood into adulthood, the divine favor of the goddesses, and traditions that helped define what it meant to be a woman. These lyrical ballads were frequently situated in natural outdoor spaces or private gardens. Much of Sappho's poetic settings are indicative of the extra-urban environment where women were "private in their separation from the rest of the group, but public in the sense of engaging in religious practices sanctioned by and in service to the *polis*" (Jarrett 19). Sappho's ballads depict areas lush in natural beauty but also cultivated for an urban environment including statues, altars, and various other remnants used for social gatherings. According to Giesecke, "Sappho's landscape bear both the indelible marks of active human cultivation and a strong divine presence...they were wooded places set apart from, or more properly, off-cuts...literally carved out of the wilderness...and they functioned as critical *loci* of the interface between the human and the divine (181). It could be argued that women writing about, or even frequenting, outdoor spaces does not necessarily mark the space itself as a gendered area. After all, gender is a fluid and shifting thing, and if the space of the home can represent both a masculine and feminine ideal, Sappho's Gardens could serve a similar function. To understand how the setting of an area may influence itself as gendered space we must also carefully consider the context of specific texts and how the settings are used to inspire either masculine or feminine cultural standards. Sappho's contemporary Alcaeus uses many similar natural metaphors but in a distinctly masculine way as Giesecke demonstrates:

"(Alcaeus,) nature is cast as hostile and terrifying...and the *polis*, represented by a storm-tossed ship, is rocked by calamitous political instability...Alcaeus evidences a thoroughly masculine, intense engagement with the political struggles of archaic Lesbos, places, and situations that appear far removed from Sappho's intimate ritual places and social dynamics.

Hers is a world inextricably bound to her identity as both the first and preeminent women poet in the ancient Mediterranean.” (188).

Sappho’s Gardens, in both description and purpose, invokes an extra-urban environment and contrasts itself with the masculine statesmanship of large urban centers. The city represents the industrious and ingenious natures of the men of Ancient Greece vs. Sappho’s natural garden, wild yet cultivated, representing Greek femininity and the social standards of an intertwined yet sequestered and carefully refined space.

Plato’s manuscripts commonly contain patterns of utilizing gendered space (and sometimes voices themselves) to borrow the authority of the opposing gender. An example can be found within the setting of the *Phaedrus*, the manuscript written by Plato that depicts Socrates and young philosopher Phaedrus discussing the concepts of the intoxicating nature of love by a river. The *Phaedrus* is often referred to as unique because it’s one of the only manuscripts by Plato that takes place outside the walls of Athens, within an open countryside. This setting choice is reminiscent of Sappho’s Garden, with natural elements, a small river, and a grove shaded by a Plane tree. The location does not seem to be an area that is particularly wild or inconvenient to access, implying a similarity to Sappho’s extra-urban space that women like Sappho may have frequented. The Plane tree itself acts as a metaphor for divine feminine influence. Not only is the Plane tree the namesake for Plato himself but was also commonly referred to as “Helen’s” tree, a reference to Helen of Troy. Helen was associated with the tree in the Iliad of Homer, and according to Daniel Carey, “Helen is present in the very landscape of the *Phaedrus*, given that Plato’s celebrated plane tree seems designed deliberately to evoke the arboreal cult of Helen dendrites” (Carey 55). Helen is an apt metaphor for Plato to reference considering that the main topics of the *Phaedrus* include

dichotomies such as the nature of love vs. desire, lover vs. teacher, and divine inspiration vs. madness.

Plato does not just imply a distinctly feminine presence in the settings of the *Phaedrus*, but goes on to reference Sappho herself by name. This occurs with Socrates's cheeky response when attempting to remember the names of the old poets "Sappho or the wise Anacreon". The mentioning of Sappho helps to bring the poets into the flow of the conversation like a revenant hovering over the setting. Plato employs a prose style of speaking throughout the *Phaedrus*, particularly when Socrates is enraptured in inspiration, helping to consolidate the metaphors interspersed throughout the manuscript, from rivers of inspiration to the madness brought on by love and the divine nature of philosophical "truth". Elizabeth Pender states that "Plato echoes Sappho's account of desire, love and the transformative power of memory...[and] that Plato's appropriation of Sapphic memory represents rather a *transformation* in line with his psychology and metaphysics" (36). Plato echoes the lyrical ballads of Sappho because he is drawing on "Sappho's insights into memory as a means of overcoming distance and loss" (54). Plato's audiences would've been keenly aware of this appropriation of feminine elements within the *Phaedrus* and most likely would easily recognize the contrast it creates regarding the topic of love and divine inspiration.

Plato repeats a similar pattern of gendered space in the *Symposium* when Plato again (writing in the voice of Socrates) uses the manuscript as a chance to quote Diotima of Mantinea. There are various arguments about who Diotima was, and her existence is discussed with some controversy. Historians believe that she may have only been a fictional character created by Plato. Others believe that she may have been a priestess and philosopher within the Sophist tradition. Still some scholars believe that she may have been an amalgam for Aspasia of Miletus because of similarities both Diotima and Aspasia share. What makes The *Symposium* interesting is that Plato's Socrates specifically

sites are the words of Diotima. It is not just a small and irrelevant quote Socrates chooses to attribute for authority, but the entire monologue of Socrates is attributed to her. Socrates references Diotima as his main character, his teacher, and his primary influence regarding the nature of love, elevating her into the position of teacher and advisor.

The *Symposium* stands almost in opposition to the *Phaedrus* because Socrates brings the voice of Diotima within the masculine realm of the *polis* itself. The setting indicates that the audience would have been primarily men, yet Diotima is brought by Socrates directly into that space. As detailed by Adriana Cavarero “Socrates does not deliver his speech but reports the words he had once heard spoken by Diotima. So Diotima is not an actual character in the *Symposium*... she becomes a character in this dialogue who substitutes...for Socrates’ own direct speech.” (93) Women were largely seen in Ancient Athens as being incapable of contributing to masculine oratory, yet Plato chooses a woman’s voice as Socrates's main influence. Women would not have been permitted to speak within the setting of the Symposium, yet Diotima’s voice is filtered through a masculine oratory of the great master - Socrates himself. Bringing Diotima directly into a masculine space creates a doubling of the mimetic function of oratory. Plato writes the oration of Socrates, who is then speaking as Diotima, and the speech again echoes itself back to the audience as a distinctly feminine oratory - heard but never seen.

Plato’s conscience choice to include Diotima within the *Symposium* indicates his belief that women were indeed invaluable when it came to the topics of love, beauty, and procreation – all of which are inherently feminine domains. Socrates did not have expertise on the act of childbirth and its necessary function of procreation, so he borrows the authority of the feminine to elevate his argument. This act resonates with some feminists as an act of violence, by erasing the voice of the feminine to promote Plato’s preferences of homosexual lovemaking. Plato does attend that



lovmaking for the act or procreation is necessary and relevant for the creation of new philosophers but affirms through the voice of Diotima that it is far less preferable to the higher love of philosophy itself. He goes as far as to appropriate procreation itself by elevating the concept of philosophical ideas as the offspring of the philosopher and the “truth” born from philosophy as being immortal and therefore, more impactful than “all children conceived in the world”. This choice to bring femininity directly within a masculine space is only impactful because it borrows the expertise gained from singularly feminine experiences. Cavarero explains that the act of utilizing Diotima’s feminine voice in this masculine space is, in fact, inflicting a symbolic matricide. For the act to be committed the feminine first had to be trotted out into a masculine world. Cavarero concludes

“when Socrates wants to give his own opinion on love he chooses to speak through the mouth of a woman, a woman he claims to have known. Rather than reporting a famous speech, he chooses to present the discourse of this woman whom he designates as his teacher. Hence the words are words which he agrees with and has appropriated as his own” (93).

It is only through Diotima that Plato’s *Symposium* can achieve its authority and persuasive element within the public domain, but it is also a unique example of the tensions created when the male/female binary converge on one another.

Plato again utilizes his pattern of introducing a feminine voice into a traditionally masculine space in the *Menexenus*, this time with Aspasia of Miletus. Aspasia was a foreign-born concubine whose position allowed her a great deal of flexibility within historic Athens. Being foreign born she was not subject to the rules and restriction made of female citizens and was free to move about, earn money, keep slaves, and educate herself. She was trained in philosophy by Gorgias in the

Sophist tradition. Her profession as a sex worker would have required her to be adaptable and witty, allowing her to perfect her art of speechmaking and improvisation.

Within the manuscript of the *Menexenus* Socrates mentions Aspasia only in passing but her reference is immensely significant. Socrates states that Aspasia is in fact a contributor to, or even the potential author of, Pericles's *Funeral Oration*. This is a heavy implication because the Funeral Oration was perhaps one of the most important speeches given within the *polis*, meant to both rally and soothe the people of Athens after the devastating loss of the Peloponnesian war.

Like Diotima Socrates remarks on Aspasia as an excellent teacher, implying that she not only was responsible for the tutoring of Pericles but also Socrates himself, particularly regarding relationships and martial advice. According to Cheryl Glenn, "In Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*, Socrates ascribes to Aspasia the marital advice he gives to Critobulus: 'I will introduce Aspasia to you, and she will explain the whole matter [of good wives] to you with more knowledge than I possess' (iii. 15)" (Glenn 188). Aspasia's introduction in the *Oeconomicus* demonstrates that even Socrates was more than willing to defer to the expertise of women regarding matters he saw himself lacking in. Attributing Aspasia as the author of the Funeral Oration of Pericles indicates a significance contribution on behalf of women in the ancient rhetorical tradition.

The funeral oration was a speech delivered to the entirety of the Athenian population and would have needed to rely heavily on adaptation to the response of the audience and improvisation to be effective. Aspasia was well positioned in both these rhetorical skills in order to contribute to the main body of the *Oration* text. The setting of the speech itself was undoubtedly a masculine space, held within the center of the Acropolis, yet once again the voice of the feminine is underlying the words and being used for the good of the citizenry. Cheryl Glenn states "The beliefs and practices of Sophists overlapped beautifully with one basic requirement of an epitaphios: 'the

personality of the orator has to yield to the impersonality of the genre...as an institution and as a literary form” (189). As an epitaph Aspasia’s background would again best suit the needed style of the oration.

The Funeral Oration serves as the ultimate demonstration of Pericles’ statement regarding the highest honor made by women, because Aspasia was present in words only. Her name never attributed to the final product. Aspasia remains unspoken and unrecognized in order to serve a greater good for her community. The words might have been birthed by her, but once ushered into the public sphere they become the words of all. The speech stands as a perfect metaphor for the roles of women within the *polis*. Aspasia is brought into the polis in spirit only, her contributions hidden behind the oration. Her ideas sway the crowd and provide support for the masculine leaders of the city while she herself remains unspoken. She attends to and creates one of the highest honors of rhetorical tradition, without distinction or mention. Like much of her life she encroaches on the territory of the masculine, silently leaving her contributions and exiting stage left for the good of civic representation. Later those words would become appropriated by historians and scholars of various generations, who will use them to justify the lack of attention paid to the voices of women during her time.

Many of the contributions and rhetorical practices of women in Ancient Greece have remained silent. Women are hidden in the background of the cultural fabric of history. Scholars and rhetoricians can tease out some of this ancient knowledge by re-evaluating the cultural ideas of space and understanding how space may influence (or be affected by) a distinctly male or female hierarchy within specific cultural traditions. As we continue to remap the rhetorical territory of ancient women, we must remember that setting and interactions within physical space can hold insights into ancient power relations. As writers (and orators) make choices about the use of

feminine/masculine binaries within their work, we can interpret how social roles press upon each other to create a multi-faceted representation of speech and culture.

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