If Aristotle views rhetoric as seeing, in any particular case, all the available means of persuasion and if scholarship can be considered “learning [and] erudition” (OED), then scholarship of rhetoric should be construed as the study of, training in or instruction on the available means of persuasion. Though this understanding of rhetorical scholarship may be broad in scope it may still serve to assist in constructing a frame for an analysis and discussion of a variety of scholarly rhetorical works. Endeavoring to analyze and synthesize the writings of four scholars in the field of rhetoric, I have attempted to discuss the ways in which these scholars—C. Jan Swearingen, Nathan Crick & John Poulakos and David M. Halperin—not only analyze the means of persuasion utilized in the pieces they address, but also the ways in which these authors utilize means of persuasion to convey their own projects and arguments to contemporary audiences.

Overall, it seems as though all three authors approach the Symposium with an overt sense of how they hope to portray the piece as functioning within, and in collusion with, their own work while. Where Swearingen seems to artfully manipulate and utilize Plato’s work to overtly function as an aspect of furthering her own assertions regarding women and their place in rhetorical traditions, it seems as though Crick & Poulakos use Plato’s piece to define and inform the intent of their work and the overall construction of their project, while Halperin uses Symposium to assist in an exploration of a theory and idea he predominantly ascribes to the Plato. In my opinion, Crick & Poulakos write from a place of joyful admiration for what Plato
accomplishes through the nuances of his work, while Swearingen sees Symposium as a functionary aspect within the project and intent of her scholarly ambitions, and Halperin diligently works toward weaving his own project into an unveiling of Plato’s project. Warranted and well articulated, all three approaches offer insights and perspectives into Plato’s work which conclusively prove illustrative, illuminating and intriguing.

In her piece “A Lover’s Discourse: Diotima, Logos, and Desire” (1992), Swearingen proposes “that we examine Plato’s representations of Aspasia and Diotima as accomplished speakers and teachers” (p 25) in order to better understand the ways in which women held valid and powerful roles in both Antique and Classic society. Swearingen, accurately, asserts that an erasure of women from valid roles in history functions as an erasure of vital aspects which formed and manifested learning in history. Swearingen asserts that by minimizing or altogether obliterating women’s voices from history we are losing the opportunity to explore “new understandings of the range of discourses we approach as rhetoric” (p 39). Through a well articulated series of examples, analogies and divisions, Swearingen leads her audience into an understanding of the ways in which women’s historical voices will guide us “to sustain and reclaim the common life within which any meaning and identity is formed” (p 49). Swearingen effectively works to draw distinctions between Diotima and Plato’s articulated theologies to bolster her assertion that Diotima, via Socrates, cannot possibly just be a construct of Plato’s writing: “Close attention to the detailed diversity of the god—Love—that Diotima honors and to her notion of immortality, reveals several features that are inconstant with dualist interpretations of Plato” (p 31).

Swearingen seems less concerned with carving out a niche for women in Antiquity than she is with recognizing the already formed niche; for Swearingen women had actual presence in
public and learned roles but due to misogynistic belief systems women’s public presence has been suppressed. She feels that the contemporary lack of articulation given to women’s presence in historical writing also stems from a current misogynist mind set. Her goal, as she articulates is to “[reclaim] women and [refigure] representations of women’s speech within rhetorical traditions” (p 26). To help begin this reclamation and refiguring, the author feels a study of Diotima’s speech in Symposium can serve as “a trace of women teachers, speakers, and religious celebrants” (p 26). Though asserting “there is manifold ambiguity and ample room for alternative readings” (p 31), Swearingen explicates the ways in which Diotima’s contribution to Symposium, via Socrates via Plato, serves to deepen and gracefully enumerate the ideologies and philosophical inquiries of the time. Swearingen fluidly utilizes texts other than the Symposium to further her argument. She brings in the Menexenos to further exemplify the ways in which women were intricately bound with the men of this time. Swearingen unravels the rather complicated relationships between the key figures in Symposium to reveal the roles of women in these alliances: “Complicating any understanding of the . . . relationship between Socrates and Alcibiades is the ambiguous ‘spin’ of Plato’s . . . rendering of Alcibiades, Diotima’s depicted roles as Socrates’s teacher of love, and the unstated backdrop of Pericle’s relationship to both Alcibiades and Aspasia” (p 32). Elaborate and intricate as this framing of relationships is, it beautifully articulates the ways in which Swearingen has plunged head-first into her material—exploring, examining, deciphering and finally synthesizing the material to realize some truly innovative and compelling interpretations.

In their piece “Go Tell Alcibiades: Tragedy, Comedy, and Rhetoric in Plato’s Symposium” (2008), Crick and Poulakos beautifully frame their article as an analogy using contemporary understandings of the codes and constructs of a “party.” Throughout this analogy
the authors consistently offer delightful demonstratios to illuminate and inform their arguments and inferences. While Swearingen approaches *Symposium* as a means of underscroing and portraying the ways in which women held viable functions in ancient times, Crick and Poulakos read *Symposium* as a means to deepening contemporary understandings of literary forms as well as further articulating Plato’s views of the art rhetoric: “As we show, the closing words of Socrates provide the key not only to understanding the dramatic form of the entire work but also to recognizing Plato’s view of rhetoric as an amalgam of comic and tragic elements” (p 4).

By first offering a distributio of Plato’s main bodies of work, Crick and Poulakos are able to construct a classification of what *Symposium* is and is not. Because *Phaedrus* “legitimates rhetoric only insofar as it accomplished the impossible, that is, embodies the True, the Good, and the Beautiful in their perfection” and *Gorgias* “trivializes [rhetoric] as a cheap ‘knack’ given to the flattery and manipulation of the ignorant masses” (p 2), the function of *Symposium* rests somewhere outside, or perhaps between, these two articulations. Further classifying and defining how Plato’s works function in regards to rhetoric, the authors also assert “*Gorgias* mocks the art or persuasion as practiced in this world [while] the *Phaedrus* spares the art but puts it in the service of an altogether otherworldly goal” (p 2). Finally, since audiences are left with “two apparently irreconcilable conceptions—rhetoric as the expression of civic depravity or rhetoric as the inspired art of pleasing the Gods” (p 2), the authors assert that *Symposium* functions as Plato’s attempt to capitalize “on rhetoric’s capacity to diminish as much as to amplify” (p 4).

According to the authors, what lies outside the “irreconcilable conceptions” of *Gorgias* and the *Phaedrus* is the “third way” as articulated in the *Symposium*; the way which serves “to study both humanity and the gods, acknowledging our mortal flaws at the same time that we make room for what lies beyond” (p 4). Ultimately, Crick and Poulakos conclude that *Symposium* is
the manifestation of Plato’s presupposition that rhetoric fundamentally functions as a fusion of tragedy and comedy “using the tragedy of human ideals to expose the comedy of human conceit” (p 4).

The authors go on to articulate an antithesis—in which the speeches of Symposium function as teams of binaries—to further explicate their assertion of the tragicomic nature of the work. Describing the first three speeches as embodying elements best classified as poetic banality, of the polis, frugal, cautiously virtuous, bereft of audacity and evincing a flat-footed prose (p 7), the authors ultimately classify these speakers as “servants of the nomos” (p 7). Crick and Poulakos articulate the opposing aspect of this polarity as “powerful discourses of the two masters of poiesis,” claiming that “In their wake we are introduced to the travesty and the majesty of the human conditions” (p 7). In a series of explanations and comparisons, Crick and Poulakos ultimately portray the ways in which Socrates “takes what is practical and worldly and points it towards the transcendent and divine” (p 13). For the authors, the first step in this process hinges on Socrates’ shifting the function of the actual speakers within Symposium: “Socrates directs attention not to Eros but to his fellow partiers, upending their claims to eloquence by revealing their shallowness” (p 11). By focusing on comparing the individualized parts to the intentional whole of Symposium, the authors fluidly establish differentiation between the function of Socrates’ voice in the piece and the functions of the words and actions of the other characters. In this way, Crick and Poulakos effectively lead their audience to stand beside Aristotle as he “is faced with two sets of unhappy choices—between dispassionate practice and impractical passion, and between the comedy of unthinking instinct and the tragedy of unattainable ideals” (p 11).
Like Crick and Poulakos, Halperin, in his piece “Plato and the Erotics of Narrativity” (1992) focuses on the structure of *Symposium* to help frame and inform his discussion. Reminiscent of the approach utilized by Crick and Poulakos, Halperin also initially offers a series of definitions and classifications to further articulate what he sees as the constituting elements which define what the *Symposium* is and is not. By engaging in this classification and definition, Halperin claims he intends to pursue—not answer—an inquiry regarding Plato’s motivation for utilizing a “peculiar narrative strategy” in which “a Socratic conversation related by a third part to an entirely different audience in response to some brief, introductory request for a story” introduces and structures the entirety of the piece (p 96). Halperin goes on to assert that the structure of *Symposium* consists of a series of narratives within narratives which ultimately take “the reader further away in time from the dramatic date of the conversation” (p 97). Halperin offers an extremely close reading of the narrative structure used by Plato in the *Theaetetus* to define and articulate the structure not adopted by Plato in his construction of the *Symposium*. Halperin claims the *Theaetetus* ultimately avoids “both oral transmission and . . . narrative structure” to bolster his articulation that the *Symposium*’s representational strategy creates “a retrospective irony: by granting the reader more knowledge about what life has in store for the interlocutors than any of them possess at any given moment” (p 99-100).

In opening the third section of his piece, Halperin interestingly reveals the twofold nature of his project: “The receding narrative frames accomplish another purpose . . . in which the erotic theory adumbrated in the *Symposium* appears to be directly implicated” (p 100). Through a series of analogies and examples Halperin further expounds on the importance of the structure in the piece, asserting “The compositional form of the *Symposium* appears . . . to corroborate Diotima’s erotic doctrine” (p 102) and that its “complex narrative structure is itself designed to manifest
and dramatize the workings of *erōs*” (p 103). I found this aspect of Halperin’s piece particularly engaging; at this point, it seems as though rather than exploring the work to bring a new dynamic to scholarship of Plato, he intends to use Plato’s work to forward his own theories regarding narrative structure. Approximately a quarter of the way through this third section Halperin weaves a well-articulated syllogism to lead his readers to the following conclusion: “the ultimate cause of narrative is desire” (p 103). Provocative and worthy of contemplation, this assertion is further bolstered through a well designed series of analogies and examples paired with a close reading of Plato’s specific moves. Though I find Halperin’s interpretations of Plato’s work fascinating and well studied and his project well-structured and compelling, he begins—from his third section on—to make a series of claims regarding Plato’s intentions when writing. I find these assertions somewhat troubling—though this could very easily be due to my lack of knowledge in this field. However, I feel as though Halperin makes assertions which he claims articulate Plato’s intentions while also revealing that these are his (Halperin’s) own contentions; for instance: “Here, then, is Plato’s official explanation of his representational strategy in the *Symposium*. I call it ‘official’ because it seems to agree almost perfectly with the precise terms of Diotima’s erotic theory” (p 105). Halperin sets up some instances of cause and effect to lead readers into accepting “the elaborate and labyrinthine tradition of oral narrative which Plato portrays” (p 106). In fact, the opening of his fourth section sees Halperin articulating his own project as Plato’s project: “The *Symposium’s* apparently perfunctory dialogic opening plays a crucial role in Plato’s larger argument for the erotics of narrativity . . . . it presents narrative as an object of intense desire” (p 106). The author carefully explicates and develops this idea throughout this fourth section but I feel as though his use of textual evidence is not nearly as strong or carefully crafted as it could be. He seems to provide ample textual evidence around his
claims without actually providing textual evidence for his claims. Ultimately, however, I fear my understanding of the majority of Halperin’s project is hindered by my ignorance of this area of study. Halperin makes certain assertions embedded in language which leads me to assume he has knowledge which I lack: “the ironies I speak of strike at the heart of the ‘official’ explanation of the relation between the compositional form of the Symposium and the erotic doctrine contained in it” (p 109).

Overall, I found Halperin’s discussion of the erotics of narrative fascinating. I think his ideas could be wonderfully expanded into the field of rhetoric. For instance, I would be extremely interested in seeing the ways in which a feminist rhetorician—perhaps Julia Kristeva—would approach this idea of erotic narrative structures. How would this cycle of absence and presence, “possession and loss, gratification and frustration, pleasure and pain” (p 101) tie into her idea of writing the female body? How would Kristeva utilize her theories regarding feminist rhetoric to, not only approach the Symposium, but other pieces in the rhetorical canon as well? I also wonder how this concept of the erotics of narrative might be applied to rhetorical analyses of works of fiction. I find Joseph Conrad’s narrative structure particularly appealing, and in some ways akin to Plato’s referential narrative structures. Could Halperin’s approach to the Symposium meld into a viable approach for an analysis of, for instance, Conrad’s Heart of Darkness?

Many theories and conjectures reel through my mind after considering these authors’ approaches to Plato’s work. It definitely seems as though a motivating aspect of scholarship involves adapting and utilizing canonical works to assist scholars in expressing and presenting research which they hope will prove innovative and exploratory. I am extremely curious to know if scholars tend to formulate these innovative ideas and then search for appropriate and
complementary texts, or if these ideas find their genesis after the reading of a particularly inspiring or thought-provoking text. Ultimately, I suppose the approach varies from author to author. Regardless of the progenitor of these inspirations, it seems essential for scholars to synthesize, not only the work of the particular author on whom they are focusing, but previous scholarly work published in relation to their focus. Conversely, it seems as though writers also engage in rhetorical scholarship out of pure love for the art; as a sort of acquiescence to the supremacy of the canon as well as a delighting in the adventure of explaining and exploring abstractions, conjectures and theories.

Though all of this proves apparently evident from the outset, I mention it as a means of explaining the complexity and intricacies involved in creating a scholarly work. Though I understand the need for a “literature review” and the idea of “establishing a niche,” I suppose I had never before truly considered the ways in which these facets coalesce, collide and complement one another at various times, in multiple ways and on a multitude of layers. Rather than likening scholars to weavers of tapestries—that is, crafters of a linear idea which unravels to form one story or idea from start to finish—they are better perceived as weavers of baskets—creators of a vessel which continually curves back on itself while also manifesting space to hold and contain a composite of new ideas and innovative additions.
Works Cited

