**The Mysterious Gift of Platonic Mothers:**

**A Spectral Solution to a Postmodern Dilemma**

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We will call essential mourning the completion of mourning for essential spectres: that is to say the accomplishment of a living, rather than morbid, relation of the survivors to these terrible deaths. Essential mourning assumes the possibility of forming a vigilant bond with these departed which does not plunge us into the hopeless fear – itself mortifying – that we feel when faced with their end, but which, on the contrary, actively inserts their memory into the fabric of our existence. To accomplish essential mourning would mean: to live with essential spectres, thereby no longer to die with them.

**Meillassoux, *Spectral Dilemma***

Up, my love, rise.

Rise and talk to me.

**Atossa, *Persians***

1. **The Spectral Mother**

Inspired by the value of Plato’s Khôra – that most perplexing (ἀπορώτατά) and unconquerable (δυσαλωτότατον) phantom-like mother and host of becoming (μητέρα καὶ ὑποδοχὴν, *Tim.* 49a, 50d,) who beautifully refused to admit into the soul’s *abode* any form of absolute destruction (φθορὰν οὐ προσδεχόμενο) – this somewhat lengthy prologue begins with a few *bastard* thoughts (λογισμῷ τινι νόθῳ, 52b) about two contemporary thinkers of the “spectral.” First, Jacques Derrida, that notorious father of deconstruction, who upon being asked a seemingly trite question, “Which philosopher would be his mother?” replied that it would be impossible for him to have any philosopher as a mother. Attempting to explain, Derrida argued that the figure of the philosopher has always been masculine and so, in his desire to destabilize paternalistic logocentrism, he proposed that the philosopher who could be his mother would be his own progeny, “a grand-daughter perhaps [...], an inheritor [...], a woman who thinks. Not a philosopher […].” Distinguishing *thinking* from philosophy, he concludes: “A *thinking* mother – is what I both love, and try to give birth to.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Passing over the forgivable *hubris* that *he* rather than a *she* would birth this ‘thinking mother,’ one may yet wonder if Derrida, however well-intentioned, deafened his ears to the already existent maternal spirit lurking, like a shade, behind his own thought. For me, and no doubt many other women cognizant of our shared history, this unphilosophical mother was burnt on pyres, raped in temples and confined to the home. Indeed the *thought* of these women was often dismissed by men as illegitimate, hysterical, emotional or irrational while their formidable *bodies* were subject to enslavement, discipline and sheer terror. We mourn these ancestors, these *thinking*, rebellious warriors, and sometimes – when a pensive mood strikes – we find ourselves unable to reconcile the loss, the tragedy, of what many politely call “erasure.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

The forgetfulness of these maternal ancestors in a well-respected philosopher leads to the second contemporary thinker of the spectral, whose timely arguments undergird the present inquiry: Quentin Meillassoux (disobedient Derridean progeny perhaps) and his provocative notions of “essential spectres.” Defined as the deceased, “the horror of whose death lays heavy not only upon their nearest and dearest, but upon all those who cross the path of their history,”[[3]](#footnote-3) such essential spectres supposedly haunt present-day philosophers and demand more than *social* justice – assuredly a paltry conciliation for the dead who need not new laws or holidays. Rather, the dead desire true and absolutejustice, an *ontological* justice, which would entail the impossible, a miracle wherein which their actual life is restored.[[4]](#footnote-4) Of course this deeply profound form of justice requires, for Meillassoux, agod, but a god *not yet* existent, as an *already existent* god would be irrevocably fettered to countless unforgivable evils and, would, therein, be found wanting and guilty. By designing an unjust world that culminates in death,[[5]](#footnote-5) this *already existent* god would be wholly immoral and unredeemable regardless of whether death was part of an eternal plan. Consequently, this philosopher turns to a forefather, the illustrious David Hume and his account of the precarity of reason. If, as Meillassoux argues, “the contingent, but eternally possible, effect of a Chaos unsubordinated to any law,”reigns, then there is no reason for thinking that tomorrow will resemble today, so why not a “god *to come*,”[[6]](#footnote-6) why not a *future* divinity, one unsullied by the atrocities of the past and entirely capable of wielding the power to reinstate all life? Promisingly, a just god could be on the horizon of possibility and so we may hope that in the infinite possibilities of tomorrow that our thinking mothers will return, redeemed by the god to come. Nevertheless, there is a problem buried in this solution.[[7]](#footnote-7) Justice and the resurrection of the dead belong, like Derrida’s thinking mother, to the future, to another generation. We must wait, we are told, for our justice, for the restoration of our thinking mothers and all those other figures who suffered from the horrors of the past. But...

Why must justice always be postponed, filed away under the category of the *not quite yet*?

The ensuing provocation will attempt to provide, *here and now*,absolute justice to the lives of three thoughtful mothers in Plato’s corpus, i.e. Phaenarete in the *Theaetetus*,Xanthippe in the *Phaedo* and Aspasia in the *Menexenus*. As will become evident, all three of these mothers invoke something of the power of Meillassoux’s *essential spectres* or, more Platonically construed, *daimonic guides* who, contrary to the speculative theorist’s arguments, do not demand the restoration of their lives. Rather, as will be clarified, these spectres speak to the mysterious ancestral teachings of thoughtful women whose power remains, like Chaos, “unconstrained by any law,”[[8]](#footnote-8) so that their salvation requires neither a Johnny-come-lately god nor a Derridean, messianic progeny, i.e. a Johnny-come-never. Contrariwise, these women simply require the present remembrance of the infinite, but nevertheless contingent, maternal power to safeguard absolute life by bestowing upon her bastard children an ever-perplexing *paideia* of immortal thought.[[9]](#footnote-9)

**II. Phaenarete**

In previous research, I have argued that the mysterious Diotima – over whom much ink has been spilled – is simply a sobriquet for Phaenarete, the very noble (μάλα γενναίας) but also subversively virile (βλοσυρᾶς, *Tht.* 149a) midwife and mother of Socrates.[[10]](#footnote-10) Hoping to glean more from that claim, this section of the current project shall (a) focus on a few of the cultural motives behind Socrates’ concealment of her identity the night he was invited to dine with Agathon. The second half of this section will shift gears to a discussion of (b) the importance of Phaenarete’s *maternal thought* and the justice that it uncovers for a group of spectral women often elided and, in many senses, violently so.

1. *Cultural Rationale*

Beginning with a regularly overlooked Athenian convention – the cultural taboo against publicly naming respectable women – Socrates masks his mother’s ‘noble’ identity insofar as he is adhering to the prohibition.[[11]](#footnote-11) Before ‘civilized’ men, i.e. the ones who dismiss women like the flute girl or seclude their mothers, sisters and daughters for the sake of ‘virtue,’ the good Socrates invokes his mother by giving her an eponym. Following a “nicknaming trope” foreshadowed in the opening frame when Apollodorus’ unnamed companions playfully tease him about his own well-known moniker “softy” (μαλακὸς, 173d; cf. *Phd*. 117d), Socrates’ clandestine substitution of the eponym Diotima for Phaenarete would reinforce (a) her nobility or virtue and (b) the sacred nature of the mysteries belonging to the home (*oikia)*, a sacred space often neglected by the likes of Agathon, Eryximachus or Pausanias. Contrariwise, in the *Theaetetus*,before the promising but *disenfranchised* young mathematician, Socrates boldly names Phaenarete and, more surprisingly, extensively praises her work as a midwife, mentioning her corresponding devotion to Artemis, the goddess of the hunt and childbirth.[[12]](#footnote-12) Nevertheless, there is one caveat put before the adolescent. Socrates requests that Theaetetus not disclose (κατείπῃς, 149a) the vocational likeness between a mother and her son insofar as most people distrust his intent. In other words, like Alcibiades’ fault-finding (μέμφομαι 222a) speech in the *Symposium*, Socrates believes that most people favor discrediting his philosophical practices by calling him an atypical eccentric who merely enjoys making others confused (ἀτοπώτατός εἰμι καὶ ποιῶ τοὺς ἀνθρώπους ἀπορεῖν, *Tht.* 149a, cf. *Symp.* 221e τὴν ἀτοπίαν ἅνθρωπος). Attempting to explain to Theaetetus that this image runs counter to reality, Socrates emphasizes his sincere desire (εὐμενής, 151b) to assist his friends and companions in conceiving (151b), birthing (150d, 151a), testing (150b-c) and, if viable, rearing (150e-151a) their ideas. He further qualifies that it is with sincere kindness (εὔνοιᾰ, 151d) that he sometimes secretly destroys (ὑπεξαιρέω) or discards (ἀποβάλλω, 151c-d) imposters, false or foolish images (*Tht.* 151d, cf. *Symp.* 209c), otherwise described as wind-eggs.[[13]](#footnote-13) In the end, Socrates repeatedly stresses to the recently impoverished (but nevertheless still generous) Theaetetus that such philosophical activity resembles his mother’s practice insofar as it helps the young bear their long-felt conceptions, proclaiming that both their maieutic abilities derive from god (*Tht.* 202c). Juxtapose this bold affirmation of maternal likeness, which includes devotion to a goddess dear to those in need, with Socrates’ frustration and corresponding chastisement of Agathon and his guests in the *Symposium*. Having observed how the men treat the enslaved, the flute girl, and his own beloved but low-class friend, Aristodemus, Socrates lambasts the previous eulogies. “It seems to me, that with all kinds of words you innovate the qualities of Eros (διὰ ταῦτα δὴ οἶμαι πάντα λόγον κινοῦντες ἀνατίθετε τῷ Ἔρωτι, 199e),” with no concern for truth. Rather what has gone before was a contest of vanity, whereby these haughty men compete for the prize of fooling those who do not know (μὴ γιγνώσκουσιν), i.e. one another, with beautiful rhetorical pomp (σεμνός, 199a). Before such arrogant deceivers, Socrates asks to speak the truth in his own way (ἐθέλω εἰπεῖν κατ’ ἐμαυτόν) in order to set forth “whatever names and turns of phrase that may chance come about (ὀνομάσει δὲ καὶ θέσει ῥημάτων τοιαύτῃ ὁποία δἄν τις τύχῃ ἐπελθοῦσα, 199b).” Slyly, the philosopher covertly warns his unknowing audience that he will be playing, like them, with names and words but not for petty rivalry and making fun (199b), but for the sake of the truth. Imitating his paradigmatic teacher, Socrates begins, as he confessed in the *Theaetetus* (151c), with discarding Agathon’s imposture by utilizing questions about Eros set in terms of the family. Particularly, the love of a mother and father and ultimately convinces the poet that desire for the beautiful and good arises from lack or need (199-201c). Once redirected away from refuting or aiding Agathon in discarding – like Theaetetus’ various concepts of knowledge (cf. 151c, ὑπεξαιρέω, ἀποβάλλω) – a false conception of love, Socrates begins his eulogy by giving his maternal likeness the aforementioned alias. Diotima, a name which – when read in parallel with the dialogue explicitly devoted to revealing mysterious etymologies, the *Cratylus* – means ‘honor the one through whom (δι’ ὃν) life (ζῆν) is given (*Crat.* 396a)’ so that the epitaph both conceals his mother’s identity but also reverently bestows upon her a truly revelatory or divine name.

Returning to the cultural context, while unaware that Socrates cleverly obfuscates the midwife’s identity on the basis of common practices and the philosopher’s respect for the home and the women within, the men sitting leisurely fail to be in on the secret and so the atypical philosopher *appears* to be naming some unknown woman. Consequently, the philosopher’s mostly privileged audience would make some rather disparaging presumptions about the priestess with whom Socrates learned his lessons on love. Namely, they would assume Socrates’ public naming of this heretofore stranger, even if referred to as wise, would connote that she was a woman of disrepute. Indeed, Socrates reinforces their assumptions by repeatedly referencing Diotima’s status as *xenia*,[[14]](#footnote-14)a title which has positive or neutral connotations for a man, but negative for a woman and, as such, the use of it would cast further aspersions on her character. Again, the use of an eponym protects Phaenarete from the haughty disdain of snooty know-it-alls like Eryximachus or proud hosting and ordering Agathon. The former cannot see the beauty of a common flute girl (typically Thracian women) while the latter explicitly fails to see Aristodemus, Socrates’ destitute barefoot lover (*Symp.* 218b).

To be sure, the historical and cultural context of the Athenian disdain for foreigners, women and the poor can in fact be traced to the well-documented mass immigration of foreign women (metics) into the city both in the decade before and after Socrates’ birth in 469 BCE.[[15]](#footnote-15) Indeed, the growth of the metic class – whose varying cultures and traditions, particularly when it came to women – lead to evolving tensions and outright legal hostility over the increasing fear of miscegenetic marriages and the possibility that their half-citizen, half-foreign children would eventually undermine Athenian values and independence by remaining allegiant to the cultural traditions of their mothers.[[16]](#footnote-16) Escalating anxieties surrounding this emergent class of citizen-metic progeny culminated in the enactment of the Periclean Citizenship Law of 451 BCE, a decree which ultimately restricted legitimate birth to Athenian citizen couples. Expectantly, this act disenfranchised an entire subsection of the population.[[17]](#footnote-17) To clarify, before the decree immigrant women (many of whom came from noble and elite families themselves, e.g. Aspasia) 1) could become legitimate wives, 2) maintained *pallakai* (consort-spouses within an *oikia*) and/or 3) supported *hetairia* (independent women, mostly elite, entertainers, educators, friends and/or lovers to one or several Athenian men). Overall, in each of these roles, having children with such citizen men strengthened the bond some foreign women hoped to have with the city.[[18]](#footnote-18) Abruptly, things changed, however, after the citizenship law as the status of *pallakai* wives and/or *hetairia* was increasingly lambasted as sexually suspect and threatening. In the end, any foreign-born woman, regardless of social status, education and/or behavior (amorous or not) towards Athenian men, could potentially be linked to prostitution (base or otherwise) as a means of disparaging her lifestyle and, by proxy, any children she might bear. Nevertheless, as R.F. Kennedy (2016) has argued, these women were not “high class prostitutes” but simply erotic (exotic) figures navigating the terrain of establishing alternative relationships and ways of life outside the confines of Athenian marriage norms and child rearing.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Returning to Phaenarete, we should recall that Socrates suggested to Theaetetusthat the greatest *phronesis* in midwifery was her skill in matchmaking (προμνηστικός, *Tht.* 149d), a trade often confused with common prostitution, promiscuity and solicitation.[[20]](#footnote-20) Attempting to distance his mother’s vocation from pimping (προᾰγωγεία, 150a) – as such work is unjust and unskilled (ἄδικόν τε καὶ ἄτεχνον, 150a) – Phaenarete, in contrast, is an expert, like the architects of the Kallipolis (*Rep.*459d), in an *art/craft* that can reliably bring together men and women (*Tht*. 250a: συναγωγὴν ἀνδρὸς καὶ γυναικός; cf. *Symp*. 206c5: ἡ γὰρ ἀνδρὸς καὶ γυναικὸς συνουσία τόκος ἐστίν) so that together they can rear the best possible children (ὡς ἀρίστους παῖδας τίκτειν, *Tht.* 149d). This craft further demands that Phaenarete is skilled in administering drugs (*Tht* 149d: φαρμάκια, cf. *Symp*. 203e: φαρμᾰκεύς, *Rep.* 459c: φαρμάκοις πολλοῖς χρῆσθαι) and performing appropriate incantations (*Tht*. 149d: ἐπᾴδουσαι, cf. *Symp*. 203e, γόης) in order to arouse and soften labor (*Tht*. 149d: ἐγείρειν τε τὰς ὠδῖνας καὶ μαλθακωτέρας, cf. *Symp*. 206e: μεγάλης ὠδῖνος ἀπολύειν τὸν ἔχοντα, *Tht.* 151a: ταύτην δὲ τὴν ὠδῖνα ἐγείρειν τε καὶ ἀποπαύειν ἡ ἐμὴ τέχνη δύναται). In short, the art of matchmaking and midwifery, like Socrates’ maieutics and the public’s misunderstanding of the activity, while often associated with unskilled sex work and haphazard assistance in delivery, has a deep knowledge of all things concerned with pregnancy, delivery and the nurturing of children. Correspondingly, in the *Symposium*,Diotima schools Socrates in the erotic arts that similarly tend to the bearing of children both in body and in soul (*Symp.* 206c), where the highest children derive from a form of education or *paideia* that ultimately establishes a *friendship* between the divine and human, thus allowing practitioners to become dear to the gods (θεοφιλής, *Symp.* 212a). These divine friendships result from a constant and never-ending work of bearing the beautiful both through common sexual reproduction (*Symp.* 208e) and, significantly, through the production of poetry, politics, acts of virtue/valor and, of course, philosophical eroticism, which aims at obtaining the vision of the Beautiful saturating all things (*Symp.* 208e -212a). Overall, Socrates emphasizes Diotima’s and Phaenarete’s skills, i.e. their possession of a certain kind of threatening and foreign *paideia* which demands expertise in beauty, the erotic, midwifery and the art of procuring friends, rearing and protecting the divine life of one’s children, which highlights the wisdom and virtues of women outside the confines of a traditional Athenian marriage, an enigmatic way of life often lambasted by men as mere sex work. To be sure, in the *Theaetetus,* Socrates explicitly emphasizes that his own form of midwifery is directed toward men (*Tht.* 150b) while his mother focused her gift (*Tht.* 210c, cf. 150c-151b) towards women. Noting that the text does not limit such female midwifery to physical birth, i.e. the mere body,[[21]](#footnote-21) but includes, rather suggestively, the art of *bringing together* men and women (συναγωγὴν ἀνδρὸς καὶ γυναικός; cf. *Rep.* 459d-e), Phaenarete’s craft would equip independent women with the education *un*becoming of a citizen wife, a service that fosters love and children that are not reducible to the mere exchange of sex and money, an act that could lead to slander, ill-repute and other penalties, e.g. exorbitant fines, exile and forced enslavement. As such, a virile (βλοσυρᾶς, *Tht.* 149a) matchmaker like Phaenarete would need to provide her female companions with a clever wisdom that seeks to give birth to the beautiful *via* knowing more than common parlor tricks. Rather, like an adept initiate, such women must study poetry, politics and philosophy so as to beguile more adeptly and, correspondingly, to procure the highly sought *friend*.

Consider, in this vein, Xenophon’s Theodoté, whose lavish surroundings and sumptuous dress cause Socrates to question the source of her income. She coyly replies that her livelihood depends upon the generosity of friends (*Mem*. III 11.4) and, rather Platonically, Socrates parries with the value of possessing strategies or mechanisms (cf. *Symp.* 203d and *Rep.* 460a) for acquiring such friends. To explain, Socrates lures the beautiful woman with images not dissimilar to Diotima’s Eros; she must become like a spider who weaves or a hunter who employs a variety of dogs to ensnare a hare (III 11.5-9, cf. *Symp.* 203d-e). Socrates even suggests that with the aid of a procurer (κτήσῃ, 11.9; cf. *Symp*. 212b) she would more easily seduce those generous lovers of beauty (τοὺς φιλοκάλους, III 11.9) to her consort. Prior to meeting Socrates, Theodoté admits that she had no such mechanisms but now, upon listening to the philosopher’s words, the young ambitious woman comes to value his charms associated, as Socrates explicitly emphasizes, with hordes of women making potions (III 11.16-17), appealing therein to the threat of foreign women and what they may teach their sons and what they may in turn teach to respectable citizens. Reminding the young woman that his skill in these alluring, ensnaring crafts causes many others, both men and women, to desire his constant company (III 11.16-17), it is evident that even for Xenophon’s Socrates, the philosopher values the *phronesis* of such erotic cunning, as it the dissemination of wisdom(s) otherwise than the official, unexamined pursuit of political power. Emphasizing to Theodoté that her craftiness should not force a lover through deceitful manipulation but should lovingly and thoughtfully persuade, Theodoté playfully puns and jokes with Socrates so as to show that she already possesses some skill in this art but confesses, nonetheless, that (unlike his lovers who depart out of ignorance [*Tht.* 159d]) she looks forward to visiting him so as to procure more *aid.* Indeed, this scene in the *Memorabilia* serves as a paradigmatic example of the unconventional paideia some women may have pursued to preserve their independence and to maintain their own cultural and cultic traditions – traditions that, at times, embodied competing notions of female virtue which undermine the so-called democratic ideals of their society. To truly carve out other forms of life, many of these (mostly) foreign women became proficient in the art of persuasion aimed at love (rather than conquest) and, as such, were known fortheir ability to pun, joke, ridicule and advance – with a winking and flattering smile – a form of complex double speak that bewitched/charmed prospective friends or lovers.[[22]](#footnote-22) In parallel, Diotima’s appearance in the *Symposium* as an explicitly foreign teacher of erotic mysteries committed to educating the young, alongside the homage to midwifery and matchmaking in the *Theaetetus*, subtly signals Socrates’ alignment with a suspect social class of women, those who can potentially devise ways to bear something altogether more everlasting. Such clever women become uncanny paradigms as they embody the divine, unconquerable and deathless valor animating their pursuit of something more than a life of illusions. This is the maternal thought that saturates Socrates’ *oikos*, casting Plato’s dialogues – like Aeschylus’ *Suppliant Women* or Aristophanes’ *Women at the Thesmorphia* – as incisive critiques of a generational Athenian social anxiety over foreign women, their miscegenetic offspring and the possible dissemination of paradoxical wisdom(s) at odds with the vanities of wealth, eristics and empty rhetoric wielded for power’s sake.[[23]](#footnote-23)

To close this section on the cultural context of giving Phaenarete an eponym, note that Socrates often refers to himself as the son of Sophroniscus (*Alc*. I 131e, *Hip. Maj.* 298b, *Euthy.* 297e) while also referring to other adult men as “the son of...”, a seeming social norm but, in point of fact, an oddity in Greek naming practices insofar as adult Athenians normally referred to one another through the use of the vocative or the demotic, reserving the patronymic for introducing a young person or as an honorific for someone with authority.[[24]](#footnote-24) This Socratic peculiarity is brought to the fore in the *Laches* (180d, 180e) when the philosopher (who is well into his forties and not in a position of authority) is strangely praised by Laches and the older Lysimachus for retaining his patronym (181b).[[25]](#footnote-25) This loyalty to his patronym alongside Socrates’ curious lack of desire to leave the city (except when on military campaign) further highlights a threat looming over many individuals born before the Athenian citizenship law, i.e. having one’s citizenship status publicly questioned and/or revoked.[[26]](#footnote-26) Did Socrates’ retain his patronym – a name that solidified his Athenian rights – and insist on his unusual attachment to the city, in order to avoid suspicion?[[27]](#footnote-27) Briefly, due to the precarity of (a) birthing records, (b) the confusions regarding the legitimacy of offspring from foreign women before 451 BCE and (c) the fact that prior to the Periclean decree that half-foreign and even illegitimate (*nothoi*) children were granted citizenship at the “age of eighteen as a matter of routine,”[[28]](#footnote-28) some Athenian citizens might legitimately fear that their genealogy would be weaponized by others for political gain.[[29]](#footnote-29) In other words, like Eros, Socrates was not abstractly an uncanny or in-between figure but, in point of fact, the philosopher was concretely and historically an embodiment of this threshold insofar as, to any Athenian aware of his lineage, he would have been both legitimate citizen and foreign threat, and, as such, was – by his very birth – something alluring but also suspect.

1. *A Matchmaker’s Thought*

To be sure, this next section does not intend to belabor the historical points above, as one cannot disabuse the standard reading of Socrates’ life in just a few paragraphs. However, it hopes to have provided readers with the concrete situation of Socrates’ first teacher *qua* foreign woman in Athens expressly teaching philosophy and other erotic mysteries, a situation which should reorient readers away from standard aristocratic readings of the dialogues. Rather, if the arguments above hold water, Plato communicates something of the genuine beauty of what a mother’s love can give to a child, even if strange, foreign and peculiar. Diotima, the spiritual midwife, did not instruct Socrates in procuring fame or power or, in Aristophanes’ case, another half. Rather, she educates her “dear Socrates (ὦ φίλε Σώκρατες, 211a)” with words that reinforce the “good which is one’s home (οἰκεῖον, 205e).” Diotima proceeds to ask the would-be philosopher if he disagrees with her idea and Socrates responds much like a child in trouble, “My god, not me (Μὰ Δί’ οὐκ ἔμοιγε, 206a, cf. 202c).” Overall, the vignettes the philosopher offers his audience are literal instances of proper boy love (παιδεραστεῖν), i.e. the true love and *paideia* found within one’s home, so that careful readers can observe other likenesses between Diotima’s *phronesis* and Socrates’ more mature philosophical ideas and practices. Did Diotima teach him

1) the significance of the intelligible *via* the mysteries of the Beautiful, troubling his youthful interest in natural philosophy (*Phd.* 96b-97b);

2) the value of refutation or the *elenchus* (201e-202e), which seeks not to best an opponent but, as Socrates described in the *Theaetetus,* to kindly guide or secretly dispose;

3) the centrality of a *paideia* explicitly concerned with the betterment of the young (210e);

4) the importance of interrogating words and common classifications of things like poetry, utilizing double-speak and name play as she practices her own form of dialectic, e.g. the method of collection and division (205b-c);

5) the beauty of the soul’s pursuit, obtainment/revelation of that which is immortal in the human being and the value of seeing it as a kind of ascent (206d);

6) the virtue of mythmaking and telling stories (203b-204a) that charm, or – to use the language of the *Theaetetus* – soften the birth or maintenance of an idea and/or complex thought?

Regarding this last possible lesson, recollect Socrates’ censorship of the poets in the *Republic* where, over and above the composers, the philosopher ‘calls out’ the uncanny power that mothers and nurses have over the young in proliferating myths and stories of the divine,[[30]](#footnote-30) a possible illusion to Socrates’ firsthand knowledge of such effective enchantment. In the *Republic* Socrates fears that women’s mythmaking spreads fear and disbelief in the gods and so he emphasizes that they tell stories that make the young spirited and desirous of the true and the good. In point of fact, consider how Diotima refutes Socrates’ immature belief that Eros was a god, *discarding* an idea which ends with Eros as a great daimon (δαίμων μέγας, 202e), a mediator between the human and divine. More specifically, she tells the young Socrates that, like herself, “Eros is a spiritual man wise in many things (ὁ μὲν περὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα σοφὸς δαιμόνιος ἀνήρ, 203a, cf. 201d, ἣ ταῦτά τε σοφὴ ἦν καὶ ἄλλα πολλά; *Tht.* 149d, δεινόταται, πάσσοφοι). Oddly, Socrates responds to this identification with a seeming *non sequitur*: “From which father and mother was Eros born (Πατρὸς δέ, ἦν δ’ἐγώ, τίνος ἐστὶ καὶ μητρός, 203a)?” Witnessing a Socrates almost entirely bereft of philosophic prowess, this promising young mind does not ask for clarification or more argumentation but, boyishly, an origin story. How is this an appropriate follow-up to Diotima’s adept refutation, unless, of course, we have before us a budding adolescent inspired to see himself and his potential to be like both his teacher and her fabled Eros? Rather coyly, the genealogical myth she provides transforms into a thinly disguised depiction of a resourceful but entitled father, a pleasure-seeking drunk whose waste of resource[[31]](#footnote-31) is set against a metic-coded woman’s survival and reduction to beggary, someone dismissed like a flute girl and so consequently stands in doorways, devising strategies to overcome need. Indeed, if one takes Phaenarete’s status as a foreign metic seriously and compares it with Penia’s desire to have a child (203c), we may more clearly witness the aspirations of many independent foreign women prior to the Periclean decree, i.e. the hope that through bearing a child with an Athenian citizen, they may gain access to flourishing homes and ways of life. Ultimately, Diotima’s image of Eros suggests that she was not completely successful insofar as Penia’s son remains “parched, shoeless and homeless” (203d). Nevertheless, he has a resource/inheritance due to his paternity, not least of which would be sheer citizenship and the right to call someplace, this backward city of arrogant men in desperate need of an education, his proper abode. Due to this, Socrates, like Eros, lives a life between citizen and foreign, legitimate and bastard, impoverished but also resourceful, and through her mythmaking the wise priestess advises her offshoot (ἀποβλάστημα, 208b) to be brave and stubborn, to learn to juggle, to practice a little magic, to sing charming songs, to speak craftily (203d-e) and, most of all, to care for the souls of the young, as this is the (foreign, erotic, non-Athenian) wisdom of the immortal beauty found in both body and soul.

To be sure, in the final hours of his life, Socrates, in the *Phaedo*,suggestively alludes to the mysteries of his maternal inheritance just after completing a series of arguments on the immortality of the soul *via* closing with an eschatological myth.Interestingly, Socrates claims to lack the ability to tell the whole story of the true Gaia and the journeys of the soul but qualifies the story as not his own. Rather, he emphasizes that he believes the story on the basis of a certain unnamed “someone’s persuasion (ὑπό τινος πέπεισμα, *Phd.* 108d).” Under the classical reading, this qualification is read as a moment of typical Socratic irony. Clearly, the philosopher authored this story, right? Nevertheless, compare the *Phaedo*’s appeal to an unnamed ‘someone’s persuasion,’ to Socrates’ remarks about Diotima’s persuasive abilities in the *Symposium*:

This, Phaedrus and you others, is what Diotima said, and of it I am persuaded. Having been persuaded, I, in turn, persuade others to persuade themselves to turn towards the procurement of the boldest collaborator that our human nature can readily find is Love. (Ταῦτα δή, ὦ Φαῖδρέ τε καὶ οἱ ἄλλοι, ἔφη μὲν Διοτίμα, πέπεισμαι δ’ ἐγώ. πεπεισμένος δὲ πειρῶμαι καὶ τοὺς ἄλλους πείθειν ὅτι τούτου τοῦ κτήματος τῇ ἀνθρωπείᾳ φύσει συνεργὸν ἀμείνω Ἔρωτος οὐκ ἄν τις ῥᾳδίως λάβοι.) (212b)

Diotima, the eponym used to protect a woman’s identity and her association with a disreputable status, indeed had an uncanny gift for persuasion and so the authority of Socrates’ final eschatological myth takes on deeper significance. If it is possible that, like in the *Meno*, where Socrates admits he heard about the theory of recollection from certain reasoned priest and priestess (81a-d) and from Diotima herself on the education that initiates individuals in bearing the immortal in both body and soul, then the story of a world inhabited by souls transformed into daimonic spirits and gods, reflects yet again Socrates’ inheritance. Emphasizing that the soul takes nothing to this other world but its education and nurture (παιδείας τε καὶ τροφῆς, *Phd.* 107d), the philosopher suggests that ones who lacked such an education will wander alone in bewilderment. Contrariwise, those purified by philosophy will find the guidance of daimonic spirits and gods who lead the soul to live in its own proper abode (107c), a world of wonderous invisible beauty filled with “sacred groves and temples” in which the gods truly dwell, communing (συνουσίας, 111b; cf. *Symp*. 206c5, *Theat*. 250a) much like they do in Diotima’s speech through mysterious utterances, prophesies and sensations (καὶ **φήμας** τε καὶ **μαντείας** καὶ **αἰσθήσεις**, 114c). This is the lot of purified souls in between divine blessedness and mortal bewilderment, ones who eternally arrive at ever more beautiful abodes (εἰς οἰκήσεις ἔτι τούτων καλλίους ἀφικνοῦνται, 114c). In short, as Socrates insists with Crito, the true philosopher does not die. They are rather transformed into a daimonic guide leading their beloved friends and lovers (those who remain embodied) to remember to care for their education and way of life. Strikingly, when Socrates concludes this story, his longtime friend, Crito, asks how they should care for his children and the philosopher responds, “What I always say, Crito, nothing new. By caring for yourselves, you will show grace to me and mine and yours in whatever you do (Ἅπερ ἀεὶ λέγω, ἔφη, ὦ Κρίτων, οὐδὲν **καινότερον** ὅτι ὑμῶν αὐτῶν **ἐπιμελούμενοι** ὑμεῖς καὶ ἐμοὶ καὶ τοῖς ἐμοῖς καὶ ὑμῖν αὐτοῖς ἐν χάριτι ποιήσετε ἅττ’ ἂν ποιῆτε 115b; cf. *Symp*. 208a, **μελέτη** δὲ πάλιν **καινὴν** **ἐμποιοῦσα** ἀντὶ τῆς ἀπιούσης μνήμην σῴζει τὴν ἐπιστήμην).” In short, if these men, compared to orphans (ὀρφανοὶ, 116a), care for, purify and birth the immortal element within themselves while also aiding others to care for such beauty, such persons will become true guides for his children, enigmatically reminding Socrates’ sons that the men and women of old, regardless of status, remain alive. By reproducing his spirit in the stories they tell and the arguments they weave, his friends transform and communicate divine love and justice through the transmission of what they taught and how they cared for an education and abode at which most scoff. Like the gods in his vision of the true world, these ancestral daimons speak mysteriously, sometimes prophetically and, perhaps like Socrates’ daimon, through sensations (αἰσθήσεις, 114c), comparable to a warning voice – a sensational voice which may sound a lot like the wise and thoughtful mother that once peculiarly rebuked the promising philosopher when he wondered if Eros was ugly or bad (201d). Cautioning Socrates against this thought, Diotima exclaims: “Don’t blasphemy (Οὐκ εὐφημήσεις, 201e),” a curious admonishment repeated only once more in the corpus. Echoing, in semblance of the original, his daimonic guide and primary teacher, Socrates chides a drunken Alcibiades (214d) with the exact same warning, “Don’t blasphemy (Οὐκ εὐφημήσεις).”

**III. Xanthippe**

Of course, at both the end of the *Phaedo* and the beginning we also see another mother, Xanthippe. Mentioned by name only once as we encounter her sitting next to a still enchained Socrates, holding their youngest child. To be clear, we meet her after a long night of work insofar as during grieving periods women within one’s family were expected to perform all-night wakes, singing songs or reciting poems of lamentation which could sometimes be accompanied with dance. With this context, Phaedo’s mention of Xanthippe draws some attention to how with the rising sun there is a changing of the guards, so to speak, and so she is escorted home, to rest before her eventual return later in the afternoon. To me this small moment set within its ritual backdrop allows us to reimagine Xanthippe as more than a shrew or thorn for Socrates, her more prototypical characterization.[[32]](#footnote-32)

To complicate the standard image of Xanthippe, consider Xenophon’s account again. In his *Memorabilia* Socrates explicitly praises her high-spiritedness, once chiding his oldest son, Lamprocles, for disrespecting her authority while underscoring the honor she deserves (II 2.5). Accentuating the importance behind the choice of selecting a wife, Socrates reminds his son that he chose Xanthippe not just to beget any old progeny but, rather like Phaenarete’s procuring, he believed she would produce the best children. Seemingly promoting an antiquated stereotype where women, like the Receptacle of Plato’s *Timaeus*, are the ones who conceive and carry the burden (ὑποδεξαμένη τε φέρει τὸ φορτίον τοῦτο), Socrates ultimately highlights how they are also charged with caring (ἐπιμελεῖται) for their progeny, rearing them for a long time (τρέφει **πολὺν χρόνον**, cf. *Phd.* 116b, 117a). Most importantly, both parents are tasked with providing not just physical nourishment but also moral nourishment, as each must teach (διδάσκουσιν) whatever good lessons they have for leading a flourishing life (II 2.6). Lamprocles responds that he is aware that his mother has done all this and much more (πάντα ταῦτα πεποίηκε καὶ ἄλλα τούτων πολλαπλάσια; cf. *Symp*. 203a, 201d), but he finds her difficult (χαλεπός), which leads the wry Socrates to respond in a tenor reminiscent of Diotima. Obviously a mother’s ferocity (ἀγριότης; cf. *Symp.* 207a-c) is more dangerous than any beast. In short, instead of bemoaning her spirit, Socrates seems to value it.[[33]](#footnote-33)

This appreciation of Xanthippe’s temper is altogether more apparent in Xenophon’s *Symposium*, where after advancing the idea that women/wives are quite capable of learning, his companion responds by insulting Xanthippe, again for her difficulty. To rejoin, Socrates employs the polyphonic speech characteristic of comedy, sophists and *hetaireia* and puns on Xanthippe’s name, comparing himself to an expert horseman who declines docile (εὐπειθεστάτους, literally “most easily persuaded”) horses in favor of “those that are high-spirited (θυμοειδεῖς, *Symp*. 2.10).” Here, the philosopher suggests that being with her (ὑποφέρω, literally “undergoing her”), prepares him to procure or handle, not horses, but human beings.[[34]](#footnote-34) Finally, this passage not only underscores her high-spiritedness, a virtue required of philosopher kings and queens in the *Republic*, but also plays with overt sexual imagery, revealing that in certain circumstances Socrates feels quite comfortable and unashamed to make sex jokes about his wife in public or, at least, with friends – an important observation considering the Athenian taboo.

As a parallel, recall Phaedo’s mention of Xanthippe at the opening of his narration, asking Echecrates, the Philiasian (a region far removed from Athens in the Northeast Peloponnese), “Xanthippe, you know her?”[[35]](#footnote-35) As should be apparent by now, this mention of her name and the expectation that Echecrates knows it, despite living far removed from the city, highlights the very real possibility that Xanthippe had a reputation that exceeded her difficult character. Moreover, ancient anecdotal evidence suggests that Socrates had two wives, wherein which Aristoxenus (a student of Aristotle) claimed that there was Myrto who was noble (but offered no dowry) while his other consort, Xanthippe, was rather ordinary,[[36]](#footnote-36) a reference not to her character but to her social class. In other words, if we take these reports seriously alongside the historical fact that during the Peloponnesian war Athenian men could take more than one wife in order 1) to produce more citizen children for the war effort and 2) to safeguard widowed Athenian women, the *Phaedo* depicts Socrates not with his respectable wife (Myrto) but with another, his *pallakē*, i.e. common-law consort/wife – arguably a former *hetaira*.[[37]](#footnote-37) This status would ultimately explain why it was his second born, rather than firstborn, who received the patrilinear moniker, Sophroniscus, while Socrates’ oldest and youngest have names suggestive of matrilinear debt, i.e. Lamprocles, the famously bright (Phaenarete), and Menexenus, the one who stays foreign (Diotima).[[38]](#footnote-38)

Turning to one of Xanthippe’s two children,[[39]](#footnote-39) consider Lamprocles, reportedly almost grown in the *Apology* (34d)and the *Phaedo* (116b) and so certainly old enough to remain in the prison while his father discusses the immortality of the soul with the other men. Nevertheless his presence goes unmentioned by Phaedo, though there is a rather bold interruption in the midst of Socrates’ final arguments which gesture to the possibility of his presence. While Socrates advances his final argument that absolutes do not admit of their opposites, Phaedo tells Echecrates that some “someone” – he poignantly could not remember – interjected (Καί τις εἶπε τῶν παρόντων ἀκούσας – ὅστις δ’ ἦν, οὐ σαφῶς μέμνημαι, 103a), pointing out a contradiction between the current argument and the earlier argument from opposites. Surrounded by men Socrates has repeatedly enjoined to be brave, the philosopher reacts to the unnamed “someone” by first cocking his head and listening (Καὶ ὁ Σωκράτης παραβαλὼν τὴν κεφαλὴν καὶ ἀκούσας), a very unusual and perplexing stage direction, before exclaiming, “Courageously, you have remembered (Ἀνδρικῶς …ἀπεμνημόνευκας 103b).” While this speaker is unknown to Phaedo, Socrates addresses him as dear one (ὦ φίλε, 103b) just before Phaedo describes how all the men feel like they are becoming orphans, a contrast all the more poignant if, in fact, this unknown “someone” is about to become an orphan. Keep in mind that after Socrates’ eschatological myth, the philosopher requests to bathe and then visits, along with the women from the household and Crito, his two young sons as well as his older son privately (116b). Here, Phaedo recalls the seemingly insignificant detail that Socrates spent a rather *long time* within (χρόνον γὰρ πολὺν διέτριψεν ἔνδον, 117a; cf. X. *Mem.* 2.26 motherhood/long time), relaying to Echecrates that the philosopher returned to the men at approximately sunset and was ready to take the poison. Upset that Socrates was choosing to depart early, Crito (having just returned from the family meeting) reminds Socrates that he can take a meal or drink, simply enjoy the comradery (116e). Of course, Socrates declines and so his childhood friend begrudgingly nods to a boy standing near him (ἀκούσας ἔνευσε τῷ παιδὶ πλησίον ἑστῶτι) – another peculiar humanizing stage direction. Curiously, Phaedo notably remembers that this unknown boy, a nameless someone, went out and stayed away for another long time (συχνὸν χρόνον, 208c). In other words, like Socrates’ visit with his sons and family, the length of the boy’s departure was extended enough for Phaedo to remember the delay and significant enough for Plato, the author, to have his narrator recall *two such lengthy* moments (rather than narrate what was discussed during those times). To my mind it is clear that an unnamed Lamprocles stands next to Crito just after having persisted for a *long time* during the family’s final visit and then stayed away for another *long time*, perhaps standing behind a stone wall, fighting – as his father would want – his own tears, his own doubts about his noble, virile lineage and its immortal *paideia*. What arguments would truly appease a young soul at that time? Nevertheless, bravely, and unlike the other men in the room, Socrates’ dear boy collects himself, completes the task and returns with the guard. Speculative, for sure, but extraordinarily, the possible name of this lingering boy could divulge another mystery of the *Phaedo*: the much-debated final words of Socrates.“Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius. Pay the debt and do not neglect it (Ὦ Κρίτων ... τῷ Ἀσκληπιῷ ὀφείλομεν ἀλεκτρυόνα. ἀλλὰ **ἀπόδοτε** καὶ μὴ **ἀμελήσητε**, 118a; cf. *Men.* 236e, *Rep.* 506e).” Like Nietzsche, most have regarded these final words as a request to sacrifice an offering to the god of healing insofar as the philosopher has been purified from the so-called disease of embodiment. However, once Plato’s/Socrates’ penchant for name-play, puns and eponyms is taken into consideration, particularly when used to show respect and reverence for certain members of one’s *oikos*, then the following request takes on new meaning. Socrates insists that Crito care for a profound debt, harkening back to his earlier prescriptions that the men in the room care for their own souls (ὑμῶν αὐτῶν **ἐπιμελούμενοι**) if they wish to educate Socrates’ sons (115b). Is there something else being said behind the use of a divine name like Asclepius? Indeed, the etymology of “Asclepius” was reportedly derived from an eponym given to the mother of the famed healer, Aegle, brightness or dazzling light. Due to this matrilinear moniker, the name Asclepius would parallel Lamprocles’ own invocation of light and so Asclepius, like Diotima for Phaenarete (the revelation or light of virtue), could very well be another maternal family/kinship name. This would mean that the philosopher’s final words beseech Crito, once again, to ‘care for himself’ so that he might give the boy standing near, Lamprocles, the bright, the awakening song of Apollo, i.e. the philosophical education, παιδείας τε καὶ τροφῆς, which reveals the light of absolute Life, transforming the departed men and women of old, those virtuous ones prepared by their philosophical education to see the beauty, truth and justice of this world right here and right now. Educate yourselves, remember what I have said, nothing new – Socrates beseeched earlier (115b), so that I may be a divine guide not only for you but also for my sons. This is what Crito must tend to; this is the debt a truly faithful friend must pay.

**III. The True Mother: Aspasia**

Turning now to the *Menexenus,* the following will begin by taking seriously (a) the dramatic date of 386BC, (b) Aspasia’s anachronistic mention of the King Peace and (c) the corresponding implication that its two main speakers, Aspasia and Socrates, are deceased. These three discrepancies have caused, like the mysterious Diotima, much ink to be spilled by scholars. Moreover, due to Aspasia’s central role, many researchers (wrongly assuming she was an infamous sex worker keen on using manipulative rhetoric) lampoon the dialogue as a farce or parody rather than as a serious Platonic text. Contrary to those opinions, this final section will give the dead their due justice by reorienting readers back to why this dialogue rather than the *Phaedo* was reportedly read by Platonists every year on the memorial of his death,[[40]](#footnote-40) i.e. ancient readers were more attuned to the fact that this text invoked something of the spiritual world and divine guidance, therein making it a more appropriate invocation of the mysteries of Platonism.

Starting with the provocative thesis that the protagonist of the *Menexenus* is Socrates’ youngest son[[41]](#footnote-41) – who was characterized as τὸ παιδίον in the *Phaedo*, terminology which indicates that Menexenus was not a baby but, rather, a small child – we should first recognize the profound likelihood that on the night before his father drank hemlock and died such a small child would have been entirely capable of listening to his father craft *Aesopian* verse (the appropriateness of this form of poetry now clearer) or, likewise, admire his mother as she recite hymns of lamentation. Indeed, Menexenus spent the entire night with his father as his Xanthippe ritually grieved and, in so doing, he witnessed the virtue of the oft-forgotten wisdom of the women within, the fierce warrior-like power of caring for and tending to an immortal soul not just in words but, also, in wonderous, spiritual deeds. Approximately 13 years later, Menexenus (nearing manhood) is on the brink of entering into the political world of Athens and quite literally passes through both the Bouleuterion (the Athenian council) and the agora (234a). Perhaps, like many youths, he finds himself wondering how he might use his voice; should he speak within the political arena or, like his father, amongst the people. Unable to make a decision but committed to heeding the familial warning, “Οὐκ εὐφημήσεις, *Symp.* 201e, 214b), he honors his lineage and the nurturing education it provides by turning inward, heeding the guidance of the divine, the men and woman of old, who, while departed, are not entirely gone.[[42]](#footnote-42) In short, Menexenus labors with a few *bastard* thoughts (λογισμῷ τινι νόθῳ, 52b) of his own and, as a consequence, births the words of a truly living, guiding daimon and is rewarded with a Socratic speech (in semblance of the original, *Symp.* 208b), complete with perplexing ideas, strange arguments and a fatherly penchant for sophisticated name play and puns.

To offer support for this, note Socrates’ initial teasing of Menexenus’ recent visit to the agora and Bouleuterion. The daimonic Socrates asks Menexenus if he has completed his education and philosophical studies (ἢ δῆλα δὴ ὅτι παιδεύσεως καὶ φιλοσοφίας ἐπὶ τέλει ἡγῇ εἶναι, 234a) and, if so, does the young man consider himself ready to govern his elders (ἄρχειν ἡμῶν...ἐπιχειρεῖς τῶν πρεσβυτέρων τηλικοῦτος ὤν). Rather ironically, this spectral Socrates asks Menexenus if he desires to resecure his house’s reputation insofar as the philosopher suggests that, historically, Menexenus’ lineage provided the city with caretakers (ἵνα μὴ ἐκλίπῃ ὑμῶν ἡ **οἰκία** ἀεί τινα ἡμῶν **ἐπιμελητὴν** παρεχομένη). Evoking the sentiments of the *Phaedo* but also the *Apology* (where Socrates emphasized that he was the only one who cared for the city [31b-c]), the son of the infamous philosopher is set by the question of how he might contribute to his family’s virtue. How might he continue to truly care for the Athenian people? What must this orphaned citizen-bastard do on the precipice of manhood? Enter politics? Write a funeral speech, perhaps? Hesitating, Menexenus responds to the shade of Socrates with the deference not unusual for a son: “Certainly if you, Socrates, allow and counsel me to lead, I shall do so gladly but otherwise not (Ἐὰν σύ γε, ὦ Σώκρατες, ἐᾷς καὶ συμβουλεύῃς ἄρχειν, προθυμήσομαι εἰ δὲ μή, οὔ, 234b).”

Quickly, the subject of the Menexenus turns to the skill of writing funeral orations – a praise speech for (1) those who have recently died in battle, (2) the city’s ancestors and (3) their survivors – the young man promptly informs Socrates that Athens plans on selecting a composer for one such speech soon. In response, Socrates first reminisces on the seductive power of a well-crafted eulogy, emphasizing that a wise man would offer reasonable praise based on likeness (ὑπ’ ἀνδρῶν σοφῶν τε καὶ οὐκ εἰκῇ ἐπαινούντων, 234c) but could, nevertheless, *embroider* his thoughts with beautiful words (literally names) and arguments which can bewitch, like Eros, the soul (κάλλιστά πως τοῖς ὀνόμασι ποικίλλοντες, γοητεύουσιν ἡμῶν τὰς ψυχάς). Strikingly the shade of Socrates, the penniless philosopher who was condemned by the Athenians, coyly reminds Menexenus that because of such charms even those who die poor and/or are thought worthless (or ill-regarded) can win praise (καὶ ἐὰν πένης τις ὢν τελευτήσῃ, καὶ ἐπαίνου αὖ ἔτυχεν, καὶ ἐὰν φαῦλος ᾖ, 234c). Amusingly, Socrates underscores the idea that such words promise honor for not only the deceased warriors or one’s ancestors, but also for all who still live (αὐτοὺς ἡμᾶς τοὺς ἔτι ζῶντας ἐπαινοῦντες), leading the philosopher to recall times when he was the subject of such praise. Admitting to their charismatic effect (κηλούμενος), Socrates confesses that such craftily composed commendation often makes him feel beside himself (ἐξέστηκα) and tends to leave him with a sense of being greater, nobler and more beautiful (μείζων καὶ γενναιότερος καὶ καλλίων, 235b). Amongst his many foreign companions, the ones who always follow him (τὰ πολλὰ ἀεὶ μετ’ ἐμοῦ ξένοι τινὲς ἕπονται), the philosopher further observes that his friends too were often persuaded (ἀναπειθόμενοι) so that even they regard him as a most amazing blessing (θαυμασιωτέραν) to themselves and the city. Again, Socrates admits to feeling ennobled and deeply august (σεμνότερος), a feeling that that tends to linger like a melody (ἔναυλος), a seductive disarming symphony of words and sound (λόγος τε καὶ **φθόγγος**) that causes him to scarcely perceive where on earth he is (**αἰσθάνομαι** οὗ γῆς εἰμι, 235c). Rather aptly for a paternal daimon, Socrates wryly concludes “For now, I think that I abide not only in the islands of the blessed (τέως δὲ οἶμαι μόνον οὐκ ἐν μακάρων νήσοις οἰκεῖν, 235c).”

Remembering his father’s disdain for empty unskilled rhetoric (235c), Menexenus parries with the belief that such speech writing would be difficult, suggesting that the soon-to-be-named composer will likely have to improvise (αὐτοσχεδιάζειν, 235c; cf. *Ap*. 20d, *Euthy*. 5a, 16a). Socrates rebuffs and argues that the task may be less of a challenge then he thinks since the orator has, so to speak, a homefield advantage and, more importantly, most rhetoricians have prepared material. Attempting to evidence the ease with which such a composition could be crafted, Socrates rather infamously claims that he has had two teachers: Aspasia in rhetoric and Konnus the son of Metrobius in music. Due to this education or, more literally, nurturing/breeding (τρέφω, 236a), Socrates confidently asserts that there is nothing surprising about his own ability to speak cleverly (δεινὸν εἶναι λέγειν). Clever, indeed, as the name of Socrates’ music teacher, read playfully, means ‘Knowing, the son of Measured Life.’[[43]](#footnote-43) Taking a further step and applying the advice of Socrates from the *Cratylus* 394b,[[44]](#footnote-44) suggestively μέτρον (measure) can easily sound like and becomes μήτηρ (mother). In other words, it is entirely reasonable that Socrates’ music teacher was none other than ‘Knowing, the son of Mother Life.’ So, again we see another possible instance of name play, allowing us to wonder if there is something more behind the invocation of Aspasia of Miletus, his famed teacher of rhetoric.

To question Plato’s depiction of Aspasia, one of the most notoriously thoughtful mothers of antiquity, much of the disparagement she received was (and has likely been) due to her 1) independent status, 2) popularity and, 3) most pertinently, the implied threat that she, *qua* foreign woman, embodied through her procurement of Pericles’ admiration and the inevitable birth of their son. Lampooned for her independence and seductive skills, Aspasia was often parodied, alongside Alcibiades, Pericles and other political “nobility” in Old Comedy, allowing Athenian audiences to irreverently laugh at the absurdity of their vainglorious leaders and their moronic dalliances. Interestingly, either due to a decree (possibly instigated by Alcibiades) mandating that comedy refrain from lampooning public figures by name[[45]](#footnote-45) or, more likely, Aristophanes own playful style, public figures were often disguised and given comedic/suggestive names, revealing speech patterns and known mannerisms so that the audience would be decisively aware of the civic figure under scrutiny. As M. Vickers (2015, 6) argues, “The actual names of the principal targets of the comic writer remained concealed (and the names of ‘real’ people are often employed to enhance the characterization), but the disguises were easily penetrable, in that the characterizations were based on the anecdotal traditions relating to the individuals in question.” In other words, like Plato’s dialogues, Aristophanes’ comedy was polyphonic and, patently, also aimed at turning the tables on those who suffer from various conceits. Suggestively and perhaps surprisingly for those who assume Plato would have disdained the comedian simply for the part his *Clouds* explicitly played in Socrates’ conviction, there are, in marked contrast, several reports that the philosopher’s deathbed was littered with the bawdy and irreverent stylings of Aristophanes, while, furthermore, the author of the *Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy* suggests that Plato so loved the comic pen that he “adopted [Aristophanes’] way of speech,”[[46]](#footnote-46) a punning adoption clearly evident in the *Symposium* and other dialogues. Applying this so-called Aristophanic styling to the *Menexenus* while also combining such adaptation with Plato’s assured awareness that the comedian masked individuals like Alcibiades or Aspasia in characters like Agrocritus or Praxagora respectively, would it not be altogether ironic and clever to use Aspasia’s name as a mask for another? In other words, could it be that Plato honors both the wit of Aristophanes alongside the wisdom of an altogether different but no less *difficult* independent woman and teacher?[[47]](#footnote-47)

Turning to Socrates’ ‘memory’ of ‘Aspasia’s’ speech, the philosopher rather humorously admits that just the day before his teacher threatened him with a flogging (πληγὰς, 236c) if he so failed to do the woman’s speech justice (cf. DL2.36-37 for Xanthippe’s similar behavior). He expresses a certain amount of trepidation that his teacher would be *difficult* (like Xanthippe, cf. X. *Mem.* 2.2., 2.10) or angry with him for disclosing/delivering (in the sense of birth) her speech to the public (Ἀλλ’ ὅπως μή μοι χαλεπανεῖ ἡ διδάσκαλος, ἂνἐξενέγκω αὐτῆς τὸν λόγον, 236c). Nevertheless, Menexenus urges Socrates to recite it: “…whether it is Aspasia that you wish to recount or *anyone else’s* (εἴτε Ἀσπασίας βούλει λέγειν εἴτε ὁτουοῦν ἀλλὰ μόνον εἰπέ).” So, yet again, we are invited to listen to a speech that ‘someone’ else wrote – a someone who might not want *her* text publicly delivered (though she seems to want it memorized nonetheless), on pains of doing an injustice to a particularly persuasive illegitimate mother, like Aspasia, or whoever else she may be. Socrates adds to the mystery by asking Menexenus not to laugh at him as despite his age, recalling this particular speech will make him appear like a child (ἄν σοι δόξω πρεσβύτης ὢν ἔτι παίζειν, 236c) but despite this, he promises to oblige Menexenus insofar as for this particular young man he would willing fulfill his requests even if asked to strip (ἀποδύντα, perhaps like a philosopher queen in the gymnasium [*Rep.* 452d]) or, even, dance (ὀρχήσασθαι, perhaps like a flute girl).

The content of Aspasia’s composition reveals more, especially insofar as she begins by emphasizing yet anotherdebt, this time a debt to the fallen which her words hope to repay in full (ἀποδίδωμι, 236e; cf. *Phd.* 118a [Crito’s debt], *Rep.* 506e [Socrates’ debt regarding the Good itself]).[[48]](#footnote-48) A well-crafted eulogy should encourage the children of the dead to imitate good men (ἄνδρας ἀγαθοὺς), those who brought joy to others through their virtue (ηὔφραινον δι’ ἀρετήν) and “who exchanged their death for the salvation of the living (καὶ τὴν τελευτὴν ἀντὶ τῆς τῶν ζώντων σωτηρίας ἠλλάξαντο),” as such individuals “became good as they are born from the naturally good (ἀγαθοὶ δὲ ἐγένοντο διὰ τὸ φῦναι ἐξ ἀγαθῶν, 237a).”[[49]](#footnote-49) Notably, Aspasia proceeds to discuss these “naturally” good citizens in terms reminiscent of the *Republic*. She first details their nobility of birth (237a), paralleling the eugenics of the second wave of paradox (*Rep.* 459d) before emphasizing their rearing and education (δὲ τροφήν τε καὶ παιδείαν, 237a; *Phd., Rep.* 412b) and then reinforces Athenian autochthonic natality (237b-c), echoing therein the Noble Lie (*Rep.*  414b-c). Indeed, during her defense of Athenians autochthonic origins, Aspasia accentuates the value of the Great Mother, a Khôra who is “no stepmother (οὐχ ὑπὸ μητρυιᾶς, 237c)” and that, despite what others may think, this true mother ensures that the Athenians never think they originate from foreign stock. Rather, like good philosopher kings/queens of his father’s Kallipolis, all Athenians must consider themselves born from the soil, living and dwelling in one’s fatherland (ἐν πατρίδι οἰκοῦντας καὶ ζῶντας), aware that one must justly adorn (praise) said Mother (δικαιότατον δὴ κοσμῆσαι πρῶτον τὴν μητέρα αὐτήν, 237b-c).[[50]](#footnote-50) Furthermore, like Diotima in the *Symposium* and Socrates in the *Republic*, Aspasia emphasizes the nutritive elements of this true mother who has founts of nourishment (πηγὰς τροφῆς, 237e), much like the overflowing breasts of the philosopher-mothers in the Kallipolis (σπαργῶσι, *Rep.* 460d). Once nurtured and reared, this true mother of the Athenians introduces her children, like Diotima with Socrates, to the gods, inviting such divinities to be her children’s rulers and teachers (ἄρχοντας καὶ διδασκάλους, 238c). Almost expectantly by now, these gods go unnamed since the auditors should know them, but not say/disclose them (238b; *Tim.* 41a-b). Further, Aspasia praises the city’s capacity for appearing to be a democracy but in truth is an aristocracy (ἀριστοκρατία, 238d), as no man is stopped from holding office based upon weakness, poverty or ignorance of the father (καὶ οὔτε ἀσθενείᾳ οὔτε πενίᾳ οὔτ’ ἀγνωσίᾳ πατέρων, 238d). Much like the Kallipolis, wisdom and goodness are the true qualities for guardianship and so this Athens is unified by the one mother who provides equal birth rather than mere legal equality (ἀλλ’ ἡ ἰσογονία ἡμᾶς ἡ κατὰ φύσιν ἰσονομίαν ἀναγκάζει ζητεῖν κατὰ νόμον) with no one acting like a slave or despot to another (οἰκοῦσιν οὖν ἔνιοι μὲν δούλους, οἱ δὲ δεσπότας ἀλλήλους νομίζοντες; cf. *Rep*.463a-c). Again, like the guardians of the *Republic*, Aspasia describes how the Athenian soldiers would not ravage other Greeks to the point of destruction since this perfect city is “compassionate to excess and the handmaid of the weak (244e; *Rep.* 471a-b).” Ultimately, Menexenus’ “Aspasia” rebuilds another “city in speech” (a speech Socrates was supposed to memorize but not disclose in its exact form) and then proceeds to respond to his father’s request of old. Menexenus depicts Socrates’ Kallipolis, a.k.a. Critias’ Athens of yesteryear (*Tim.* 21a) in motion, specifically at war (*Tim.* 19d),[[51]](#footnote-51) so that the clever Socratic inheritor transforms the historically ravaged and downtrodden Athenian legacy in which he currently abides so that his homeland may avoid being remembered simply for its savagery. Rather, Aspasia/Socrates/Menexenus honors the true citizen, the heart of the real people who lived virtuously. People like his father who cared and tended to the weak, poor and disenfranchised, to all those pregnant with beauty, finding a way to bestow upon the Athenians their much-deserved justice and reward.

Aspasia ends her speech with an exhortation to the children of the dead “not to fall out of rank with their fathers nor to give way to cowardice and beat a retreat (246b).” Here, Aspasia’s words, Menexenus’ daimonic paternal remembrance, shifts to highlighting the role Socrates had hoped his friends would take with his sons (*Ap.* 41e). This thoughtful mother exhorts the “children of good men (ὦ παῖδες ἀνδρῶν ἀγαθῶν, 41b)” to remember that they are to be like their dearly departed, i.e. noble and fine (καὶ ἀναμνήσω καὶ διακελεύσομαι προθυμεῖσθαι εἶναι ὡς ἀρίστου), and so she echoes the philosopher’s defense speech (246d), appealing to the idea that the words spoken are not her own but, in truth, the words of the deceased:

Now, in this moment, it is just that I speak. For our fathers charged us with the sacred message that we must speak always to those left behind, if they ever suffer when danger rises near. I shall utter what I once heard from their souls, and what I believe they would gladly say now, if they had the power to speak to you. Drawing on what they once said, you must think you hear them [the fathers] as this is the message they gave (ἐν δὲ τῷ παρόντι δίκαιός εἰμι εἰπεῖν ἃ οἱ πατέρες ἡμῖν ἐπέσκηπτον ἀπαγγέλλειν τοῖς ἀεὶ λειπομένοις, εἴ τι πάσχοιεν, ἡνίκα κινδυνεύσειν ἔμελλον. Φράσω δὲ ὑμῖν ἅ τε αὐτῶν ἤκουσα ἐκείνων καὶ οἷα νῦν ἡδέως ἂν εἴποιεν ὑμῖν λαβόντες δύναμιν, τεκμαιρόμενος ἐξ ὧν τότε ἔλεγον. ἀλλὰ νομίζειν χρὴ αὐτῶν ἀκούειν ἐκείνων ἃ ἂν ἀπαγγέλλω ἔλεγον δὲ τάδε).

She continues:

Oh children, that your fathers were good men is now made known. Though we could have lived shamefully, we choose to die nobly, before bringing rebuke to you and those who come next, before we shame our fathers and still more prior generations, since we deem the shameful life not worth living. Such a person is neither dear to the gods nor to men, neither while living on earth nor dead under the earth (Ὦ παῖδες, ὅτι μέν ἐστε πατέρων ἀγαθῶν, αὐτὸ μηνύει τὸ νῦν παρόν. ἡμῖν δὲ ἐξὸν ζῆν μὴ καλῶς, καλῶς αἱρούμεθα μᾶλλον τελευτᾶν, πρὶν ὑμᾶς τε καὶ τοὺς ἔπειτα εἰς ὀνείδη καταστῆσαι καὶ πρὶν τοὺς ἡμετέρους πατέρας καὶ πᾶν τὸ πρόσθεν γένος αἰσχῦναι, ἡγούμενοι τῷ τοὺς αὑτοῦ αἰσχύναντι ἀβίωτον εἶναι, καὶ τῷ τοιούτῳ οὔτε τινὰ ἀνθρώπων οὔτε θεῶν φίλον εἶναι οὔτ’ ἐπὶ γῆς οὔθ’ ὑπὸ γῆς τελευτήσαντι).

Like the departed in the *Phaedo* who lead shameful lives and are thusly mired in mud, such souls are not led by good gods and daimons. Without virtue, the dead cannot share in the bliss and justice of absolute life, which lovely tends to and guides the young of every generation. This life without virtue is not worth living (regardless of its deathlessness). Consequently, Aspasia mimes Socrates’ philosophical worldview while nevertheless adding her own *extemporizing* ideas (see 236b) as she attempts to eulogize over the lessons that the true mother and virtuous father give to their progeny:

1. Neither wealth nor beauty bring honor without justice and virtue (246e);
2. All knowledge without *virtue* is brute cunning and strategy (247a);
3. One should know they have a duty to exceed in virtue, if possible, not only the presently fallen but every ancestor. This is the source of happiness for both the living and the dead (247a-b);
4. One ought not abuse or waste the reputation of their ancestors, leaning on it like social capital. Rather they must reproduce such treasure for their successors (247b);
5. If one follows these words, remembering father and mother and their precepts, they will be received, like Socrates advised in the *Phaedo* and Diotima in the *Symposium*, by their daimonic ancestors and guides as friends (246c).

With the speech complete, Menexenus, son of Socrates, has been exhorted by a thoughtful mother to remember and hold dear his ancestors, all those who bequeathed to him a virtuous life more valuable than any reputation. This is the life which always remembers that the goddess safeguards the voices and wisdom of those who most justly adorn her (δικαιότατον δὴ κοσμῆσαι πρῶτον τὴν μητέρα αὐτήν, 237b-c), as they need not lament the loss of either father or mother. Due to their philosophical “education” and corresponding care or “nurture” they remain very much alive, tending to and continuously caring for the ceaseless love of a noble – though admittedly difficult and mysterious – abode.

After Socrates finishes Aspasia’s speech, he asks if Menexenus would like to visit with her. The young man responds: “I have conversed many times with Aspasia and know what she is like (Πολλάκις, ὦ Σώκρατες, ἐγὼ ἐντετύχηκα Ἀσπασίᾳ, καὶ οἶδα οἵα ἐστίν, 249d” – a quick aside of ‘knowing’ reminiscent of Phaedo’s description of Xanthippe: “Xanthippe, you know her?” Socrates follows up as he reportedly did with Lamprocles: “Well, and do you not admire her, and are you not grateful for her speech (Τί οὖν; οὐκ ἄγασαι αὐτὴν καὶ νῦν χάριν ἔχεις τοῦ λόγου αὐτῇ?” Menexenus retorts: “Certainly, Socrates, I am very grateful to that woman or that manwho told you, and still more grateful to you who have told me (Καὶ πολλήν γε, ὦ Σώκρατες, ἐγὼ χάριν ἔχω τούτου τοῦ λόγου ἐκείνῃ ἢ ἐκείνῳ ὅστις σοι ὁ εἰπών ἐστιν αὐτόν· καὶ πρός γε ἄλλων πολλῶν χάριν ἔχω τῷ εἰπόντι, 249e).” Often dismissed as another expression of Menexenus’ misogyny, these final words reveal something far more daimonic: the inheritor of Socrates listens to the voices which taught him how to live the examined life – remembering to remain faithful to it, even at the cost of death, even if it makes you look ridiculous or worthless before the uneducated and unloved. In the end, Menexenus’ language of gratitude bears the mark of having learned not only from his father and mother, but, through them both, the love and respect for the immortal wisdom and virtue of all the brave men and women who came before.

To return to Meillassoux and his hope for a god to come, the Platonic rejoinder demands we remember afresh a seemingly antiquated idea about the deceased, as the erotic life secured by Khôra and her bastard thinking call us to remember that the divine, immortal lot is neither one nor many, but a living chain – a lineage of souls who risk death willingly. These are the uncanny figures who choose to live so fully that they kindle in others the mortal power to give birth to the immortal, reminding future generations of their own infinite power – be it in words or deeds – to bear the miraculous, making it impossible to forget that, like Socrates, we already live in the Isles of the Blessed. In remembering such incredulous virtue and our mutual power to love and become friends with the divine, we do more than mourn. We reveal absolute justice, seeing beyond the evils that essential spectres endured, praising therein the good such ancestral voices bestow so that every generation can remember the divine power of the “contingent, but eternally possible, effect of a Chaos unsubordinated to any law,” residing very much in the living figures of the past. In this way, the dead are not lost, but live – guiding us still, whispering of the beauty and perplexity of a thoughtful mother’s unconquerable and absolute justice.

1. For this interview, see Parker, A. *The Theorist’s Mother*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2013, 5. I take it that “thought” here indicates the *trace* or reserve that cannot be conceptualized or captured by language. On the overcoming of *status quo* conceptions of philosophy, consider the following: “Philosophical language belongs to a system of language(s). Thereby, its nonspeculative ancestry always brings a certain equivocality into speculation. Since this equivocality is original and irreducible, perhaps philosophy must adopt it, think it and be thought in it, must accommodate duplicity and difference within speculation, within the very purity of philosophical meaning” (1978: 113). See also pp. 110–111. *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I invoke both the political sense of this term as well as Derrida’s own concept of *sous rature* symbolized by the Greek letter χ and his (mis)understanding of the rhetorical device of the chiasm, wherein which one writes or speaks in such a way that there is a reversal of meaning through the use of similar words or thoughts best represented by an ABBA pattern, e.g. it is not *consciousness* that determines *being* but *being* that determines *consciousness*. For Derrida, the chiasm shows ‘how writing structurally carries within itself (counts-discounts) the process of its own erasure and annulation, all the while marking what remains of this erasure.” *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982, 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Meillassoux, Q. “Spectral Dilemma,” *Collapse* 4. 2008, 262. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Indeed, for Meillassoux (2010, 476), mere social justice would merely reproduce the evil of politics, i.e. the militant who “likes the intrinsically negative benefits of social confrontation.” In contrast, true justice would overcome the political conditioning of a fourth world where “emancipatory politics” is a politics that seeks its own abolition. (476) See ‘The Immanence of the World Beyond’, in Connor Cunningham and Peter Candler (eds), *The Grandeur of Reason: Religion, Tradition, and Universalism*, London: SCM Press, 2010, 444-78. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. On why neither the atheist nor theist can provide such true justice: “This alternative can be stated, summarily, in very simple terms: either God exists, or he doesn’t. Or more generally: either a merciful spirit, transcending humanity, is at work in the world and its beyond, bringing justice for the departed; or such a transcendent principle is absent. Now, it becomes rapidly apparent that neither of these two options – let’s call them for convenience religious or atheistic, however innumerable the ways in which they can be configured – allows the requisite mourning to take place. To say that God exists, or that he does not – whatever is thought through these two statements, both are paths to despair when confronted with spectres.” (2008, 263) On the problem of the theist who asserts that such deaths are redeemed *via* God’s plan: “You only succeed in exacerbating the nightmare you promise: for you suppose that this being has the power to spiritually transform me in such a radical fashion as to make me love He who allows such atrocities to occur, for having let those atrocities occur. This is a promise of a spiritual death infinitely worse than a merely bodily death: in the presence of God, I will cease to love the Good, for He would have the power to make me love Evil as if it were Good. If God exists, the exit of the dead is thus aggravated to infinity: their bodily death is redoubled in their spiritual death. To this hell you wish for them, I prefer, for them as for myself, nothingness, which will leave them in peace and conserve their dignity, rather than putting them at the mercy of the omnipotence of your pitiless Demiurge.” (2008, 264) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Meillassoux, Q. (2008, 261). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Besides the problem addressed above, Tyler Tritten, author of *The Contingency of Necessity: On Reason and God as Matters of Fact*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press (2017), also noted in a correspondence: “This is a problem. And, probably not the only one. Even if hyper-contingency lets me hope for anything, e.g. a future god-to-come, this future possibility is no more likely or plausible than any other contingency, e.g. the advent of a sadistic god that will resurrect the unjust and condemn the just to eternal torment. There are surely numerous problems here.” [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Meillassoux: “God must be thought as the contingent, but eternally possible, effect of a Chaos unsubordinated to any law (274).” [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. As Giorgio Agamben (1999, 267) suggests, such “remembrance restores possibility to a past, making what happened incomplete and completing what never was. Remembrance is neither what happened nor what did not happen but, rather, their potentialization, their becoming possible once again.” *Potentialities*, Stanford: Stanford University Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Layne, D. “Divine Names and the Mystery of Diotima,” in *The Routledge Companion to Woman and Ancient Philosophy*, (eds.) Brill, S. and McKeen, C. New York: Routledge, 2024. Some supporting materials for this argument include but are not limited to the following: 1) Plato/Apollodorus’ prolific use of eponyms, puns and polyphony in the *Symposium*; 2) the aforementioned Athenian injunction against naming women in public; 3) the centrality of Artemis (the wild goddess of childbirth) in the region of Mantinea, Arcadia, cult parallels/names in Diotima’s speech and Phaenarete’s explicit devotion to Artemis in the *Theaetetus* and, finally, direct 4) textual parallels between the *Symposium* and the *Theaetetus* (which can also be seen in some of the ensuing parenthetical quotations). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See Schaps, D. “The Woman Least Mentioned: Etiquette and Women’s Names.” *The Classical Quarterly*, vol. 27, no. 2, 1977, 323–30, Humphreys, S.C., *Kinship in Ancient* Athens: An *Anthropological* Analysis, Oxford: OxfordUniversity Press, 2018, 264-254 andDickey, E. *Greek Forms of Addr*ess, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. Humphreys writes the following: “Women of respectable families were usually not named in public, a woman instead being referred to by the name of her father or of another male guardian—husband, brother, or son. The names of respectable women are however recorded on inscriptions, usually with that of father or guardian [...] a woman may be named by opponents in a lawsuit who claim that she has not led a respectable life (*Dem*. 39–40) or is not entitled to citizenship (*Is*. 3).” [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Beyond simply belonging to a similar class and talking to a young person unburdened by the same cultural demands, the naming of Phaenarete could also simply mean she was deceased, a likelihood for her in 399 BCE. As Schaps (1977, 6) argues, an Athenian man could name a woman of disrepute, a woman who is an opponent in a law dispute and, finally, women who have passed away. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Two textual parallels are of note. First, compare Diotima’s descriptions of animals (*Symp.* 207a-c)and their protective behavior when it comes to their young and Socrates’ descriptions in the *Theaetetus* (151c-d) of peoples’ reaction to the loss of their first offspring. Like the animals in Diotima’s speech, some of Socrates’ companions become so upset about the loss of their idea, they resort to behaving like an animal, literally ready to bite (δάκνειν) him. Second, compare Diotima’s descriptions of how the lover easily brings forth long-felt conceptions by contact, consorting and remembering the beloved (209c) and Socrates’ description in the *Theaetetus* of former students who discover, by the mere presence of the philosopher, their own ideas, owing their birth to the midwifery of Socrates/the divine. Unfortunately, unlike Diotima’s conception of the lover, some of Socrates’ companions go away (150d-151a) out of ignorance of his part in helping them bear and rear their offspring and as such individuals, filled with haughty pride and hatred, miscarry or warp their conceptions into something false. In short, Diotima describes the positive, long-lasting effect of a true erotic relationship based upon the value of recognized ignorance while Socrates, in the *Theaetetus*,describes invertedly the reaction of the doubly ignorant lover. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. On being able to name *disreputable* women, see Schaps (1977, 4-6). In a private correspondence, Harold Tarrant asked me why Socrates would refer to Diotima as a xenia if, in fact, it is his mother. Besides the arguments to be unfolded below, two further responses merit consideration. First, in the *Symposium* Socrates/Apollodorus is deliberately concealing the relationship and, so, one can easily imagine substituting more parental terms of respect with *xenia*. Second, using the title of *xenia* with a woman within the home was an Athenian nicknaming practice utilized by families in reference to both (a) legitimate *foreigner* wives and (b) even citizen wives who opted to maintain their status as either independent women or women with a paternal dowry that was only given as a loan. In other words, such wives/mothers did not fully integrate into her husband’s home but remained part of her father’s *oikos* and were considered *xenia* or guests in their husband’s home. See Silver, M. *Slave-Wives, Single Women and Bastards in the Ancient Greek World: Law and Economics Perspectives*, Oxbow Books Limited, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See Kennedy, R.F. (2017). *Immigrant Women in Athens*, Routledge Studies in Ancient History, NY: Routledge, Bakewell, G. (2013); *Aeschylus's Suppliant Women: The Tragedy of Immigration*, University of Wisconsin Press, 2013;and Patterson, C. (1981). *Pericles’ Citizenship Law of 451–50 BC*. New York: Arno Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Challenging Patterson’s (1981) reading of Aeschylus’s *Suppliant Women*, Kennedy (2017) offers an excellent account of how Athens reacted to the sudden “invasion” of foreign women in the first half of the 5th century: “[Patterson] views the *Suppliants* as evidence for anxiety over a large influx of young foreign women into Athens between 480 and 460 BCE who were seen as a threat to the property rights and marriage status of citizen families. [...] The decision by the Athenians to define citizenship by descent, a definition the law requires, strengthens the view of foreign immigration as a major driving force in both the institutionalization of *metoikia* and the changes in citizenship. If ideas of patriotism had truly become entangled with birth status, then the metic, as the *de facto* outsider, could never be a true supporter of the democracy. The metic woman would, therefore, become one focus of ethnic anxiety because it was through marriage to a non-Athenian woman that the citizen body could most easily be invaded and undermined. This idea begins to develop following the Persian Wars and grows to become a staple of oratory in the years throughout the fourth century. [...] foreign women become a ready target for undermining the status of political opponents in no small part because their associations with these women called into question their loyalty to Athens.” [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See Bakewell, G. (2013, 19) andKennedy (2016, 15): “Because the women could no longer bear citizen children, their share in the city was diminished and essentially eliminated.” [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See Kennedy (2017) who rejects in chapter 3 that *heterea* were simply high-class prostitutes. Rather, she advances several strong arguments based upon historical and legal data that *heterea*, which simply means female friends, were educated and often foreign women whose own cultures had different conceptions of women’s virtue. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See McClure, L. (2003, 10), which discusses the immigration of foreign women as motivated by the explicit desire to be an “independent woman” or a “free courtesan.” See also Kennedy (2017, 113). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. For a general understanding of how προμνήστριαί was associated with sex work, see Kapparis*,* K. (2011) “Terminology of prostitution in the Ancient Greek world” in *Greek Prostitutes in the Ancient Mediterranean, 800 BCE–200 CE*, (ed.) Glazebrook, A. and Henry, M., Madison: Wisconsin University Press = GPAM; Cohen, E. E. (2003) “Athenian Prostitution,” in G. W. Bakewell, J. P. Sickinger (eds.), *Gestures: Essays in Ancient History, Literature, and Philosophy Presented to Alan Boegehold*, Oxford: Oxbow Books; Davidson, J. (1998) *Courtesans and Fishcakes: The Consuming Passions of Classical Athens*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Glazebrook, A. (2011) “Porneion: prostitution in Athenian civic space” in GPAM; Goldman, M. (2015) “Associating the Aulêtris: Flute Girls and Prostitutes in the Classical Greek Symposium,” *Helios*, 42.1: 29-60. For more on midwifery see Laes, C. “Midwives in Greek Inscriptions in Hellenistic and Roman Antiquity” in *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, vol. 175 (2011), 156. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See *Tht.* 150b, where the passage emphasizes that men cannot bear, like women, in body and so, of course, Socrates must concentrate his midwifery on men’s souls rather than bodies. Nonetheless by the close (210c) of the dialogue his maieutic skills are expanded to include the young, the noble and the beautiful. See also Layne (2024), where I show how Socrates’ devaluation of women’s midwifery as less difficult (150a) is a moment of Socratic playfulness based upon a careful examination of Diotima’s speech in the *Symposium*. Briefly, his exact criticism of women’s midwifery (or what he describes curiously as the female drama [δράματος, cf. *Rep.* 451c]) is that “they do not deliver women sometimes from phantoms and sometimes of truths (μὲν εἴδωλα τίκτειν, ἔστι δ’ ὅτε ἀληθινά).” Nevertheless, he continues, “if they could distinguish between the true and the false, midwifery would be the greatest and most beautiful work (μέγιστόν τε καὶ κάλλιστον ἔργον).” To be sure, Socrates’ mother, under the moniker of Diotima, does practice a form of midwifery that urges initiates not to bear phantoms (τίκτειν οὐκ εἴδωλα) but true virtue (ἀρετὴν ἀληθῆ, *Symp.* 212a-b), and so we have a moment in the *Theaetetus* where Socrates once again hides before others the power of the female drama. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See Cyrino, M. S. (2010, 30-52). *Aphrodite*, Taylor & Francis Group, for Pietho’s connection to erotic matters, sex-workers, courtesans, adornment, etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See Kennedy (2017, 55): “As the representations of metic women in tragedy show, there are generally two potential paths such women could follow within the scope of the ideology of metic women, both bound up in their status as simultaneously women and foreign. On the one hand, before 451 BCE, they could enter into the citizen body through marriage and childbearing, both fulfilling their proper role as women and aligning their sexuality with the fertility and life of the polis; even if that sexuality had a dangerous aspect to it, it could be tamed. As [Aeschylus’] *Suppliants* suggests, refusal to accept this role in the city brings war and stasis whereas reconciliation brings new peace to Argos by the trilogy’s end and a guarantee of new marriages and children. The Furies [of the *Oresteia*] as well come to Athens and provide for the protection of marriage and childbearing.” [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Dickey (1996: 52-55). Dickey emphasizes that within the classical works she surveys, she observed only 55 uses of the patronymic with fifty percent of them being found in Plato’s corpus. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. It is also interesting to note that the Laches (179a-b) opens with an explicit reference to the naming practices of Athenian men, i.e. giving their firstborn legitimate sons their father’s name. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Again, see Kennedy (2017, 59): “The real life effects of this particular strand of the ideology on metic women in post-451 BCE Athens seems to have been relentless, especially in the years after the reinstatement of the law in 403 BCE. Metic women who interacted with citizen men were slandered and reviled in the courts and on stage and in other public fora in the manner best suited to demonstrate their mercenary natures and their unsuitability to becoming citizen wives. They became prostitutes. Not real prostitutes, but imaginary ones. As the Athenians further developed a sense of ethnic and social superiority over the course of the fifth century, metic women found themselves the victims of a form of ideological warfare.” [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Consider the three mentions of Sophroniscus in the *Euthydemus* 297e- 298b and how the issue of citizenship status would raise the stakes of Socrates’ argument with Dionysodorus and Euthydemus, especially when the latter eristically undermines Socrates’ lineage and concludes that the philosopher is fatherless. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Silver, M. (2017, 170): “... a *nothos* born to an Athenian *pallakē* or, in the past, to a foreign *pallakē*, was granted citizenship as a matter of routine.” Among other ancient sources, Silver particularly cites Demosthenes 23.213. See also Carawan, E. (2006) “The Athenian Law of Agreement” GRBS 46, 339– 74; Carawan, E. (2008) “Pericles the Younger and the Citizenship Law.” CJ 103, 383– 406; Patterson, C.B. (1990), “Those Athenian Bastards.” ClAnt 9, 40– 73; Patterson, C.B. (1991). “Marriage and the Married Woman in Athenian Law” in S.B. Pomeroy (ed.), *Women’s History and Ancient History*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 48– 72; Walters, K.R. (1983). “Perikles’ Citizenship Law.” ClAnt 2, 314– 36. See further Kennedy (2017, 15), whose analysis shows that the increase of immigrants and their children with Athenians being admitted into the rank of citizen, a common practice that may have stimulated the enactment of the Periclean decree. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Note that Plato was writing in a time when such miscegenetic laws were even stricter. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. *Rep.* II 377c: “And the stories on the accepted list we will induce nurses and mothers to tell to the children and so shape their souls by these stories far rather than their bodies by their hands. But most of the stories they now tell we must reject.” See also 381e: “Nor again must mothers under the influence of such poets terrify their children with harmful tales, how that there are certain gods whose apparitions haunt the night in the likeness of many strangers from all manner of lands, lest while they speak evil of the gods they at the same time make cowards of children.”  [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Interestingly, Socrates uses the matronymic, son of Metis, when he refers to Poros. This suggests that if Sophroniscus is the historical parallel, the stonemason was a bastard *metroxenoi* (an elite son of a foreign woman and Athenian male) with (as all men born from male citizens had prior to 451BC) unquestioned entitled citizenship status. In Layne (2024), I argued that Eros is a stand-in for Aristodemus rather than Socrates. Due to Socrates’ polyphonic way of speaking, both can be true, particularly insofar as Diotima’s version can be told in such a way that it is clearly a narrative meant to inspire her son while Socrates’ narration before Agathon and his motley crew is a memory retooled to upset the men who have treated Aristodemus and the truth of the erotic with vein pretension. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. See Graves, Robert. 1960. The case for Xanthippe. *Kenyon Review* 4 (4): 597-605. Contra shrew, see Saxonhouse, A. “Xanthippe: Shrew or Muse?” *Hypatia* 33.4, 2018, 610-625. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. See Saxonhouse (2018, 614): “The high-spirited Xanthippe, to be sure, highlights Socrates's excellence, as Xenophon clearly wishes to do, but the portrait may also reveal something about the personal strength of this woman whom others, expecting acquiescence from their own wives, find "harsh." [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. To point out another possible reimagining of Xanthippe, reconsider what it might mean for her to be “difficult to persuade” when set in opposition to Diotima’s persuasive skills and the world of *hetaira* and metic who lead independent lives. Recalling that an *hetaireia* must be adept at persuasion and that being susceptible to another’s persuasion could be a job hazard. To clarify, one must keep men, unlike Theodoté with Socrates, coming to her, rather than she going to them like a common *porné*, soliciting. Yet with Socrates the tables reverse, as he persuaded the young woman that she needed him and so Theodoté joined the bevvy of women desirous of his charms. And so, Xanthippe as one who is not so easily persuaded would be an ideal philosophical seductress for Socrates. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. As Saxonhouse (617) also questions: “Wherefrom Xanthippe's fame? Plato gives us no indication why Echecrates would know her. We never hear of the wives of other characters in the Platonic corpus. Yet with Phaedo's side comment, Plato ensures that his readers attend to Xanthippe.” [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Aristoxenus, fr. 51. See Woodbury, L. (1973), “Socrates and the daughter of Aristides.” *Phoenix* 27 (1): 7-25. See DL 2.26 for the various explanations for how it is possible that Socrates had two wives. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. See Morris (2017, 72): “One approach is to understand that Socrates (and others) had two legitimate wives. The other is to recognize that the sources attribute a lower status to Xanthippe, who may be understood to be a secondary or pallakē-wife (discussed by Woodbury 1973: 21– 25).” Further, despite the fact that many scholars have argued that the use of a horse-sounding name connotes Xanthippe’s aristocratic lineage, most overlook the cultural context that 1) many underprivileged persons took on ‘fancy’ names in order to reflect their own aspirations and 2) that horse and horseracing metaphors abound in Athenian comedy, often referring to sex and sex workers. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Further, as Dickey (1996) shows in her work on Greek naming practices, names that begin with “So” suggesting ‘safety’, wholeness and salvation, were often taken up by manumitted slaves and then passed down in the Greek/Athenian tradition of naming male citizens after paternal grandfathers. See also Morris (2017) and Reilly (1969). This means that Socrates’ name reflects that either he or someone in one of his parent’s lineages was at one point enslaved. Again, this is suggestive, as both in Plato and Xenophon Socrates has a penchant for referring to Daedulus, a mythologically imprisoned and enslaved scheming inventor, with Xenophon explicitly referring to Daedulus’ enslavement in reference to Socrates’ lineage and Diogenes Laertius recounting that one such Darus reported that Socrates was in fact a former slave. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. DL 2.26 suggests that Menexenus is Myrto’s son, but on the basis of naming practices Socrates and Myrto’s second male heir would have been named after her paternal line and as such would have been named after Aristides, the Great. Either way, Xanthippe is clearly, at the very least, Menexenus’ primary caretaker or at least this is how she is depicted in the *Phaedo*. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. For the *Menexenus* as Plato’s *epitaphos*, see Cicero, *Oratio* 151. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. See Dean-Jones, Lesley. “Menexenus-Son of Socrates” in *The Classical Quarterly*, 1995, Vol. 45, No. 1 (1995), pp. 51-57, for the argument that Socrates and by extension Aspasia are ghosts and that the Menexenus of the *Menexenus* is Socrates’ youngest son. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Strikingly, once this spectral text is read this way, an interesting parallel to the *Alcibiades* I surfaces, wherein which the latter dialogue depicts Socrates exposing a young Alcibiades to his false conceit and his need to turn inward to the divine or immortal element residing within. Nonetheless, as we learn in the *Symposium* the soon-to-be traitor fails to follow, in the philosopher’s absence, such guidance (*Symp.* 216b-c; cf. *Tht.* 151c-d) while, contrariwise, in the *Menexenus* we witness a young man who has learned this important lesson and thus finds a resource. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. See Aeschylus’ *Suppliant Women*: “And do not ignore (or fail to know/respect) the honored oaths of the gods (καὶ μὴ κοννεῖς ὅρκων τιμὰς θεῶν, 130)” and “I have come to know the gods, but you know nothing (θεῶν δ’ ἔγνων, κοννεῖς δ’ οὐδέν, 164).” Rather oddly this name is alluded to in Socrates’ forward to his (Diotima/Phaenarete’s) eschatological myth while discussing the kind of soul that does well in the true Gaia, i.e. one purified and having passed through a measured life (ἡ δὲ καθαρῶς τε καὶ μετρίως τὸν βίον διεξελθοῦσα, 108c). [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Here, the philosopher enthusiastically argues that divine names can have letters transposed, added or subtracted, sometimes even having altogether different letters but still retains the same force (εἴ τι πρόσκειται γράμμα ἢ μετάκειται ἢ ἀφῄρηται, ἢ καὶ ἐν ἄλλοις παντάπασιν γράμμασίν ἐστιν ἡ τοῦ ὀνόματος δύναμις). [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. See Vickers, M. (2015). *Aristophanes and Alcibiades: Echoes of Contemporary History in Athenian Comedy*, Berlin: de Gruyter. On the possible role Alcibiades may have had with regard to the outlawing decree and the furthered practice of leaning on symbolic satire and puns on names in tragedy and comedy, see especially (2015, 5): “(Where does this quote end?)Playwrights exploited the possibilities for double meanings presented by Alcibiades’ speech mannerism. Sophocles was doing it as early as 438 BC, and we find Aristophanes doing so from *Knights* onwards. Eupolis clearly upset Alcibiades’ in *Baptae* , and not only does he seem to have been punished (Alcibiades having some of his friends “baptise” the poet in the sea), but Alcibiades is said to have “passed a law to the effect that comedy should no longer be written openly, but figuratively” (Tzetz. XIAi 97-8 Koster). There may be some support for this statement if, as seems probable, *Baptae* was performed shortly before the Sicilian expedition, in legislation passed in 415 BC. The Decree of Syracosius stated that it should henceforth be illegal to lampoon people in the theatre by name (μὴ κωμῳδε ῖσθαι ὀ νομαστίτινα: Schol. Ar. *Av*. 1297; cf. Eup. PCG 220). There has been much discussion of the meaning of Syracosius’ legislation. The absence from *Birds* of the names of any of those found guilty of parodying the Eleusinian Mysteries or the mutilation of the Herms, for example, has been taken as evidence for the law having applied to them: that these individuals should not be mentioned on the stage. The reality may have been that Aristophanes was simply obeying the law by not mentioning by name the major figures who were being seriously lampooned. Aristophanes is in any case said to have been among those who practiced symbolic satire after 415 BC (Tzetz. XIAi 99 – 100 Koster), and if his next extant play, *Birds*, was concerned with Alcibiades’ exile at Sparta, the bamboozling of his hosts, and the seduction and impregnation of Agis’ queen Timaea, then Aristophanes was simply obeying the law in lampooning Alcibiades “symbolically” and failing to mention him by name.” [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. *Prol.* 73.4, Olymp. *Vita 65-70.* Both also record fr.18 from Plato’s epitaph for Aristophanes: “The Graces, seeking an imperishable sanctuary, found the soul of Aristophanes.” See also Vickers (2015, xvi) who notably picks up on Plato’s fondness for Aristophanes’ style and political satire: “Plato’s devotion to Aristophanes is clear from the fact that he wrote his epitaph and kept his works (doubtless a selection) in his bed. He visited Sicily ‘in his fortieth year,’ which could be any time between 388 and 385 BC, and he encouraged ‘Dionysius the tyrant’ (who must be Dionysius I) to learn about Athenian government by studying Aristophanes’ plays, in particular *Clouds*.” [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. One should also point out a small coincidence when Socrates deploys the patronymic “son of Xanthippus” as he refers to Aspasia’s influence (a possible allusion to Phaenarete’s influence on Xanthippe) or that when Socrates desires to show that even if one had lesser teachers in music or rhetoric like Lamprus or Antiphon, Socrates may perhaps be punning on the names of Menexenus’ older brothers Lamprocles and Sophrosuniscus (insofar as Plato’s own half-brother was so named)? [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Recalling that Socrates only offers the interest or offspring of the Good in the analogy to the Sun, a text that explicitly emphasizes that fallen guardians will be daimonized, one wonders if the following epitaph promises to deliver much more than an example of rhetoric, perhaps it intends to pay a great debt. On daimonizing the fallen, see *Rep.* 468e: “And ever after we will bestow on their graves the tendance and [469b] worship paid to spirits divine. And we will practice the same observance when any who have been adjudged exceptionally good in the ordinary course of life die of old age or otherwise.”  [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Arguably Aspasia puns on Phaenarete/Diotima (ηὔφραινον δι’ ἀρετήν) and Socrates’ (**σω**τηρίας) names in this passage. (Why the underlines and bolding?) [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. This may also gesture to the historical fact that Aspasia was a stepmother to Pericles’ children/Alcibiades and that Menexenus himself had a stepmother, Myrto. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Socrates: “I would gladly listen, then, if one of you is ready to speak, to a description of that city engaging in war—how it repels its enemies and acts nobly and appropriately in such circumstances (ἡδέως οὖν ἂν ἤκουον, ὁπότερός τις ὑμῶν ἑτοῖμός ἐστι λέγειν, τὴν πόλιν ἐκείνην ὡς πολεμούσαν ὡς δεχομένην τοὺς πολεμίους καὶ πῶς ἐν τούτοις ἀγαθὰ καὶ προσήκοντα λέγοιτο πράγματα πράττουσαν).” [↑](#footnote-ref-51)