

Paul Allen Miller

*Diotima at the Barricades: French Feminists Read Plato*

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*Reviewed by Maria Palaiologou, 2019*

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**Quote:** "Miller's meticulous discussion in this book offers a wonderful chance to reevaluate old debates in a reflective manner."

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Paul Miller's *Diotima at the Barricades: French Feminists Read Plato* rediscovers and repositions the identities and philosophical enterprises of three influential French feminists, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Sarah Kofman, whose "engagement with Plato is central to postmodern French feminist thought" (x). Their participation "in a complex, multifaceted dialogue concerning these texts, both with themselves and with their male counterparts" (ix), provides an insight into their deep understanding of the Platonic and other ancient texts in the Western philosophical and literary tradition.

Unfortunately, Miller argues, these exchanges, which have meaningfully contributed to postmodern French intellectual thought and "consciously or unconsciously determine our assumptions about the nature of meaning, consciousness, subjectivity, gender, and truth" (268), have generally been overlooked or ignored by English-speaking academic institutions. Many articles have been written on Irigaray's reading of Freud and Lacan against Heidegger and Levinas in *Speculum*. However, only a few have discussed her interpretation of Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* in relation to defining the concept of *woman as such*. Kristeva's concept of the *khora* in Plato's *Timaeus* is widely known, but her detailed reading of Plato's *Symposium* in response to her disputes with Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault on "where are the women in all this?" has hardly been noticed. Likewise, Kofman challenges her audience by legitimizing woman as an *atopia* that does not occupy a single determined place. In *Socrates*, the least known of her works outside France, Kofman portrays Socrates, the epitome of desire for wisdom, as a *Janus bifrons*. Much like her woman, the philosopher is an *atopia* whose trek illustrates the dynamics of the binary relationship between ignorance and desire for *sophia*. In juxtaposing and exposing the relationship between the "masculinist text of philosophy to the body, to desire, and most importantly to its (to her?) conflicted relation with the maternal body" (219), Kofman is not interested in showcasing how the two ends complement each other, collapse into each other, nor

how distinctively different they are from each other. Rather, Kofman "destabilizes these texts, while simultaneously opening them to new uses, to new appropriations . . ." (219), much like the way she practices philosophy "as a self-conscious desire [*eros*] for that which exceeds the immediate . . . whose task is always to formulate a way, however provisional, however temporary" (274).

To manage the project and make the exposition more meaningful, in the beginning of each chapter, Miller provides his readers with brief biographical accounts of his female protagonists. Despite Irigaray's concern that such accounts may challenge women's credibility as intellectual thinkers (Whitford 1991), I believe that they are quite valuable, since the cultural background with which these women are in direct or indirect correspondence has been instrumental to who they are as individuals and thinkers. Indeed, a person's historicity is an unavoidable feature of the person's intellectual maturity. Since birth, each of the thinkers discussed in Miller's book had been drafted into an ongoing narrative comprised of cultural, religious, and sociopolitical rules of engagement dictated mainly by the predominant masculinist ideology. In these short but illuminating biographical expositions, Miller illustrates his protagonists' determination to contest these very rules that dictated for them what woman essentially is.

The book starts with a lengthy introduction followed by four substantial chapters and an epilogue. In the "Introduction: The Sublime Freedom of the Ancients: Beauvoir, Cixous, and Duras on Gender, the Erotic, and Transcendence," Miller focuses on three influential predecessors to Irigaray, Kristeva, and Kofman. These are French feminists as established by Anglo-American feminist theory of the 1980s. The pivotal aspect of this presentation is its reception of antiquity and the direct or indirect engagement and/or reference of the three thinkers regarding Diotima's speech in Plato's *Symposium*. As Miller correctly observes, "for Diotima, *Eros* represents at once the movement beyond the present and a situated lack. We do not desire that which we have, and if we had the greatest goods, we would not be human" (51). So, each of these thinkers attempts to articulate what woman is and the structure of desire and transcendence as Diotima understands it in Socrates's speech. For Beauvoir, antiquity and woman within a dominant masculine system play the same role. In a masculine dominating tradition, they are both understood as the "intimate other" that manifests the limits of man's identity; as such, the feminine is seen "as both the dark continent and the means of its own transcendence and redemption" (269). Hélène Cixous revisits the myths of antiquity rather than the Platonic text to argue that the protagonists of the ancient myths "are not topics presented for us to think about but ambiguities for us to live" so that "woman is not a category, not an essence, not even a social construct, so much as a *complex multi-perspectival* conjuring of all that patriarchal metaphysics must repress--a *feminine polymorphous* perversity and ecstatic chaos" (50; emphasis mine). Finally, Miller's Marguerite Duras, who is neither a classicist nor a philosopher, becomes the unlikely defender of Platonic love. As Miller states, her intentional use of anti-Platonist language to address questions of feminine desire and sexual difference helps articulate the structure of desire and transcendence described by Diotima. "Duras's feminine style . . . points precisely to the moment of nondetermination that gives rise to desire and hence also to the moment of freedom and transcendence, of introducing something new into the Real as the beyond of the Symbolic." Lack, which is part of *Eros*'s unique nature, simultaneously signifies freedom to entertain the possibility of "infinite substitution" (46-47).

In the following chapters, Miller painstakingly revisits the dialogical exchanges not only among Irigaray, Kristeva, and Kofman but also with their predecessors and contemporaries. By juxtaposing and constructing insightful interpretations of their multilayered narrative, Miller seeks answers to questions such as: What do the concepts of desire, self-transcendence, and freedom from a predominantly masculinized understanding of the very essence of woman contribute to the concept of *woman as such*? Do Irigaray, Kristeva, and Kofman help escape Cixous's prophecy that "we do not seek to emerge from the cave but burrow further into it?" Does the concept of *woman as such* remain an *atopia*, the dark continent? Is woman a *Janus bifrons* never wanting to manifest her two faces as complementary to each other nor to celebrate their distinctive differences, but allowing for the possibility of self-scrutiny and *autopoiesis*? In chapter 1, "The Dark Continent: Luce Irigaray, the Cave, and the History of Western Metaphysics," Miller admits that Irigaray's argument may not be easy to trace, and her close reading of the Platonic text may be challenging. Indeed so, but what makes the reading and assessment of this chapter challenging is the sheer number of issues dealt with. In his attempt to sort out the crucial details essential to Irigaray's argument, Miller provides an intriguing discussion of Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* using textual evidence from the *Republic* 5 and 6. Accordingly, the textual evidence from books 5 and 6, as the precursors to the epistemic happenings within and outside the cave, seems to point to a series of representations in the form of the representation of representation. The prisoner having ascended from the cave does not experience truth itself; rather, he "touches upon the truth," he is in a state of *hupar*, a state that points beyond itself. The *hupar* state is to be juxtaposed with the *onar* state, the dream/self-referential state that the prisoner, whether free or not, experiences while he is still in the cave (69-103). The challenging aspect of this otherwise intriguing section is that it does not clearly illustrate its connection to Irigaray's investigation to define the concept of *woman as such*. At the end of the chapter, Miller contends that the interior of the cave, simply being the "theatre of representations in Western thought," is the place of the *onar*, the place of the seeming. Its existence is important mainly because it has become the "choric receptacle" for the instantiation of *aletheia*. The essential nature of the walls in the cave is to remain imperceptible. Their only use for Plato is to make possible the projection of other images and likenesses. By the same token, for Irigaray, the maternal body, as the "choric receptacle," must remain invisible; for masculine societal rules, *woman as such* must remain the unknowable other only to be understood as the reflection of a self-contained masculinist subject (110-11).

Julia Kristeva's challenging, provocative, and original writing explores problems of femininity, motherhood, and sexual difference across several fields, such as linguistics, political philosophy, and psychoanalytic theory. In chapter 2, "Revolution in Platonic Language: The *Chora* in Kristeva," Miller explores the various and changing views Kristeva holds on the concept of the Platonic *khora*. To do so, he provides a critical overview of Kristeva's views on the subject from a linguistic and phenomenological, political, psychoanalytic perspective, while at the same time he draws attention to influences from Derrida and Bakhtin to whom directly or indirectly Kristeva's views respond. The overview is essential, since it helps the reader understand the multilayered relationship Kristeva's subject bears to her *khora*. Plato's *khora* in the *Timaeus* is the lacuna between the sensible and intelligible world through which everything passes but in which nothing is retained; it is the "receptacle of becoming." In Plato's closed metaphysical system, *khora* is outside description and language, it is the Democritean void, "it is *neither* this *nor* that [nor is it] that it is *both* this *and* that" (Derrida 1995, 89), and as such it must remain

unrepresentable. So, Derrida continues in his hermeneutic approach, *chora* is "irreducible to all the values to which we are accustomed--values of origin, anthropomorphism, and so on . . ." (Derrida and Eisenman 1997, 10). Unlike Derrida, Kristeva's *chora* "becomes the embodiment of the drives [*eros* and *thanatos*], the unnamable that comes into being only at the moment of the subject's entrance into the Symbolic, the moment of its invisibility. The *chora* is the ground on which the subject is written, the lost relation to the maternal body that can be articulated only as loss" (160). In his closing remarks of this chapter, Miller addresses the reader who worries how much of such interpretive attempts of the Platonic text are warranted by Plato. In other words, "where is Plato's *khora* in all this?" Miller correctly observes that for the most part the *Timaeus* is an atypical Platonic text, "featuring very little Socrates and very little dialogue." So, to read it simply as a "straightforward metaphysical treatise" would be doing injustice to its various textual nuances (161-63). To borrow Miller's assessment of Kofman's *Socrates*, it would be doing a great injustice to philosophy, the offspring of *penia* and *eros*, to treat the Platonic texts as implying one single and unchanging truth hypostasizing itself to a changeless essence. The quest for wisdom and not the possession of wisdom is the very nature of philosophy (274-76).

Withdrawing from an active political life, Kristeva immersed herself in psychoanalysis and therapeutic intervention. In chapter 3, "Platonic *Eros*: Kristeva Sends Her Love to Foucault and Lacan," Miller focuses on Kristeva's psychoanalytic approach to the dynamics of the transference relationship, transference love, in the psychoanalytic situation. In the process of his exposition, Miller critically discusses Kristeva's approach to love and sexuality and her responses to Foucault, Derrida, and Lacan's views presented in his seminar, *Symposium, Le transfert*. For Lacan, "Man's desire is the desire of the Other." In this sense desire is always desire for something else. On one hand, then, the desire is a desire for some kind of recognition; on the other, it is a desire for what we believe the other desires. Regardless, once the object of desire is attained, the subject is no longer interested in pursuing it and moves on to a different object. Lacan calls this process the *metonymy of desire* (Lacan 1978). According to Miller, Kristeva's potentially revolutionary contribution is "her prioritization of a metaphoric of love over the endless metonymy of desire." In this sense, love is viewed "as a form of openness to the other that allows us to posit the subject not as [a] closed unity but as an open autopoietic system" (273-74). What makes Miller's discussion in this chapter exciting is the message of hope his Kristeva sends her reader in creating and allowing for space where love/desire of the other and the maternal embody renegotiating new forms and manifestations of love.

When Kristeva asks her male interlocutors, "where are the women in all this?," Kofman responds that woman is a marginality, an *atopia* always struggling to define her own identity in the dynamic process taking place between two polar opposite *faces* to which she has been ascribed: "Woman is often the *Janus* figure with opposite but inseparable faces: the good and bad mother, or the virgin and the prostitute" (Deutscher 1999, 249, n. 7). Her will is not to compromise with an inauthentic coexistence, but to allow for an *atopia* where new forms of negotiations can take place. In his final chapter, "Socrates, Freud, and Dionysus: The Double Life and Death of Sarah Kofman," Miller argues that Kofman's unique contribution to feminism consists in neither some sort of direct political action, nor in undermining the "masculinist Symbolic" that Irigaray's *parler femme* or Cixous's *écriture féminine* attempt to do. Rather, Kofman's reading of the masculinist philosophical text is to open it to a different realm of interpretation. The masculinist mental body is to converse with its opposite but inseparable face of the maternal body. *Logos* is

to converse and address its conflicted relation with desire. What is exciting about Miller's interpretation of Kofman's trek toward defining her philosophical identity and thus her painting of a unique portrait of woman qua woman is that Kofman is not interested in collapsing the boundaries of the two polar opposites of Janus faces into one. In his view, when Kofman engages with the masculinist text, whether it is in the two faces of Socrates in the *Symposium*, of Freud, of the joke, of irony, of woman, of Dionysus, or of Derrida, she does not seek to point to yet another distinctive difference between the two, nor does she seek to show in what way they are or could be complementary to each other. Rather, her main goal is to point out the dynamic process that takes place in defining their relationship. As Miller sharply observes using Kofman's autobiography, "it is not *Rue Ordener* **or** *Rue Labat*, nor *Rue Ordener* **and** *Rue Labat*, but *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat*" (220; emphasis mine). Miller's exposé shows that Kofman's understanding of *woman* consists in her reflection of her own trek toward defining her identity by acknowledging and meditating upon the traumas of her childhood. Much like her woman, Socrates for her is a fascinating enigma: "What fascinates us still today and enchants us in Socrates, what regards us, is it not his strangeness, the *atopia* of his *Janus bifrons*?" (Kofman 1998, 21, quoted in Miller, 213). Socrates, whose *aporia* forces us to acknowledge the gap, encourages us to engage in a dynamic dialogue not of assimilation nor of subjugation, but of cross-examination.

"This engagement," Miller hopes, "offers a chance to think differently, to historicize and thus potentially recreate what it means to be a woman (and a man)" (xi). Indeed, Miller's meticulous discussion in this book offers a wonderful chance to reevaluate old debates in a reflective manner. In summary, his book not only constitutes an excellent source study, but also an important read for anyone interested in enriching their understanding of the intriguing engagement these three postmodern French thinkers had with the ancient text and with their male counterparts in the defining moments of postmodern intellectual thought. Further, Miller's project is valuable to an academic audience ranging from Anglo-American feminist theorists, to English-speaking classicists whose knowledge of continental philosophy and theory is for the most part elementary; from theorists whose knowledge of the Platonic text in philological detail is insufficient, to departments of philosophy whose curricula follows the traditional canon of male-centric, mostly European thinkers, with minimum diversification regarding French feminism and its ongoing dialogue with Plato. One of the main strengths of Miller's work is the variety of chapters and the extensive issues they cover, in addition to the quality of his research and his insightful interpretation and/or commentary. Miller's book has brought together thinkers from various academic backgrounds, such as philosophy, feminism, political theory, linguistics, economics, as well as psychoanalysis. To bring to light all the valuable points argued for in this book would not be manageable, given the space allotted for and the purpose of this review. Indeed, a wide range of views is entertained, and the author's clear demonstration of his deep understanding of the issues and his expertise make the narrative and ongoing dialogues among his protagonists and the original ancient texts as intelligible as possible to a wide audience. However, due to the sheer amount of textual evidence and views, the writing in places becomes dense and the discussion can be disjointed. Nevertheless, given Miller's projected audience, his conscientious effort to bridge the gap and lay the foundation for a deeper engagement with the lesser known theoretical projects of Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Sarah Kofman in the Anglo-American academia is highly commendable.

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