

Guided Reading: Textual Maieutics in Plato's *Theaetetus*

It has often been noted that the theme of writing occupies a prominent place in Plato's *Theaetetus*, but scholars have diverged in their explanations for why this is so, and how the issue of writing, so conspicuously foregrounded in the prologue, is carried into the dialogue's main body. Although Tschemplik (1993), Howland (1998), and Morgan (2003) have offered promising interpretations of the prologue, Andrew Ford (1994) identified writing and the interpretation of texts as one of the dialogue's main concerns. The harsh words that Socrates directs at written philosophy in the *Phaedrus* (274b-277a) and *Seventh Letter* (341b-345c) show that the question of writing is a topic of great significance in Plato's works. Another aspect of the *Theaetetus* that must be accounted for is the image of Socrates as a midwife of the soul, who propounds no positive doctrines of his own, but merely brings to light his interlocutors' thoughts (Sedley 2004; Giannopoulou 2007; Grazzini 2007). Indeed, the language of midwifery bookends the dialogue, appearing just before the *Theaetetus*' first definition is proposed and just after his last has been refuted (*Tht.* 148e-151d, 210b-c).

If a Platonic dialogue is a unified whole following the principle of logographic necessity, as Socrates recommends in the *Phaedrus* (264b), then how are we to understand Plato's decision to underscore the two disparate themes of writing and midwifery in the same dialogue? I suggest that the image of Socrates as a midwife is best understood not as a metaphor for Socrates' philosophical method generally, but specifically for the role that an advanced thinker may play in guiding a student's attempt to read a text while also developing original ideas in response to it. Furthermore, I argue that this practice of textual maieutics is meant to help reinvent and rehabilitate the acts of philosophical writing and reading, so maligned elsewhere in the Platonic writings. This latter argument takes its cue from the recurrence of key vocabulary in Socrates'

condemnation of writing in the *Phaedrus* (275b) and his explanation of intellectual midwifery in the *Theaetetus* (151a). As Kenneth Sayre notes, the latter passage makes frequent use of συνουσία “being together” to denote the relationship between midwife and patient (Sayre 1995: 220-222). A key danger of writing identified in the *Phaedrus* is that readers of philosophy become χαλεποὶ συνεῖναι “difficult to be with” (275b). Philosophical writing may have a corrupting influence on the reader’s ability to be with others, but this corruption is averted by the reader who approaches the text under the guidance of a midwife.

In conclusion, this paper contributes greater clarity to the themes of writing and midwifery in the *Theaetetus* and, by claiming that the value of written philosophy can be upheld under the condition of guided reading, proposes an answer to the open question of why Plato saw fit to pair them together.

Bibliography

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