

Plato, Feminist Philosophy, and the Representation of Culture: Butler, Irigaray, and the Embodied Subjectivity of Ancient Women

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This paper seeks first to interrogate the ways in which two contemporary feminist thinkers (Judith Butler and Luce Irigaray) have appropriated and reformulated a fundamental principle of pre-modern thinking about human action and conduct (Plato's philosophy of Forms). I will argue that any view on issues of essentialist and constructivist social history which Butler and Irigaray inadvertently raise must first accommodate a thoroughgoing presentation of *all* available evidence. The second half of this paper explores the ways in which specific representations of female identity—the gravestone of two citizens of the late-republican city of Rome (*CIL* 6/3.18524) and the graffito of a Roman “poetess” in the epigraphic environment of early-imperial Pompeii (*CIL* 4.5296)—engender (in many senses) exactly the kinds of tensions and ambiguities which Butler and Irigaray bring to bear on Plato's philosophical strategies. What I hope to illustrate is two-fold: a practical method of, and the critical need for, integrating post-modern theoretical standpoints on sex/gender issues with the representational discourses of the ancient world.

INTRODUCTION

The late twentieth-century student of ancient social-cultural discourses faces an historical record which silences women's voices, distorts their lives, and treats their concerns as peripheral. How is this history to be interpreted, how are those “voices” to be “heard/read”? Were they the voices of fellow beings sharing a common biology or essential being? Or are history and social context so constitutive of all being that no *thing* called “woman” can be said to exist outside them?

The first “matter” (a loaded term, I realize) I wish to address relates to the intentionally irritating “readings” of the Platonic dialogue *Timaeus* by the feminist philosophers Judith Butler and Luce Irigaray. An account of the natural world cast in the form of a description of how it was made by a creator god, the relevance of this dialogue to modern feminist philosophy is con-

tingent on the fact that many aspects of the *Timaeus*'s cosmology depend on the assumption that the world itself is a living thing. Particularly, I want to consider Butler's and Irigaray's distinctions between material and sexual differences, between constructed and sexed bodies. The purpose of this brief comparison is to suggest a possible redeployment of theoretical protocols which these feminist thinkers foreground in their work, in order to effect a recovery of certain ancient suppressed knowledges of wo/men, sexuality and the body. This will require a limited criticism of both writers' claims, specifically with regard to the Foucaultian notion of epistemic discontinuity, a concept which Butler and Irigaray negotiate only obliquely. I will then suggest tentative criteria by which to rearticulate a critical genealogy of the ancient world's formulation of materiality. In all of what follows, I should emphasise that the ancient world that I seek to interrogate comprises the late republican and early imperial Roman megalopolitan *milieu* of the first centuries BCE/CE. This was the time of women like Terentia, Clodia, Fulvia, Cleopatra, Livia, Antonia, Agrippina, and of Hellenistic preoccupations, of Ciceronian discourse and Augustan reconstitution, and of the beginnings of Roman dynastic imperialism. By "genealogy," I refer to the Foucaultian analysis of power and of the mechanisms whereby that power is expressed and employed in social-cultural relations.

First, though, a point of order. How do the intersections of an elusive Platonic dialectic on nature, the *Timaeus*, and two late twentieth-century feminist philosophies, Butler's performativity and Irigaray's *catagoresis*, address issues pertinent to contemporary interdisciplinary gender studies? As much as anything else, it is the exclusion and degradation of the feminine in pre- and post-modern discourses compelling the exercise. My contention is a familiar one, but nevertheless one that deserves rehearsal. Representation is often seen as operating under the constraints of a binary perspective; namely, representation of "form" or "matter," "text" or "material culture," "canon" or "catalogue"; or, for argument's sake, the competing specialisms of comparative philology or iconography, historiography or archaeology. This artificial, disciplinary differentiation (and, bear in mind, I speak now in the simplest of senses) may be seen to reflect broader, exclusionary discourses, like those which posit, for instance, an identity between culture/masculine and nature/feminine. In Aristotelian terms, "matter is potentiality, form actuality" (*De Anima* 412a10). If this initial presupposition is correct, then interrogating the ways (proprietary or disruptive) in which modern thinkers and practitioners represent ancient thought and practice should help to deconstruct principles of theory or practice valorizing "word" over "image," "religious"/"political" over "social"/"cultural," or *vice versa*, and so on. Merleau-Ponty (1962, 170) observes that the human body was/is always "a historical idea." Although aspects of his existential phenomenology have been subjected (rightly) to feminist critique, his formulation of embodied subjectivity at least treats fe/male experience as a cultural and historical modality. This implies that the "body-

subject” inhabits a situated existence, that wo/men’s experience is not homogeneous, and that differences in social location give rise to different perspectives and forms of knowledge. For the historian of ancient world cultures, the epistemology of spatial-temporal situatedness offers a pertinent adjunct to the interpretative process: the location of the “knower” (then) has a bearing on what is “known” (then/now).

PLATO’S DIALOGUE ON MATTER

To begin, let us consider the pre-modern discourse. Timaeus, an adherent of the ancient philosopher Pythagoras, is the chief speaker in Plato’s eponymous “dialogue.” The modern world has no knowledge of him independent of this work, and he may have been a fictitious character. Almost from the start, then, the underlying problematic of representation kicks in. A formulation for the cosmological aspects of a mysterious sixth century BCE Greek intellectual’s world-view, Pythagoras of Samos, is assimilated to what might be a rhetorical figure, Timaeus of Locri Epizephyrii, by an equally elusive fifth/fourth century BCE Greek philosopher, Plato of Athens.

What are these Platonic–Pythagorean materials which help to construct an account of the destiny of the human soul and its place in the totality of existence? The substance of the argument is as follows: all bodies, it is observed, are the centres of radical and continuous changes, and they possess no stability of nature or of quality. Change is only possible if we suppose a substratum denuded of the transitory states which affect it and which are manifested by it. So it is necessary to admit the existence of a universal subject, having no particular form but capable of receiving all forms.

This is already the almost non-existent, but still real, element known by Aristotle, as previously cited, as *pure potentiality*. Plato’s conception of it implies already its twofold and essential function. It is the principle of corruption in material bodies, and effects an infinite plurality of those perfections, which are realized fully in the immutable unity of the Forms.

Plato, however, fails to reach total precision, if such a state is possible, in the metaphysical concept of pure potentiality, and his description is in terms of poetry. And herein lies the rub. For he sees matter as the universal container of Forms, the mirror of Ideas, the mother and nurse of all that is born and dies. As the inexhaustible source of movement, it has life and animation, but its soul acts aimlessly and without discretion. When uncontrolled, its progress is blind and its end, chaos.

The container, mirror, mother, and nurse, that is, the “receiving principle” or *hypodochē*, is a woman; complementarily, the “source” or “spring” is a “father,” and irremediably male. Unfortunately, then, for the poeticized female construction of “the dynamic nature (*physis*) that receives (*dechesthai*) all the bodies that there are (*ta panta somata*)” (50b), she is at one and the same time potentially all-inclusive yet ultimately indefinable. The problem-

atic for representation of the feminine in subsequent philosophical discourse, ancient and modern, should be clear.

BUTLERIAN PERFORMATIVITY AND IRIGARAYAN PLAYFULNESS

Let us turn now to the interpretations of Butler and Irigaray. Judith Butler, in studies such as *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993), re-thinks Platonic notions of agency, identity, intentionality, and “the subject” notions central to psychoanalysis, poststructuralisms and feminisms, in light of a wide-ranging theory of “performativity,” or gender as iteration. Simply, for Butler “the category of ‘sex’ is, from the start, normative; what Foucault called a ‘regulatory ideal’”. In this sense, ‘sex’ not only functions as a norm, but is part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs” (1993, 1). This means that Butler wishes to radically reconceptualize contemporary understandings of the sex/gender system.

Taken in this context, the relation between culture and nature, for instance, presupposed by some models of gender “construction” implies “a *culture* or an agency of the social which acts upon a *nature* which is itself presupposed as a passive surface outside the social and yet its necessary counterpart” (1993, 4; italics added). Here Butler raises a provocative question: Is the discourse which represents the project of construction as a kind of inscription or identification not implicitly defined in terms of the masculine, Plato’s “source” or “spring,” whereas the image of the passive space, awaiting that interrupting operation whereby meaning is assigned, is tacitly defined as feminine, Plato’s *hypodochē*? In other words is sex to gender as feminine is to masculine?

Interestingly enough, this is a question which the speculative Irigaray also asks of feminist philosophers who seek to show how the body is figured as feminine. In her polysemic 1970s treatise *Speculum. de l’autre femme*,¹ Irigaray argues that in fact the feminine is precisely what is excluded in and by such a binary opposition. In this sense, when and where women are represented within this discourse is precisely the site of their erasure. As she tells us in the 1996 collection *I Love to You. Sketch for a Felicity Within History*, the term “speculum” signifies that which claims the most faithful expression of reality that is, the thought of objectivity of the world as “reflected” through a discourse. For Irigaray, “the question of the mirror figures as interpretation and criticism of the enclosure of the Western subject within the concept of the ‘Same,’ even in those propositions concerning the need to use a different mirror for the constitution of female identity” (1996, 60). Like Butler’s take on the philosophy of social construction, Irigaray’s view of the “female” as somehow “encapsulated” or “contained” within a generative discursive process that is identifiably “male” reformulates Plato’s material dialectic.

It is at this point that Irigaray and Butler seem to part company, some

might argue decisively and definitively. For Irigaray would say that, between men and women, “there really is *otherness*: biological, morphological, and relational” (1996, 61). She sees any “dream” of dissolving material, corporeal or social identity as leading to “a whole set of delusions, to endless and irresolvable conflicts, to a war of images and reflections” (63). The aim of *Speculum* and her other works, Irigaray insists, is to construct an objectivity that facilitates a discussion of metaphysical contradictions and solutions proper to the female subject, meaning specific relations between her nature and her culture, her same and her other, her singularity and the community, her interiority and her exteriority, and so on. The philosophical thrust of Irigaray’s writings argues for an irreducibility, either subjective or objective, of the sexes to one another. This, she says, “requires us to establish a dialectic of the relation of woman to herself and of man to himself, a double dialectic therefore, enabling a real, cultured and ethical relation between them” (63). (See Irigaray 1985a, 214–226; 1993a; 1993b; 1996.)

What interests me and is particularly important for my more traditionally historical purposes are the remarkable points of intersection between what might simplistically be regarded as the linguistic monism of Butler and the uncritical biological maternalism of Irigaray. Specifically, how can we redress the imbalance in historiographical reconstructions of gendered relations in the ancient world. Butler (1993, xi) understands “construction” as a heterogeneous network of constitutive constraints which produces not only the domain of intelligible bodies but also a domain of unthinkable, abject, unlivable bodies. These domains do not exist as opposites; rather, the latter is the excluded and illegible domain that renders the former domain possible, intelligible, constituted. Irigaray would seem to agree with this contention, positing the exclusion of the feminine from the economy of representation as a set of constitutive circumscriptions. Both reject the binarisms of universal/particular; each would argue that the feminine is, if you will, “domesticated” and rendered unintelligible within a phallogocentrism that claims to be self-constituting or auto-generative. According to Braidotti (1991, 213): “Patriarchy is the practice, phallogocentrism the theory; both coincide, however, in producing an economy, material as well as libidinal, where the law is upheld by a phallic symbol that operates by constructing differences and organising them hierarchically.”

This is the heart of (the) matter for me. If the limiting, fashioning and destabilizing of sexed bodies is animated by a set of founding injunctions like those compelling criteria of know-ability theorized in Plato’s *Timaeus*, then Butler and Irigaray are not merely considering how bodies *seem* from a theoretical vantage or epistemic disposition, removed from bodies themselves. On the contrary, they are both asking how the protocols and standards of intelligible sex operate to form a range of bodies, and how precisely these criteria might articulate specific discursive formulations to produce the bodies that they regulate (Butler 1993, 55). In this sense, they want to invoke a stratified

history of sexual hierarchy and sexual erasures not as a *ground* of feminist theory but as an *object* of feminist inquiry, and I would like to do the same.

Here, though, I tend to take my cues more from Irigaray, not for my practice alone, but as a point of entry into the practices of pre-modern men and women. I refer particularly to the vertical and horizontal relationships which subsist between feminine and masculine economies of representation. What I seek to recover are the possible linguistic/visual sites of critical feminine *mimesis*. Irigaray (1985b, 76) says that, for a woman, *mimesis* means “to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it . . . to resubmit herself . . . to ideas about herself that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic . . . so as to make visible by an effect of playful repetition what was supposed to remain invisible.” That is, by miming phallogocentrism, one might also expose what is covered up, the linguistic residue which complicates the unbroken reiteration of the phallogocentric principle. In a way, Irigaray’s theoretical protocol of *mimesis* addresses the problematic Foucaultian distinction between the historical act of bodily inscription and the logically necessary prediscursive constitution of the body identified by Butler (1989). Instead of presupposing a site (or sites) of precategorical resistance to regimes of discourse and power, the concept of mimetic phallogocentrism allows for a genealogical investigation of specific regulating formations of cultural coherence within the social field of a disruptive or subversive signifying practice. No fictive prehistorical surface is required; the process of constructed materiality is derivable. Butler’s “paradox of bodily inscriptions” is discarded in favour of a critical perspective on an alternative mechanism of cultural construction.

As an historian of ancient social-cultural relations, my question is this: if we accept the possibility of the “feminine in language” within a contemporary frame of reference, might it also be possible to recover similarly “playful” mimetic practices in the ancient world? Certainly, *mimesis* was applied philosophically by Plato (*Respublica* 10) and Aristotle (*Poetica*) to the semantic relation by which language or art represent their objects. The more widespread ancient usage of the term (*imitatio*) is rhetorical, to designate a later writer’s relation of acknowledged dependence upon an earlier one. Starting with the sophists, the careful study and imitation of usually written models of discourse became an established educational technique. Throughout antiquity, a strong continuity in method and attitude linked school exercises on canonical texts (memorization, excerpting, paraphrase, translation, commentary, variation of theme or style, comparison) with a poetic practice which drew attention to its skilled use of models. As Seneca the Elder tells us, speaking of Ovid in *Suasoria* 3.7, “not so as to filch but to borrow openly in the hope of being recognized.”

For the ancient rhetoricians and pedagogues *mimesis* was the study and conspicuous deployment of features recognizably characteristic of a canonical author’s style or content, so as to define one’s own generic affiliation.

The most interesting surviving treatments are by Dionysius of Halicarnassus, the aforementioned Seneca the Elder and the Younger, Longinus (*Subl.* 13–14) and Quintilian (*Inst.* esp. 10.2). Typically, though, ancient literary theory, which never entirely abandoned a model of oral communication, tended to view systematic issues like tradition and genre in interpersonal, binary, and hence moralistic terms. Ancient discussions of imitation urge emulation and rivalry, not servile dependence, recommend critical study and a plurality of models, and establish as the highest goal a melding of the student's personality with her or his model's.

INSCRIBED IDENTITIES ON GRAVESTONES AND GRAFFITI

Most definitely, then, a precedent exists for Irigarayan practice in pre-modern oral-rhetorical thinking. How might this interpenetration of literary-critical and philosophical discourses be deployed in aid of historical reconstruction? To draw the threads of this paper's arguments together as much as possible, I offer two instances of the paradigm of gendered "play." The first is one of tens of thousands of Latin inscriptions found in and near the ancient city of Rome. It is a burial epitaph, and is recorded without specific context in the compendium of Latin inscriptions known as the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* (labelled *CIL* 6/3.18524).²

FORTEIA C. L. ELEUSIS H. O. DATA FORTEIA C. L. HELENA

If the shortened Latin of this inscription is interpreted in the light of comparative epigraphic studies, we may complete and interpret the memorial as follows:

*Fonteia C(aiae) l(iberta) Eleusis h(uic?) o(lla) data Fonteia C(aiae)
l(iberta) Helena*

Fonteia Eleusis, freedwoman of Gaia. The burial urn granted to her. Fonteia Helena, freedwoman of Gaia

Even without a defined historical or social context, the intensification of the female is nascent and tangible in this simple memorial inscribed in stone. The commemorated, Fonteia Eleusis, is identified as the *liberta* (manumitted female slave) of a woman, and could take her name from this individual. This is indicated by the Latin abbreviation of the reversed or retrograde C. Quintilian reifies the impression that Gaia is a typical name conventionally used of "any woman" in his explanation of the retrograde C symbol: "Gaius is denoted by the letter C, while the inverse means (a) woman" (*Institutio Oratoria* 1.7.28). It would appear that the dominant Graeco-Roman discourse manufactures a signifier expressly suited to the symbolic transmission of a deeply embedded social-cultural premise: (a) Woman is (the) Inverse of (a) Man. Her second name, Eleusis, bears eloquent witness to the procurement of Greek nationals as chattel-slaves, and the reproduction of the attitudes and ideology of *domin-*

ium (superordinate status in the Roman owner-slave relationship) in the nominal status of the owned. Susan Treggiari (1969, 6–8) notes that it was common to give slaves of non-Greek origin a Greek name. This linguistic marker of subordinate subject positions (status, filiation and ethnic descent) is also evident in the designation of the dedicator, Fonteia Helena. In both cases, the fact that it is a woman, or two separate women, who retains a superordinate position over other women is embedded in the conservative and abbreviated discourse of the commemorator's epigraphic medium. The two Fonteiae are each identified in relationship to the authority of another woman—an authority conferred (indirectly or not) by virtue of conquest, capture, birth, or penal condemnation, and which represents an extension of one individual's legally sanctioned will over another. The absorption of marginalized identities, the slave and the foreigner, by a dominant kyriarchic discourse, ownership of individuals as property, would seem to extend horizontally across specific categories, women, as well as vertically through social strata, the owner and the owned. The terms "kyriarchy" and "kyriocentrism" relate to a social-political system of domination and subordination based on the power and rule of the lord/master/father. These neologisms are explained by Fiorenza (1995). According to Fiorenza, such an analytic distinguishes the androcentric symbolic gender constructions—which "shape and legitimate the social-political kyriarchic system of oppression that in turn has produced such rhetorical constructions"—from the "prevalent dualistic understanding of patriarchy as domination of men over women" (1995, xix). While the hierarchies of social status and economic position are regularly invoked in the inscribed discourse of the ancient Roman world, their appropriation and redeployment are seldom considered in gendered terms; that is, as markers of social-cultural relations utilized by women for specific purposes.

Freedwomen of women, then, living and deceased: in one sense, a microcosm of the social order, hermetic and self-sustaining. A person, Fonteia Helena, commissioned a skilled worker, almost always male, according to the surviving evidence, to inscribe a brief dedication to the deceased. The hired epigrapher employed the standard signifying economy of his art and occupation to represent Helena's dedication, the condensed abbreviation of commemorator, commemorated and memorial wish in a Latin inscription. In Platonic terms, both women, dedicator and honorand, are contained within the discourse of Latin epigraphic representation, a male-prominent discourse favoured by the citizen population of Rome in the public spaces of the city and its surrounding environments including the encircling cemeteries outside the city's walls. The subjectivities of Fonteia Eleusis and Helena are thus inscribed by the language of burial and dedication; these women, Plato might say, are the mirrors of a male-prominent discourse and practice.

From another standpoint, these thirty-seven letters incised in marble can be interpreted as a representation of marginal agency, expressed in terms at once traditional and unusual. The inscription contains an abbreviated for-

mula, H. O. DATA, interpreted as *huic olla data* – “the burial urn granted to her,” which to this point in time remains unique among the tens of thousands of funerary inscriptions found in or near Rome. This collocation of letters might be viewed as simply an accident of the inscribing artisan. It might also be regarded as an innovative, personalized solution to the restrictions of a limited surface; how, in other words, to express succinctly and explicitly both ownership and sentiment. In the former instance, the inscription may tell us nothing more than that the stoneworker was careless or indifferent in transcribing his commission but this seems unlikely, given the regular spacing and height of the incised letters and the symmetrical arrangement of the epitaph. In the latter, however, if the Latin of the inscription has been correctly interpreted, we may “read” a different narrative. In addition to identifying the agent of commemoration and the subject of dedication, the epitaph designates an act of benefaction involving the donation of property. Fonteia Helena is inscribed as the provider of a benefit to Fonteia Eleusis, and may be seen to act as a patron toward the deceased. If we allow the possibility that Fonteia Helena not only commissioned the inscription but composed it, then we can allot to her a specific facility with Latin, one which reflects a functional literacy capable of expressing intention in a way that differs from every other funerary inscription so far recorded. Applying an Irigarayan framework to this interpretation, it is reasonable to suggest that Fonteia Helena is “playing” with the traditional form of the funerary dedication in order to communicate aspects of self and other outside the usual relations expected of libertine women in Augustan Rome.

While the foregoing discussion is necessarily speculative, the continuity of the exchange inscribed in the epitaph is explicit. The relationship of the participants, however, is subject to debate. For argument’s sake, a conventional analysis might see either a familial or servile relationship, perhaps a mother and daughter, or *conlibertae*, female slaves belonging to the same collective social unit. It may also be conjectured that they were slaves of one of the great Roman families of the first centuries BCE/CE, possibly even that of the Fonteii Capitoes, consuls in the time of Augustus (Walker and Burnett 1981: 44).³ Fortunately, a representative context for this dedication exists, within which the semantic tensions already noted may be seen to resonate significantly.

Figure 1 is a photograph of the funerary relief—labeled British Museum Sculpture 2276—to which the preceding epitaph, inscribed beneath the sculpted figures, belongs. It is one of around ninety instances of group portraits of ex-slave families belonging to burials of the late republic and early empire of Rome (Kleiner 1977). This example of mid-Augustan portraiture gives us an insight into the discontinuities of representation only hinted at in our study of the epitaph alone. Approximately life-size, not free-standing and therefore intended to decorate the facade of a tomb, or perhaps the interior and integral to the accompanying dedication, the bust-length portrait provides

Figure 1: Relief Portrait with Inscribed Commemoration (*British Museum Sculpture 2276 and CIL 6/3.18524*: author's photograph)



Note: The inscription at the base of the portrait relief reads as follows –
FONTEIA C. L. ELEUSIS H. O. DATA FONTEIA C. L. HELENA

the viewer with an interrupted view of two individuals. Although truncated, the figures possess animation, and give the impression of living beings looking through a window.

This sense of physical presence heightens our awareness of the gestures, postures and attributes of the pair in composition. The inward turning of heads and the clasping of right hands, referred to as the *dextrarum iunctio*, embody in placement and conception definitive aesthetic witness to a married Roman couple. Only in the minutiae does this scene urge caution. Scrutiny of the head on the “male” figure to the left of the relief has revealed a substitution. What the epitaph reports to the casual reader belies in representation the portrait which remains. Simply put, at some point in time after the original sculpture, at the request of an unidentified individual and for a purpose upon which we may only speculate, the image of Fonteia Eleusis was defaced, excised, and replaced by a male visage. This may have been done by someone distantly related to one of the individuals portrayed, or conceivably associated with a funeral guild or *collegium* (a private association of fixed membership and constitution) charged with the maintenance of the tomb in question. If we follow the usual identification of the original gestures, postures and attributes of the two women as portraying a married couple, it would appear that the depiction of a same-sex union, commemorated in the late-Italic assimilation

of a classicizing Hellenistic Greek style of funerary portraiture, could not be tolerated. Materially and discursively, this ancient visual–textual representation exemplifies constructive practice, whereby women are paradoxically marked and erased. These Roman women were made present *and* absent in the same signification – within what Butler (1993: 2) refers to as “the domain of cultural intelligibility.”

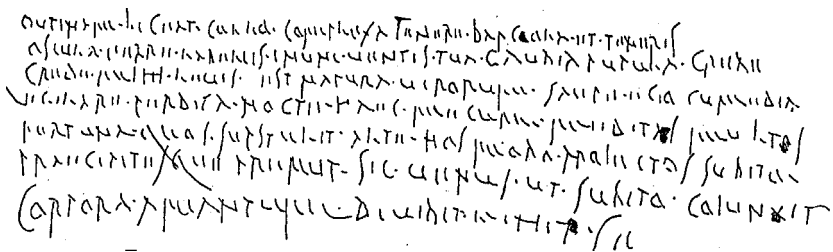
Certainly, *BMS* 2276 and *CIL* 6/3.18524 together put the lie to the view that group portraits in relief of late Republican and Augustan *libert(in) aeli* (freedpersons)⁴ reflect a universally conservative character. Though not explicitly argued, such a viewpoint is easily taken from Kleiner (1977), especially her concluding chapter. Adoption of a mode of commemoration specifically associated with the patrician class may underscore a dependence on upper-class models, but the explicit memorial of a same-sex union, utilizing the key physiological and ideological signifiers of citizen Roman marriage, points to anything but a straightforward representation of identity and sociocultural *mentalité*. The mimetic reproduction of a strictly male-prominent discourse (epigraphic commemoration in text and relief) gives us a tantalizing insight into what may well have been an incipient social reality and a way of communicating that reality to a contemporary and complicit audience. In a Foucaultian sense, the subjectivity of the Fonteiae Helena and Eleusis is realized in the material practices of everyday life (in this instance, participation in the epigraphic environment of the ancient Graeco-Roman world) which are also discursive practices: that is, socially located discourses.

To demonstrate the usefulness of the epigraphic environment as a measure of Butlerian performativity and Irigarayan playfulness in historical and social–cultural terms, consider the following textual representation of the female-as-Other (that *locus classicus* of contemporary feminist critique): *CIL* 4.5296 (Figure 2).⁵

CIL 4.5296 is a 9-line verse in cursive script, found on the right-hand side of the entrance to a house in the ancient city of Pompeii. It is one of the *inscriptiones parietariae*, inscriptions belonging to or associated with walls, of *CIL* 4, the compendium of Pompeian inscriptions in Latin, and may be compared with those on the walls of the guard-house of the 7th cohort of the *vigiles* at Ostia. A dense series of graffiti inscribed on the plaster of a series of service rooms in the smaller garrison of the permanent detachment of the VII cohort (constructed at the end of the second century CE over a private house). This rich collection of epigraphic material (which can be dated to the period 214–45 CE) records the names of the guards along with their fears, their superstitions and, above all, their labours, carried out with few and rudimentary aids. It was presumably scratched with the large stylus known as the *graphium* into the lime or clay of the house wall.

“Readings” for this inscription have varied considerably over the last 126 years and will undoubtedly continue to perplex and stimulate the modern interpreter of oral–literate social–sexual representative discourse. Antonio

Figure 2: Line Drawing of Pompeian Graffito (CIL 4.5296)



Latin text transcribed from the inscription in Figure 2:

- o utinam liceat collo complexa tenere || braciola et teneris
 oscula ferre label(l)is. || i nunc, uentis tua gaudia, pupula, crede: ||
 crede mihi, leuis est natura uirorum. || saepe ego cu[m] media
 uigilare[m] perdita nocte || haec mecum medita[ri]: multos
 5 Fortuna quos supstulit alte || hos modo proiectos subito
 praecipitesque premit. || sic Uenus ut subito coiunxit
 corpora amantum || diuidit lux et se...
 line 8 may read: *pares qui[d] amant*

Sogliano's original excavation report (in *Notizie degli Scavi di Antichi* (Rome: Accademie di Lincei): text, 519) is dated 1888. Matteo Della Corte (1960), for instance, thought that the verse was written by "a cynic without scruple," whom he identified as Marius *quidam* (*scripsit*), a "certain Marius." Antonio Varrone (1994) places the inscription under the rubric "l'amore infelice" (rather than Della Corte's "Bitter Mockery"). He describes it in the following terms: "... verses of melancholic distress . . . the lament of a woman who comments on the joy experienced by a young girl who loves another, joined to the expectation that the fates will overthrow that love and happiness transform into smoke." He concludes by noting that "the alternate vicissitudes of human fortune are welcome compared to the subtle and perfidious joy of love."

A literal translation of the inscription, in keeping with my previous formulation of Varrone's undoubtedly far more elegant criticisms of the text, provides an opportunity to evaluate for ourselves this tantalizing epigraphic "trace."

Oh if only it was permitted to grasp your little arms, clasped around
 my neck,
 and to bring kisses to your tender lips.
 Come now, little girl, entrust your sensual delights to the winds.
 Believe me: (s)light is men's nature.
 Often, when (desperately in love) I keep watch in the middle of the
 night,

You should think on these things with me: "Many are they whom
 Fortune has raised on high;
 These, suddenly thrown down headlong, she now oppresses.
 Just as Venus suddenly joined the bodies of lovers,
 day divides them and . . .
 you (sc. *Fortune*) will separate those who love . . .

The resonances of this text with the poetic motif known as the *paraklausithyron* (a lover's song at "his" beloved's door, in which "he" begs for admission and laments his exclusion—that is, the province of (male) lyric poets) are evident enough. Especially the lament in Catullus's *epithalamion* (a song or speech given at the bridal chamber, a regular feature of ancient marriages) of Peleus and Tethys. For example, compare the sentiments and vocabulary of *CIL* 4.5296 and Catullus 64.139–42: at non haec quondam blanda promissa dedisti/ uoce mihi, non haec miseram sperare iubebas,/ sed conubia laeta, sed optatos hymenaeos,/ quae cuncta aerii discerpunt irrita uenti ("But not such were the promises you gave me once with winning words, not such what you insisted I hope for, poor fool, but happy marriage, longed-for nuptials; all which the winds of the air have shredded into nothingness"). More pointed, however, is a gendered "reading" of this (self-?) representation of a woman's love lost as female same-sex passion. Let that thought linger for a moment, especially in relation to the traditionally sexualized vocabularies of ancient fe/male social interrelationships, that is, active/passive and penetrator/penetrated. If this interpretation is countenanced even briefly, a constellation of possibilities arises, many revolving around Irigaray's and Butler's questions of transgressive social action and deviant performativity.

One might reasonably ask, for instance, when this could have been effected to best result, that is, before the cement had hardened, or at some stage subsequent to the building of the house wall. Similarly, in what way(s) might the content and intention of the verse have been apprehended by the inhabitants of the house and the composer of the verse need not necessarily be identified with the occupants of the *domus* in question *and* by those who passed within and by its walls? In this light, a variety of sociolinguistic matters each of considerable importance arises. *Inter alia*, what does this inscription tell us about the degrees of discursive competency possessed by the female composer; that is to say, the varying capacities of our lovelorn interlocutor for literacy and the literary? These could include the extent of her vocabulary; her facility with the metrical requisites of the chosen medium of expression, her acquaintance with textual antecedents in the genres of *epithalamion* (marriage song), *paraklausithyron*, and lyric of neoteric typology. As well, one might contemplate her level of participation in the inscriptive process. Here, should we imagine her manipulating the stylus herself, or must we interpose an intermediary *scriptor*?

Unfortunately, the surface context of this "lost same-sexed voice"—a small house, at odds with the hierarchies of status, education, and gender usu-

ally associated with the absorption and production of elegiac verse—is now effectively only the *CIL* 4 line drawing and the “original” note in a 19th century journal *Notizie degli Scavi* (1888, 519). Nevertheless, listening to the “differences” in this inscription – not simply choosing *between* its material or discursive traces, that is, the “reality” of *a woman/women* or the “representation” of *Woman*, affords a productive initial point of entry into elucidating potential sites of constitution and construction. In this sense, there does not need to be such a marked dichotomy between the *schemata* of discourse analysis and the *criteria* of materialist historical study. Does not the very existence of this problematic verse-inscription “constitute” the beginnings of a constellation of “facts” through which regulatory *and* transgressive discourses of gender identity, sexual preference, and status designation might be engaged?

Rehearsing Butlerian and Irigarayan theoretical protocols, does not this representation of the female allow us to “hear” a(n *other*) meaning already in the process of rediscovering a different sexuality, a different imaginary? Neither pre–historic nor pre–uterine, as Butler would say; but neither, in Irigaray’s terms, dependent on genital morphology or masculinist specula(riza)tion: an embodied feminine otherness as a site of resistance and transformation. In simple terms, one is able to insist upon viewing these Pompeian women as subjects in their own right without reinscribing the claims of universal ontology. Their subjectivity is not so much a use-value or locus of competitive exchange; rather, it can be seen to operate in a multiplicity of ways.

In conclusion, any verdict on the issues of essentialist and constructivist social history raised by feminist philosophers like Butler and Irigaray must first accommodate a thoroughgoing presentation of *all* available evidence. It is insufficient to rely on an assemblage of the splintered multiplicities of women’s lives that is chronologically skewed against premodern voices. Likewise, only a methodology which admits the possibility of reconstructing the particularities of individual and collective experiences, despite millennia of deafness and deliberate, systematic, Platonic muting, can hope to disalienate the marginalised and suppressed. From this understanding a project is possible which is historically and culturally specific, focussed on the variable multiple categories of oppression and concerned not with a universal subject of history, but instead with plural and complexly constructed conceptions of social identity.

In this regard, the Roman gravestone of two late-republican female citizens and the Pompeian graffito of a Roman “poetess” (en)gender, in many senses, exactly the kinds of tensions and ambiguities which Irigaray and Butler bring to bear on Plato’s philosophical strategies. What I hope to have illustrated is two-fold: a practical method of, and the critical need for, integrating postmodern theoretical standpoints on sex/gender issues with the representational discourses of the ancient world. In the end, the social-cultural historian

should be encouraged to catalogue as a precious historical commodity *any* unambiguous citation of female participation. Let the burden of proof rest with the dissenting commentators.

NOTES

1. Imperfectly translated as *Speculum of the Other Woman*; perhaps better “read” as *Speculum. On the “Other”: Woman*.
2. This inscription is recorded in the third fascicle of the sixth volume; it is numbered 18524. The Latin transcription and the English translation which follow are the interpretations of Dr Daniele Manacorda (University of Siena), cited in Walker and Burnett (1981: 43–4 with n.5). The inscription may be assigned to an early- to mid-Augustan date (31–13 BCE).
3. The index to *CIL* 6 lists five other inscriptions naming freedwomen and men whose patron was a Gaia Fonteia. On the Fonteii Capitones, see *PIR*² [= *Prosopographia Imperii Romani*, 2nd ed.] F 469–71.
4. *liberta/us* was used of a freedwo/man when spoken of in relation to her/his manumitter; *libertina/us* was used with respect to her/his status in society – s/he was not freeborn (*ingenua/us*). cf Gaius, *Inst.* 1.10 and 11; *Dig.* 1.5; Tac. *Ann.* 15.57.2. Hence the twin designation *libert(in)ae/i*.
5. For the transcription and translation of *CIL* 4.5296, I acknowledge the Feminism and the Classics III workshop presentation (University of Southern California, 2000) given by Kristina Milnor (Barnard College, Columbia University), and the invaluable suggestions of Professors Andrew Wallace-Hadrill (Director, British School at Rome) and Alastair Small (Cary Fellow, BSR). On an archaeological map of Pompeii, the house on which the text is inscribed may be located in *regio* 9, *insula* 9.

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