

WAGS 31: Second Essay

Rick Griffiths, 542-5355

Due: Feb. 28 (Sunday) 5:00 PM by e-mail¹

Office hours: Tues. 2:00-4:00

Length: 1,250-1,500 words

Fri. 10:00-11:00

Editorial conferences to discuss rough drafts:

Feb. 24-27

(see CMS page for times)

Please send rough drafts in advance of the block of appointments in which you are scheduled.

Sex, Power, Truth

Quote Plato by the embedded page numbers [248] rather than page in notebook and Hubbard.

I. Does “Homosexuality” Exist in Plato’s Dialogues?

As Davidson explains in “Dover, Foucault,” recent decades have seen controversy about whether homosexual : heterosexual were recognized social categories for the Greeks in the way that male : female are. Dover, Foucault, and others have argued that the Greeks perceived sexual acts and roles in terms of dominant : submissive rather than same-sex object : opposite-sex object. This penetration-centered perspective would not result in a social identity or category of the sort that “homosexual” has become since ca. 1870.

>Do the speakers in the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* understand “homosexual” as a social category?

As we discussed in class, Plato does in places describe how some lower or abusive relationships fall into the dominant : submissive model, even if he does not focus on penetration, and he advocates the self-controlled : lacking self-control (or sōphrosynē : akrasia²) model as a guide to higher relationships. The question remains, does homosexual :

¹Moved back from the 12:00 PM time given on the syllabus.

²*Sōphrosynē* is temperance, self-control; *akrasia* is intemperance, lack of self-control, impulsiveness. *Hybris*, violent or emotional self-assertion, is also used as an antonym to *sōphrosynē*. *Hybris* is also used more narrowly for assault, including rape.

heterosexual function as the next most useful category after male : female? Or, in the virtually all-male world of the dialogues, is it overshadowed by some more important distinction, such as potential philosopher : not potential philosopher (along the *sōphrosynē : akrasia* line), or free : slave, or Greek : barbarian? Or, to put the matter differently, when the ultimate goal of desire (erōs) – at least for people who understand ultimate goals – is possession of the Good, is object choice (same sex : opposite sex) really important?

This is a broad and slippery topic, so feel free to narrow it down, or find some distinctive and limited approach to answering it. Hubbard's survey (pp. 1-16) is worth consulting again.

II. Socrates and Davidson

Socrates does not argue people down, shut them up, or browbeat them; he merely questions. And without looks or money, he once drove to distraction the most courted *erōmenos* in Athens, Alcibiades, and years later still has the ability to paralyze him, now the most powerful man in Athens. Whatever Socrates' powers—about which Alcibiades has much to say—they're not *power* in the sense that Alcibiades, the politician and general, understands it.

>How well does Davidson's anti-Foucauldian view of Greek homosexuality work to analyze the Socrates-Alcibiades stand-off about how sex is and is not about power as power is conventionally understood?

III. Wild Side: Sappho and Alcibiades

Greek love poetry, gay and straight, is one-sided: We hear from the male lover, but not the beloved, be it boy or woman. In addition to lacking social power, women and boys fall toward the "nature" side of culture : nature in Greek eyes: that is, they are wild, in need of taming, not yet (or ever) as rational as their older male lovers, but perhaps more visionary or "poetic." What would they say about love if they had a voice?

Sappho and Plato's fictionalized Alcibiades offer rare evidence for how women and boys might speak beyond the social constraints on them. Of course, the two have many differences: Sappho speaks for herself – and not about men. Plato's Alcibiades is already a general when he is seized by the memories of his youthful frustration with the unique *erastēs* Socrates. But in those memories we see the perspective of a boy. Different as they are, several of you have mentioned Sappho and Alcibiades as a relief from Plato's eternal truths.

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>What is comparable in how Sappho and Plato's Alcibiades speak to the experience of love?

Some possible questions that may open this topic up: How do they each, at least partly, speak in the mode of confession? Is Sappho claiming male territory? Is Alcibiades – more than he realizes – slipping into female territory? (Davidson's brief summary of female and male desire may be helpful here.) How does the gaze work in the dynamics of attraction?

IV. Platonic Love and Roman Sex

As Davidson points out, Roman mores lend themselves to the dominant : submissive model more than do the Greek.

>Use examples from the syllabus's Roman readings in Hubbard or others, such as Juvenal (A 9.38-39), to draw a contrast with how Plato uses dominant : submissive in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*.

V. Kinder, Gentler, Maler

The *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* mark a clear departure from violent and competitive aspects of Greek culture that we see as oppressive to women, including the stark emphasis on political, military, and physical power. Yet in outlook they seem even more exclusionary of women – more of a men's club – than Greek myth and literature before them (Homer, drama, choral poetry).

>Can the moves that Plato makes in developing the mind : body and self-controlled : lacking self-control binaries be adapted to giving women more agency or do those moves inevitably deepen the exclusionary tendencies of Western culture?

This is a tricky hypothetical to put together, and what I'm looking for in particular is how resourcefully you can work with the ideas of the dialogues to make a case one way or another. Plato did himself allow women to be guardians (the ruling elite) in his ideal and highly militarized *polis* in *The Republic*, but essentially by effacing female distinctiveness almost to the point of invisibility.

VI. Socrates: A Biography (Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?)

What if we call Plato's dialogues "the longest and most charming love-letter in literature"? We've seen how Woolf turned her friend and former lover Vita Sackville-West into a fictional character whose loves and adventures and creativity were under Woolf's authorial control. Somewhat similarly, Plato spent decades fictionalizing his mentor Socrates, sometimes as the sexiest man in Athens, and spoke in Socrates' voice rather than his own. He depicts numerous young men, including Alcibiades and Phaedrus, who sit at the knees that led him to philosophy. Socrates (unlike Vita) was dead by the time Plato began to write (and live?) through him, and scholars assume that Plato's "Socrates" goes on to articulate ideas that the historical Socrates never got to. Plato's own "birth in beauty" perpetually has Socrates' face on it.

>In comparison with Woolf's romance with Orlando/Vita, what kind of affair is Plato having with his "Socrates?" Among the several better and worse relationships depicted in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, where does the Socrates-Plato romance fit?

General issues:

Organization:

It really helps me to know early in the essay what your argument is going to be or at least how you are going to organize your answer to the question. In other words, give me a map. Please indicate your topic (I, II, III, IV, V, VI) and give me your own title as a hook or headline.

Intellectual honesty:

Please consult *Intellectual Honesty* on the course CMS page. Use of secondary sources other than those on the syllabus, including the Internet, is not required or encouraged. All sources used should be cited. The reading questions, material from discussion, and e-mailed questions/comments may be taken as common knowledge and need not be cited. I refer any suspected plagiarism to the Office of the Dean of Students. When in doubt, please contact me.

Writing Center:

Another pair of eyes can often be helpful, and sustained, systematic work with a tutor is a great way to become a better writer.