

BOUNDLESS VISION: A READING OF PLATO'S *SYMPOSIUM*

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172a-177a: Apollodorus, Glaucon, and the Road to Agathon's

Plato's *Symposium* begins with the reader being introduced to Apollodorus¹, the narrator of the piece and a close follower of Socrates. He is, at the time of the telling, speaking to an anonymous crowd – the only piece of information given to the reader is a description of their being “wealthy businessmen.”² He starts with a recent event which occurred during a journey from his home in Phaleron into the city of Athens. Apollodorus is hailed by a man named Glaucon, who presses him to retell the story of a dinner held at the home of the dramatic poet, Agathon, where he heard that speeches were made on the subject of *Eros*. While a “vague” account was given by someone named Phoenix,³ it was recommended that he seek out Apollodorus for a more exact

retelling. During the conversation, we learn that the event in question occurred some time ago, while both of the speakers “were still children.”⁴ We learn also that Apollodorus was not present at the dinner in question, but rather received an account of the event from Aristodemus⁵ – the same man who gave an account to Phoenix.

The reader is actually shown a sort of brief contest here between the two receivers of Aristodemus's tale. While Phoenix is only able to muster a vague account of the story, Apollodorus delivers to us the majority of the symposium's events. It may not be the *Republic*, but it isn't exactly a “brief” retelling, either. In this case, the reader is shown a positive aspect of Apollodorus's character: he is able to recall a good deal of what happened during the affair at Agathon's. Considering the length of the dialogue, we have to ask ourselves if we would be able to recall such a story with the accuracy of Apollodorus. It is true that, as we go on, we'll be shown more of his negatives; yet at the same time, this man is “preserving” for us a very important event. Given that Socrates won't talk about the evening personally, Apollodorus and

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¹ Apollodorus, literally “gift of Apollo,” serves as the narrator for Plato's *Symposium* (hereafter cited as ‘*Symposium*’). He is also referenced in the *Phaedo* (59a-b) as weeping without restraint at the coming death of Socrates.

² *Symposium* 173c

³ Nothing is really known of Phoenix as a character. R.G. Bury suggests in *The Symposium of Plato* (hereafter ‘*Bury*’) that Phoenix represents “at least one other account of a banquet at which Socrates, Alcibiades and Agathon figured, and that it is Plato's intention to discredit it” (xvii).

⁴ *Symposium* 173a

⁵ Aristodemus was a lover and emulator of Socrates, as seen from his willingness to be “always barefoot.” In his *Memorabilia*, Xenophon refers to him as “Aristodemus the dwarf” (I.IV.2) and recalls a conversation between him and Socrates in which the two discussed the reasons for sacrifice, prayer, and divination. Aristodemus, at the time, professed a form of atheism.

Aristodemus are the only (semi-)reliable sources available.

Having said that, we do have some judgment to make of Apollodorus. Plato's structure of the *Symposium*, again contrasted to a dialogue like the *Republic*, actually makes an effort to understand the narrator via his relationships with others. This "introduction" lasts from 172a to 174a, and it has very little use other than to give the reader a way to relate to this follower of Socrates. As a result, our assumption has to be that Plato wants some judgment made *before* the story begins – something to keep in the back of our minds for the duration of the *Symposium*. Apollodorus is not the narrator simply, but a character to be understood – one with his own unique contribution to the dialogue as a whole.

As I mentioned, we are told that Socrates does not talk about the symposium personally. Glaucon asks whether Socrates had told the story to Apollodorus, to which he replies "good heavens no!"⁶ Further, when he reviewed his understanding of events, Socrates added nothing personally – he merely "approved the telling."⁷ To understand this, some historical context may be relevant. The date of the symposium itself, as Apollodorus remembers it, falls close to another important historical event in Greek history: the mutilation of the Hermae charged against Alcibiades and others in 415 B.C.⁸ This particular event is famous in that it, along with the profaning of religious

ceremonies, played a part in the sentencing and exile of Alcibiades, who was engaged in an expedition at Sicily. It is also important to consider that the discussion which was to occur at Agathon's was quite blasphemous in the context of Athenian piety.⁹ The speakers move between gods (Eros, Aphrodite, Ouranian, Pandemian, etc.), between creation stories, and between the consideration of love as either the greatest god or not a god at all. This fact reminds us that the symposium is, first and foremost, an "upper class" affair. The men present for the evening are of a different sort than the average "Athenian *demos*" – "intellectuals," maybe. They even dismiss the night's entertainment – a "flute girl" – that she might "pipe away to herself or, if she so desires, to the women inside."¹⁰ The group's discussion is isolated from everything and everyone else. The result being that traditional Athenian piety and *nomos*, law, finds little place among those present.

Overall, it seems possible, especially given the drunken state of Alcibiades presented later in the dialogue, that the night of the symposium and the accusation brought against Alcibiades are connected. If this is true, it becomes clearer why Socrates would hesitate in sharing the story personally. At the same time, it raises some questions: given what we see in the dialogue, and given what Alcibiades is charged with, no clear evidence is really presented of any blasphemy. Indeed, the real blasphemer, if it were to be anyone, would be none other than Socrates himself. It becomes an interesting point then that Socrates, a presumably just

⁶ *Symposium* 173b

⁷ *Ibid*

⁸ The Hermae were religious statues placed throughout Athens. In Seth Benardete's *On Plato's Symposium* (hereafter '*Benardete*'), he describes a situation in which the city "disregarded all legal safeguards and executed numerous Athenians on rumor" (p. 181). Alcibiades was called back from the Sicilian Expedition under charges of instigating the crimes as well as "profaning the Eleusinian mysteries." Two other symposiasts, Eryximachus and Phaedrus, were also implicated in the Hermae incident.

⁹ Sir Kenneth Dover, in his commentary *Plato's Symposium* (hereafter '*Dover*'), notes how Diotima will later be presented as using Mystery-like language. She offers the "final revelation" to those who are willing to journey deep into the "mysteries of Love" (210a). Dover notes how similar the language is to one who is admitting initiates into "the final secrets of a mystery-cult" (p. 155).

¹⁰ *Symposium* 176e

man who seemed to love Alcibiades and knew of his innocence, chose to say nothing – not in his own defense, nor to make clear what actually occurred at Agathon’s. This is especially strange in light of the fact that other people are talking about the symposium or want to know more about it – something that Phoenix pointed out to us earlier.

Before going into a discussion of the symposium itself, we get a few interesting looks at Apollodorus’s character. We learn of his decision to become “Socrates’s tireless companion, since [he] first assumed the task of setting down all that he says and does each day.”¹¹ We can compare this lifestyle of Apollodorus, in several ways, to that of Aristodemus. He defends this decision to his current listeners, saying that “nothing gives [him] greater pleasure than spending several hours engaged in philosophy... and I never give any thought to the profit to be had from it. However, when I hear other conversations... I immediately get bored and angry.”¹² The reader ought to question this lifestyle – while his statement about enjoying philosophy and his lack of concern for profit do seem to be things Socrates would endorse, he departs from him in several important ways. Unlike Socrates – another person who claims to have a “love for wisdom” – he becomes “bored and angry.” In addition, he is disposed to brief outbursts in which he insults those with whom he is speaking. He describes Glaucon as being “one of the most worthless men alive,” and tells his current conversation partners that they are “unfortunate wretch[es],” something he knows “for a fact.”¹³ His audience comments on this, saying that his nagging extends to all subjects save one – Socrates himself. In addition to this, the reader

notices that Apollodorus is compelled to extend his pity to those whom he is speaking to. All of these instances show Apollodorus taking on an air of superiority to his fellows. This stands in contrast to Socrates, who tends to assume the position of a student at the beginning of conversations.

Instead of a love of wisdom, then, Apollodorus seems to desire something else. Rather than pursue the Socratic lifestyle, one that he seems to liken to the life of a “philosopher,” he decides simply to pursue *Socrates*. For someone who claims to love philosophy, it seems odd to go after Socrates in such an obsessive, non-philosophic way (meticulously “setting down all that he says and does each day”). It might be better said, then, that Apollodorus is much more a lover of the man, Socrates, rather than the active pursuit of wisdom. We see something in Apollodorus – anger, *thumos* – which is never seen from the man he appears to love. It seems almost as if he feels that philosophy, as it exists through the exploits of Socrates, can actually be ignored and endangered by the words and actions of others. What Apollodorus cannot see, and what it becomes clear that Socrates sees consistently, is the enduring connection between life and philosophy. While Socrates happily speaks of “pack-asses and blacksmiths and cobblers and tanners,”¹⁴ Apollodorus immediately becomes “bored and angry” with the “prattle of... wealthy businessmen.”¹⁵ Can not the problem be easily seen in the opposition here? Apollodorus believes in something called “philosophy” which is not philosophy. Socrates, on the other hand, is capable of seeing this, and he charms Apollodorus with the fact. The result is an infatuation with a man who practices what Apollodorus envies in a world which he

¹¹ *Symposium* 172e-173a

¹² *Symposium* 173c

¹³ *Symposium* 173d

¹⁴ *Symposium* 221e

¹⁵ *Symposium* 173c

rejects.¹⁶ It is this mixing of priorities – one he is both conscious and unconscious of – which produces the uneven temper and the feeling of superiority in Apollodorus.

Our narrator begins his retelling with an introduction of Aristodemus. The “originator of the tale” is said to have bumped into Socrates and found him most oddly dressed. In contrast to his usual look, which the reader knows to be dirty and unkempt, Aristodemus finds Socrates “freshly bathed and wearing his sandals.”¹⁷ When questioned about this, he responds that Agathon is “our paragon of good looks,” and that he thought the party an occasion that merited a handsome appearance. This irregular behavior is a submission to a sort of formality – another important aspect of the *Symposium*. Socrates, instead of going about in his normal mode, chooses to adapt himself to the situation; in other words, he chooses to present himself more according to what is considered “in form.” He attempts to be a “part” of the normal proceedings, but he becomes abnormal rather quickly by refusing to join the gathering until well into the meal. It would be similar to making reservations for a date at a high-end restaurant and then showing up late. What this seems to be is an illustration of the Socratic dilemma between public and private: a well groomed man prepared for a dinner who, ignoring the calls of those inside, is standing aloof on the neighbor’s porch.

This scene in particular – that of Socrates standing outside on the neighbor’s porch while those inside call for him to join – is one of the more interesting ones in the dialogue. We are never really told what it is that Socrates is thinking about while he’s absent because he avoids Agathon’s questioning. Thus, we are left to speculate. It is easy to say that Socrates had some thought which prompted him to forget about the task at hand; in other words, his personal “philosophizing” was enough to distract him. Aristodemus may offer some support for this at 175b, where he assures Agathon that this is something Socrates does habitually. At the same time, this explanation might be stopping itself too early. It is probably true that Socrates caught an interesting thought and was compelled to avoid the dinner for some time, but this ignores the possible relevance of what he might have been considering. Instead of forgetting the dinner, might it be possible to say that Socrates was actually thinking specifically *about* the dinner?¹⁸ While this is only an idea to consider for the time being, we should make it clear that the topic of Love – that which almost the entire *Symposium* is dedicated to – is probably not the topic Socrates planned on discussing. After all, the dialogue itself ends with a discussion on tragic and comedic poetry, while Socrates himself spends much of the night flirting with the symposium’s host, Agathon. It could be possible that Socrates, instead of distancing himself from the event,

¹⁶ This, by the way, foreshadows the problem presented by Alcibiades in Socratic education. Plutarch talks about this problem in his life of Alcibiades, saying that the politician would “abandon himself to flatterers, when they proposed to him varieties of pleasure, and would desert Socrates” (*Plutarch’s Lives Vol. 1*, p. 262, hereafter ‘*Plutarch*’). The great difficulty is that Socrates cannot always be present: someone like Alcibiades and Apollodorus – despite their vast differences – both fall into vice when the philosopher is not around.

¹⁷ *Symposium* 174a

¹⁸ In Waller Newell’s book *Ruling Passion: The Erotics of Statecraft in Platonic Political Philosophy* (hereafter ‘*Newell*’), he talks about the spontaneous and unpredictable nature that some Socratic dialogues take on. He goes on to say that “often one has the impression that Socrates has come prepared to a discussion with a few ready-made themes in mind” (p. 97). This seems to support our idea: Socrates wants to make an impression on Agathon by distancing himself from the group, but he also wants to think over how he should speak.

was actually thinking about what he might like to discuss with those present, specifically Agathon. If we take this approach, it would also be important to note that Socrates develops a sort of distinction, or “singling out,” for himself here. By refusing all calls to come in, he actually performs an act of disrespect which assumes some superiority to the host. While this may be offensive in some ways, it is intriguing in others; it could very well create openings for the flirtatious advances Socrates will make later on in the dialogue.

So as the two approach Agathon’s house, Socrates loses himself in thought, and he waves Aristodemus on. This puts his companion into the embarrassing position of having come to the party uninvited and quite alone. The situation, however, does not seem to affect Agathon, who welcomes him inside and tells his servants to see that he is taken care of. This episode establishes Agathon as a gracious host, but, again, it also singles out Socrates as a peculiar character.

Upon returning, Socrates is beckoned by Agathon to join his couch. Agathon hopes that by being in close proximity to Socrates he will be able to “absorb some of the wisdom”¹⁹ that Socrates came to while on the neighbor’s porch. Socrates offers the response that it would be a “wonderful idea... if one could actually siphon wisdom from a man who is full to a man who is empty simply by touching him.”²⁰ He goes on to humble himself and praises Agathon for his recent victory at the drama festival. The suggestion of “touch” is an interesting aspect for the discussion on Love that is soon to follow. Aristophanes, for instance, talks about the inevitable wish of lovers to be “welded” together as a single whole, while the advances of Alcibiades towards Socrates pursued physical union. Pausanias

also presents a relationship between lovers which, without some physical aspect – as he says, the appropriate use of “Ouranian” and “Pandemian” – is incomplete. The basic expectation in each case is that Love, when exercised with physical connection and activity, will somehow lead to a general improvement in the “goodness” of the person; as it applies to the comparison used by Socrates, it might make him feel “full.” The Socratic depiction of Diotima later on the *Symposium* will discuss the concept of physical and spiritual “fullness” and “pregnancy.” It is possible that this brief dialogue between Socrates and Agathon is a rejection of the exchange of something like “wisdom” via physicality. The rejection, however, is far from concrete. Socrates is flirting with Agathon with coy implications of physicality; these are the first signs of a seduction which will go on throughout the dialogue – to the later frustration and amazement of Alcibiades.

Agathon dismisses the flattery of Socrates as a mockery – though it seems unlikely any offense was taken – and informs him that the two of them will “compete on the stage of wisdom later, and we will let Dionysus judge between us.”²¹ This seems to settle the issue for the time being, but it also introduces the main “feud” of the *Symposium*. To be clear: all of the smaller dialogues and interactions fall as a backdrop behind this major relationship – Socrates and Agathon. This “judgment” between the two, however it is made, forms the main thrust of the dialogue – with Aristophanes standing as its opposition.²²

²¹ *Symposium* 175e

²² It is interesting for us to note here that “Agathon” literally translates to the “Good” or “Virtuous.” While Agathon is a real person, and so I hesitate to full give ourselves over to symbolism, it is tempting to think of this dialogue as a contest between philosophy and comedy over the treatment of the Good.

¹⁹ *Symposium* 175d

²⁰ *Ibid*

After finishing dinner, Pausanias, Aristophanes, Eryximachus, and Agathon voice a collective desire to abstain from heavy drinking for the night, the festivities of the previous day having left them in rather imperfect condition. Eryximachus makes the comment that it is a “godsend” if Agathon and Aristophanes, the “hardest drinkers here,”²³ choose not to partake during the evening. This is especially true for someone like Eryximachus, who makes it clear here as well as during his speech that sobriety and seriousness are the things he does best.

The fact that the two poetic characters – Aristophanes and Agathon – are the most able drinkers of the group is something interesting to note. The *Symposium* is here divided into three categories of drinkers: the “lightweights” (Pausanias, Phaedrus, and Eryximachus), the “heavyweights” (Aristophanes, Agathon), and those of indifference (Socrates). With this, Plato establishes groupings for the speeches which are to follow. The first three speakers form a sort of coherent argument between themselves by taking what the previous speaker said and making adjustments along the way; together, they present the “non-poetic” view of love. The next two, a tragic and comedic poet, consider love as a relationship both between men and the gods, and between the good and the beautiful. While they both speak in a similar form to one another, the conclusions are almost complete opposites. Finally, Socrates attempts to speak to all of the previous arguments and presents his own – a speech which is (somewhat) grappled with, and clarified, by Alcibiades. These divisions, denoting respective approaches to sobriety and alcohol, will have important contributions to the dialogue and how each character approaches the concept of Love.

While on the subject of divisions and structures, some consideration must to be

²³ *Symposium* 176c

given to the larger narrative structure of the *Symposium* itself. The *Symposium* is a minority among the Platonic dialogues in that it is not a simple conversation between two individuals – or even a group. Rather, it is a complex narrative that encompasses a period of over 10 years and several different speakers. The symposium itself, hosted by Agathon and attended by Aristodemus and Socrates, is given as having occurred around 416 BC.²⁴ This event is recounted by Aristodemus, who “couldn’t be expected to recall each speaker’s every word.”²⁵ He gives his recollection to at least two speakers that the reader is aware of – a man named Phoenix and the narrator, Apollodorus – over the course of approximately ten years. We learn, however, that these two characters recall the tale very differently. To put it simply, the reader is being given a recollection (Apollodorus to the “wealthy businessmen”), of a recollection (Apollodorus to Glaucon), of a recollection (Aristodemus to Apollodorus). This amounts to the omission of several aspects of the night in question: Aristodemus omits speakers, and Apollodorus gives his audience “...only those elements which seemed to [him] most worth remembering.”²⁶

At this point, then, we have a couple implications of the dialogue’s structure which should be kept in mind. In the first place, Apollodorus’s narration will leave a portion of some (or all) of the speeches omitted, while others will be out entirely thanks to Aristodemus. Aside from the obvious consideration, being that each speech may require some additional “filling in the blanks,” Socrates is also implicated. By

²⁴ *Dover*, p. 9. Date lifted from the Athenian official record of festivals. “Thus,” *Dover* continues, “at the party Socrates is in his early fifties. Alcibiades is in his thirties; his appointment as one of the generals of the Sicilian Expedition lies over a years ahead.”

²⁵ *Symposium* 178a

²⁶ *Symposium* 178a

electing to keep Apollodorus ignorant of the full story, Socrates commits himself to the incomplete retelling. Secondly, it introduces the order of speeches as an interpretive tool for the *Symposium* as a whole. For instance, in 185a-e, Eryximachus and Aristophanes end up switching places after the comedian is caught by an unexpected bout of hiccups. This prompts us to ask several questions: what the connection is between Aristophanes and Eryximachus? What use does “hiccupping” play in describing Aristophanes's character or criticizing Eryximachus's? What did the old order of speakers suggest previous to the switch? And after? Once Plato establishes an order to the dialogue, any deviations from that order merit the reader's consideration.

177a-180c: Eryximachus and Phaedrus

After reaching an agreement not to engage in drinking for the evening, Eryximachus moves to usher out the flute girl as well. It is interesting to note that, in preparing for a night dedicated to praise for *Eros*, Eryximachus has taken it upon himself to remove those things associated with festivity (wine and music). Also worth noting is that, with this, Eryximachus has entirely separated the symposium from any literal feminine presence. The symbolic emphasis here is important – women are not given a great deal of credit throughout the speeches. Granted, Agathon's speech is decidedly effeminate, and Socrates will change things with his introduction of the prophetess Diotima; but, with the possible exception of Aristophanes, the rest of the dialogue follows a strong bias. Overall, it is a strange move, but one which will show its significance as time goes on.

Regardless, he credits Phaedrus with the topic for the evening: speeches in praise of the divinity, *Eros*. He goes on to give the full account of Phaedrus's complaint, which is that the language of praise has gone much too far into trivial matters while ignoring a god as glorious as *Eros*. He cites a “learned treatise examining *The Sundry Virtues of Table Salt*” as an example of “endless scrolls of... trash.”²⁷ He goes on with the suggestion, stating that he wishes to “gratify him [Phaedrus].”²⁸

This small speech from Eryximachus serves as an introduction to the relationship between himself and Phaedrus as lover and beloved. We see the element of gratification as the catalyst for the event – a case of *eros* prompting its own praise: a lover persuaded by his beloved to talk about love. It seems to be significant in that much of *eros* is grounded in the realm of experience: each speaker goes about praising *eros*, in some effect, for how they experience it in their lives.²⁹ This is not quite true for Phaedrus, however: while he participates in a relationship, he does not appear to see himself as someone having experienced the effect of *eros*. The *Symposium's* first speech is thus given by someone who does not himself claim to be in love, but still envies it. This mirrors the experience of many young people who hear stories or see the deeds of great lovers, and so long to be a part of the experience themselves. Perhaps most indicative of this longing is his characterization of Achilles, his greatest hero, as “obviously the younger... and therefore not the lover.”³⁰ His reward for behaving nobly as a beloved?

²⁷ *Symposium* 177b

²⁸ *Symposium* 177c

²⁹ *Newell*, p. 69: Newell backs this idea up, stating that “the varieties of personal eros explored in the dialogue are intertwined with different perceptions of, and expectations from, public life.”

³⁰ *Symposium* 180a

Eternal life in the Isle of the Blessed. Phaedrus imagines everything that his speech wants to place in the lover – manliness, courage, sacrifice, and reward – as coming to himself.

178b-180c: Phaedrus's Speech

Before getting into Achilles, however, Phaedrus starts his speech by exploring the divine origin of all things. He praises the god, Love, for its being among the oldest of all the gods and divine powers, citing works from the poets Hesiod, Akousileos, and Parmenides to support his theory that Love was not a minor deity, but rather among the first great powers of the universe.³¹ “And, being one of the oldest gods, he endows us with one of the greatest goods: love that is.”³² He goes on to say that “... it is Love, far more than family, connections, or wealth, which must guide any of us who wish to live a good life.”³³ The means which love shall use for this end, according to Phaedrus, are the installation of a “piercing shame we feel when we act ignobly, as well as the yearning that incites us towards any noble pursuit.”³⁴ In other words, Phaedrus finds love to act both as a means of deterrence – as in the case of performing ignoble deeds – in addition to one of encouragement – as is the case concerning noble pursuits. The results of such a powerful gift, accord-

ing to Phaedrus, are enough to bring the greatest virtues out of human beings in all walks of life. He states that a city “composed solely of lovers and the boys they love” would be the “strongest and purest society of all,”³⁵ while an army³⁶ of the same, “fighting shoulder to shoulder, could conquer all the world.”³⁷ It must be made clear, however, that these virtues are not, in the sense that someone such as Socrates would describe them, true virtues. If one is courageous because they fear shame, then they are not, in the usual definition, “courageous” individuals. They are simply afraid of shame, something which could drive a man to act both nobly and ignobly. So what Phaedrus presents is either a lack of belief in traditional virtue, or an inability of love to actually foster virtue. Either way, this presents problems for Phaedrus's speech – one which claims such a high place for love.

Regardless, Phaedrus backs up his assertions with another set of literary examples. He invokes the story of Admetus and his wife, Alcestis, as an example of the great capacity for self-sacrifice that love brings into an individual. The king of Thessaly, Admetus, was fated to die if another body could not be produced to Death in his place – a bargain struck up by the god Apollo. While both “mother and father... refused to do so,” Admetus's noble wife took the punishment upon herself and was slain in his place. In addition to this, Phaedrus brings forward the example of Orpheus, the mythical musician and husband

³¹ *Bury*, p. 22. While Phaedrus claims a that a “unanimous silence” (178b) exists on this point, the truth is a bit different: “for Alcaeus makes Eros son of Zephyros and Iris; Simonides, son of Ares and Aphrodite; Euripides, soon of Zeus; Sappho, of Ge and Uranos; Ibycus, of Chaos” and so on. This gets at a larger sort of trend within Phaedrus: he tends to misrepresent his literary references quite often.

³² *Symposium* 178c

³³ *Ibid*

³⁴ *Symposium* 178d

³⁵ *Symposium* 178e

³⁶ *Dover*, p. 10. Phaedrus actually seems to anticipate the Theban “Sacred Band” here. It was an fighting force made up of homosexual lovers and their beloveds. From *Dover*: “... there are reasons for thinking that the ‘sacred band’ of Thebes, composed in just such a way, was formed in or very soon after 378. A dating of [the *Symposium*] to the period 384-379 is consistent with its style and its philosophical content.”

³⁷ *Symposium* 179a

of Eurydice. He cites the man as an example of poor faith in the power of love – for he “preferred to sneak his way into Hades while still alive rather than die for the sake of his beloved.”³⁸ He looks down on the man for showing himself to be “cowardly and soft” like “most musicians.” His punishment for this display was, to Phaedrus, fitting of the crime: “death at the hands of women.”³⁹ Finally, he brings up the aforementioned example of mighty Achilles and his vengeance taken on behalf of the man Phaedrus calls his lover, Patroclus. His act of revenge – the killing of Hector – was all the more impressive because he did so even with the knowledge that such an act would mean his death. Phaedrus sees this as a clear indication of selfless love on the part of Achilles – all the more admirable because of the fact that he sees Achilles as the younger (beloved) acting in the place of the elder. It is for this that Phaedrus believes Achilles earned his spot in the Isle of Blessed – a place of paradise reserved for those displaying the greatest of virtue. With these situations considered, Phaedrus concludes his speech by restating his faith that “Love is the eldest and most venerable god... who most surely determines which men will win lasting virtue and happiness, whether they are alive or dead.”⁴⁰

The speech is an admirable display of skill on Phaedrus's part. He seems to take proof from worthy figures in Greek society and put them to use in defining and demonstrating the impact love has on the lives of men. However, beyond a surface reading, there are multiple problems with the objects of his admiration.⁴¹ First, while he cites

Alcestis as a model of love's ability to promote noble action, he seems to entirely ignore the other half of the relationship. Admetus, while stricken with grief at the death of his wife, immediately breaks a promise made to her on her deathbed by welcoming a guest and engaging in (somewhat) mirthful hospitality. Beyond this, he mourns the death of his wife to such an extent that he loses his sense and begins to wish that he had not been married at all – part of a series of reactions which force onlookers to think his grief goes too far. His actions hardly seem reminiscent of a wonderfully virtuous human being. Further, while Phaedrus is correct in noting that Alcestis is returned from Hades, he fails to note how the entire thing took place. Far from simply being a “privilege” granted by the gods, the return was actually due to Heracles, embarrassed by his accidental acceptance of Admetus's hospitality during a time of mourning, who decided to ambush Death and force the return of his friend's wife from Hades. It is difficult to say that this story can be attributed to love winning the favor of the gods.

Further, the story he presents about Achilles and Patroclus is almost entirely unfounded.⁴² Certainly, Achilles had great affection for Patroclus, but the designation of the two as lovers is difficult to sub-

Alcestis, Dover suggests that “Plato may be using an older and simpler form of the legend” (93). He makes the same claim about the changes to the Orpheus/Eurydice legend. These arguments might be conceded, as they are not necessarily crucial to my understanding of Phaedrus as a lover.

⁴² *Dover*, p. 94. Dover also notes that, while “Homer does not portray their mutual affection of Achilles and Patroclus as a homosexual relationship... it was so interpreted in classical times.” This I have a more difficult time accepting, as he provides no proof for the assertion, and the Achilles point is a crucial turn from rewarding the lover to awarding the beloved. At the least, Homer provides no reasonable ground for this assumption.

³⁸ *Symposium* 179d

³⁹ *Symposium* 179d

⁴⁰ *Symposium* 180b

⁴¹ *Dover*, p. 93-94. Before going on with this point, it is worth noting that Dover does not suggest that Phaedrus purposefully altered or misrepresented his content. To the discrepancies that arise with

stantiate. Achilles was a character of vanity, rage, and courage – one who desired for himself a glorious name that would be known by the entire world. While Phaedrus would have his audience believe that the death of Achilles was due to a desire for his lover, Patroclus, the much more sensible observation seems to be that he simply wanted to make the greatest name for himself by being the hero of Troy. The rage and burning for vengeance he felt after the death of his companion was a manifestation of the character that was already there – a fact which puts Phaedrus's case in an even more difficult position.

He also presents the story of Orpheus and his wife, Eurydice. Stricken with grief at the unfortunate loss of his beloved – the victim of a chance snake bite – Orpheus travels into the underworld in order to attempt to win his wife back. Far from angering the gods as a result of what Phaedrus described as "sneak[ing] his way into Hades," Orpheus actually moved all of the gods to emotional understanding of his plight; indeed, his love so inspired his music that the gods themselves granted him a chance to retrieve his lover from the grips of death. Unfortunately, he ended up failing the test offered to him to retrieve Eurydice, but his sentiment remained unchanged. His love bound him to Eurydice for all his life – a fact which enraged a group of women (worshippers of Bacchus) and led to his death at their hands. The result of this fate, as the story goes, was a happy reunion with the woman to whom he had remained faithful. This hardly seems to be as lamentable an end as Phaedrus makes it out to be.

Ultimately, while he did well to gloss over the imperfections in his retelling, the truths are often different – and occasionally directly contrary – to what he asserts. His assumed understanding of what love inspires, what is noble and good in a human being, seems to be very rugged and

masculine in nature; it's centered on the concept of sacrifice – and in no small sense, either. For Phaedrus, it seems necessary that a person go so far as to die for their love. Anything less than this is unbecoming. He seems to ignore, however, the imperfections that love can inspire: he quiets the excessive grief, the rage, the impiety. He speaks, in some sense, as a child speaks – ideals and glossed over tales that try and "take the bad out" for the sake of a good ending. It is not, ultimately, that Phaedrus speaks with an intentional dishonesty, or one that is focused on leading listeners astray, but it seems that he is speaking on the subject in the way that he, as a younger man, wishes for it to pan out. The character of Phaedrus is not exactly an ugly one, then, but he is certainly naïve. His conception of nobility in sacrifice – especially as that serves as an example of manliness – might be the wishful thinking of a boy who longs to become a man.

Despite all of the faults, however, there is something more to Phaedrus as a part of the *Symposium's* structure. For instance, the structure of his love is interesting: a lover who gives everything to the beloved is praised by the gods, but the beloved who dies for the lover is even above that. A couple of these aspects will be explored as the dialogue continues. Firstly, the separation of lover (older) and beloved (younger) is something that is retained principally by Pausanias, and he will make another division into noble and ignoble ways for a lover to consider his beloved (and vice versa). As it evolves, Aristophanes will simply state that every person is both a lover and beloved, and that there's no real consideration of noble or ignoble to be made. Secondly, Phaedrus introduces the consideration of love, *eros*, as a means to virtue. Granted, in his understanding, *eros* does this by manifesting shame, whereas someone like Agathon considers it more as an "infusion" of ability.

In all, Phaedrus establishes a basis for talking about love – as lovers and beloveds with an eye to virtue – which will endure throughout the dialogue. It is perhaps worth noting that the highest character for Phaedrus, the beloved who acts for the sake of the lover, is almost exactly the opposite of the Socratic “hero”: a lover who serves and pursues the beloved endlessly.⁴³ Phaedrus, however, may actually turn out to be more sympathetic to this idea than his speech seems to indicate. While the theme of his speech is strikingly *thumotic*, he ends up growing closer to the character of Socrates over time. He becomes, for instance, much more open to the Socratic method being employed against Agathon later on in the dialogue.

180c-185c: Pausanias's Speech

Pausanias aims to amend a defect in Phaedrus's thinking – that love is solely virtuous – by identifying Love as a being with two distinct natures: one worthy of praise and the other undeserving. He begins by stating that his speech will be of two parts: “first... defining that sort of Love which does indeed merit our praise, and then by going on to praise the god appropriately”.⁴⁴ This is the dialogue's first attempt at actually defining *Eros* simply.

To satisfy this objective, he begins by associating Love with the divinity Aphrodite. This, to him, is a common association, but he proposes also that the audience keep in mind that “there are in fact two Aphrodites so there must be two kinds of Love.”⁴⁵ After giving their names – Ouranian (Heavenly Aphrodite) and Pandemian (Common Aphrodite) – he makes a statement that, to Phaedrus, might be somewhat startling: “...every deed, in and of itself, is neither honorable nor base... each depends entirely on how it is done”.⁴⁶ He holds that the same is “true with loving and with Love.”⁴⁷ He takes this division and offers an explanation of how one might discern the relationships as they manifest themselves in human beings. The Common Aphrodite, he says, “is vulgar indeed and lusts after whatever he happens to find... such men desire women as much as boys.”⁴⁸ Heavenly Aphrodite, however, inspires a Love which will “always prefer the male child, delighting in his more robust nature and his greater intellect.”⁴⁹ He goes on to explain that such a love, associated with the Heavenly Aphrodite, is compelled to take a beloved into a lifelong relationship and share with the beloved everything that he has.⁵⁰

Such a relationship is greater than the ill-motivated love of Pandemian. Pausanias uses this lesser motivator as the reason for Love having “so bad a reputation that some today argue that the gratification of

⁴³ *Benardete*, p. 182. “Phaedrus, then, sees that the Olympian gods, who compensate the lover, cannot be combined with the real thrust of Eros, which serves the good of the beloved. The problem of the relation between the beautiful and the good, or between the lover's sacrifice and the beloved's advantage, is first set out by Phaedrus. The problem is solved by Socrates in reversing Phaedrus. In his solution, the lover gets the good and the beloved keeps the beautiful.”

⁴⁴ *Symposium* 180d

⁴⁵ *Ibid*

⁴⁶ *Symposium* 181a

⁴⁷ *Ibid*

⁴⁸ *Symposium* 181b

⁴⁹ *Symposium* 181c

⁵⁰ *Dover*, p. 96. Pausanias's two-fold division of Aphrodite actually has some historical basis. “According to Hesiod... Aphrodite was born from the genitals of Uranus (Sky), which were lopped off by his son Cronus and fell into the sea. In [the *Iliad*] 5.370-430, on the other hand, Aphrodite is the child of Zeus and Dione.”

any lover at all is itself shameful.”⁵¹ He says, however, that such conduct would be acceptable only once they submit themselves to “the bounds of decorum and custom,” of which “no one could easily complain.”⁵² This point of decorum and custom plays a large role for the character of Pausanias. He goes on to examine the rules of decorum in places like Elis and Boeotia – less sophisticated people, barbaric and tyrannical. He makes note that tyrants especially are predisposed to finding love quite bothersome, for the tyrant is done “no good if his subjects begin to cultivate ambitious thoughts or form loyalties and strong friendships... precisely the sorts of things which Love has the greatest likelihood of fostering.”⁵³

From here, he examines the complex political and social structure of relationships in the Athenian regime. He suggests that all conduct – even that normally considered shameful or unbecoming – becomes praiseworthy when in the cause for a noble and virtuous love. He calls this a part of the great combination of two customs, “the one governing the love of boys and the other governing boyhood education and virtue in general.”⁵⁴ Through this method, it is possible for a lover both to find himself loving for a noble cause and for his beloved to return those feelings for the sake of virtue while still not renouncing the aspect of physicality that comes along with a relationship.

Such a speech comes off in a very positive light – especially as it follows the sort of “all inclusive” definition given by a character like Phaedrus. Still, several aspects of the speech do seem strange. Firstly, Pausanias himself is the declared lover of the young man Agathon – an extremely

handsome and sexually appealing youth. For all of his talk of virtue and decorum, it is perhaps important to note that Pausanias seems to have some very basic connection to physical beauty, regardless of all else.⁵⁵ This is further reinforced when he says that “people are right to condemn the hasty and immoral demands which the vulgar lover makes upon his prey. But surely, if it were done decently and within the bounds of decorum and custom no one could reasonably complain.”⁵⁶ This seems to suggest that Pausanias's belief comes from attempting to “satisfy” the Heavenly Aphrodite for the sake of engaging in the vulgar Aphrodite.⁵⁷ Indeed, he goes so far as to put other ignoble acts – like lying and slavery – among the good so long as they pursue virtuous ends. Considering this, one might actually want to put the question to Pausanias: what is virtue? If he sanctions all of this ill activity for the sake of “virtuous love,” why is it clothed in such a lack of virtuous activity?

Beyond this, it ought to be considered that Pausanias is glorifying the reality of the city's view towards the relationships between a man and boy. The true view of

⁵¹ *Symposium* 181e

⁵² *Symposium* 182a

⁵³ *Symposium* 182c

⁵⁴ *Symposium* 184d

⁵⁵ At the same time, his connection is not exclusively physical. While it likely began with an eye to the tragedian's beauty, much more was at work. Agathon, sometime between 411 and 405 BC, went to Macedonia to continue his work as a poet. When he left, Pausanias actually decided to follow him and continue the relationship (Kenneth Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, II.C.4.:84). In everything that Pausanias says, it is important to keep in mind that he maintains a very permanent devotion to his beloved.

⁵⁶ *Symposium* 182a

⁵⁷ *Benardete*, p. 183. “Pausanias, one might say, is how Socrates appears to Athenian father. Pausanias offers the same pattern, and the law is incapable of distinguishing between the genuine and the spurious versions of Socrates.” This, of course, has huge implications for the later trial and execution of Socrates. Fathers may be afraid for their sons.

Athens was a bit more wary.⁵⁸ If it were the case that Pausanias came fully with the intent of acting for the “Heavenly Aphrodite,” why did he commit himself to dishonesty? Ultimately, we see the totality of Pausanias's character as one which attempts to veil itself with law and simply “satisfy” the nobler ends for the sake of base desire. His division between base and noble may be accurate, but his division is not accompanied by a personal resistance or rejection of the vulgar. In any such soul, it is impossible to pursue that which is “good” – the erotic desires get in the way.

Pausanias does end up introducing a topic which has a good longevity within the dialogue: that of finding a “mean” between extremes. Indeed, this will form the main line of thinking within Eryximachus's speech, but it is one which is also picked up by Socrates later on. While Pausanias uses this mean as a way to get at a sort of “decency” between lovers, Eryximachus will use it to form the final end of *eros* – balance. The problem with Pausanias's speech lies in that he is unable to connect the base desires to the noble desires in any necessary way. His understanding suggests that a truly noble love should consist of purely noble concerns – only a lover with base desires would wish that the object of his love become involved in the “willing servitude” that he speaks of at 184b.

⁵⁸ *Dover*, p. 2. “It is clear from Greek literature, art and myth that at least by the early sixth century B.C. the Greeks had come to think it natural that a good-looking boy or youth should excite in an older male the same desire for genital contact and orgasm as is excited by a pretty girl. They did not consider homosexual relations incompatible with concurrent heterosexual relations or with marriage... but the sustained relationship between Pausanias and Agathon which we encounter in [the *Symposium*] is something unusual.”

185c-186a: Aristophanes and Eryximachus

During Pausanias's speech, the next speaker in line, Aristophanes, found himself suffering from a case of the hiccups. Apollodorus recalls the cause imperfectly, attributing it to “overeating, the excess of hot air or something else, I couldn't say.”⁵⁹ The afflicted Aristophanes implores his couch partner, Eryximachus, to “...either [hiccup] cure these hiccups or else speak in my [hiccup] place until I recover” (185d). The physician agrees to do both of these things: take the turn of Aristophanes and provide for him three possible cures to administer while he speaks. Eryximachus prefaces his speech by saying that Pausanias, while having a “sound beginning to his speech, hadn't quite ended it properly.”⁶⁰

This interruption from Aristophanes seems to serve several purposes. In the simplest way, it's upsetting. When compared to all other events in the *Symposium*, with the entrance of Alcibiades being the only possible exception, it strikes us as the most “destructive” scene in the dialogue. The hiccups, which surfaced while Pausanias was talking, detracted from his speech; they created a spectacle during Eryximachus's speech as well, since the sight of Aristophanes “stimulat[ing] the interior tissues of the proboscis” sounds hard to ignore, and finally, they changed the current order of speakers. Each event here serves specific ends.

The beginning of the hiccups came during Pausanias's speech.⁶¹ Apollodorus at-

⁵⁹ *Symposium* 185c

⁶⁰ *Symposium* 185e

⁶¹ The jury is out on this point. *Benardete* has the hiccups seen as a “funny noise whose cure consists in the funny noises of gargling and sneezing. Aristophanes finds it funny that funny noises heal funny disorders; but Eryximachus does not find it funny; we certainly must find it strange at least that

tributes this, in his memory, to the effect of “overeating, the excess of hot air or something else.” The concept of indulgence – whether considered from the viewpoint of overeating or from “hot air” – seems relatable to the character of Pausanias. As mentioned, his glorification of the Athenian view on man and boy relationships, partnered with his loving of Agathon (a rather attractive youth), and his questionable definitions of virtue, put him in a poor light as a defender of the “Heavenly Aphrodite.” Even if it were granted that Pausanias was entirely sincere in his speech, he still seemed to put himself in the position of satisfying Ouranian for the sake of Pandemian. He always comes back to the concept of gratification: when it is “okay” to gratify one’s lover or beloved. The reader is left, then, with this praise of “decorum” or “decency” instead of a praise of love. Aristophanes, in being taken by hiccups, serves as a critique of this attempt by Pausanias. This is in line with what the job of a comedian tends to be: tearing through false motives and appearances, showing things as they are. Instead of focusing on customs and motions, why not focus on the true motivation for it all – physical gratification, bodily indulgence? This concept will be taken up more fully in Aristophanes’s speech, but the basic point comes in the form of a question: why are you, Pausanias, afraid of showing love for the body? Why the decoration? To the comedian, the decency being sought by

Pausanias is a front, and Aristophanes points this out with his “bronchial eruptions.”

Secondly, we know that Eryximachus is a prideful man – he believes in his profession not only as a guarantee of skill in medicine, but of skill generally, even in love. Further, his speech is mechanical in some ways: he tries to bring together opposites, to harmonize, and to produce equilibrium. This is what doctors do – something which he states. Aristophanes, by hiccupping, cuts into the prestige of such a speech; not only by hiccupping, but by performing the prescribed “solutions” as well. Thus, Aristophanes makes light of this sort of “beyond sexual” lover (a concept which Aristophanes will develop during his speech). The hiccups seem to serve the purpose of applying a critique to the belief furthered by Eryximachus – indeed, a poetic “but what about this...” to the first three speakers as a whole.

Finally, the hiccups result in a re-ordering of speakers. Again, this highlights the relevance of speaking order in a way similar to the division of “lightweight” and “heavyweight” drinkers. This particular incident is unique, however, since it actually changes the way in which the reader is given the speeches. Instead of simply indicating the importance of order, this incident demonstrates it: Aristophanes and Eryximachus will now play different roles in the dialogue than what they formerly would have. Instead of a progression from Pausanias to Aristophanes to Eryximachus, as was intended, the latter two have their places exchanged.

As a small thought experiment before going on, one can consider how the *Symposium* might have looked without Eryximachus following Pausanias; in other words, if it had followed the original progression from Pausanias to Aristophanes. We notice rather immediately that the two actually follow each other very well. In fact,

bodily disorders establish the harmonious structure of the speeches of the *Symposium*” (p. 184-185).

On the other hand, *Rosen* recognizes a narrative function as well as an instance where “Plato caricatures Aristophanes in vengeance for the comedian’s portrait of Socrates in the *Clouds*” (p. 91).

Bury identifies most strongly with this latter view, saying that “the incident shows up Aristophanes in a ludicrous light, and at the same time it gives further occasion to Eryximachus to air his medical lore; so that we can read in it the intention of satirizing gently both the personages” (xxiii).

it is almost a more sensible progression than the one we are actually given. While Eryximachus takes love into the cosmos, Aristophanes gives a speech which centers itself on human love – much like Pausanias. In addition, he provides a strong counter to Pausanias's assertion of decency by describing an *eros* which is not only “indecent” in the traditional sense, but proud of that indecency. Indeed, he verbalizes much of what we just assumed the hiccups implied. Given the compatibility of the two, then, we must consider why Plato decided to make this change.

In the first place, Eryximachus introduces the idea of the “good in itself” to the discussion at 188d. This becomes much more important during the discussion between Aristophanes, Agathon, and Socrates, but it suffices to say that this theme was largely absent from both Phaedrus's and Pausanias's speeches. For Aristophanes's speech to generally avoid the discussion of virtue and instead pursue “the good,” Eryximachus had to forward his own argument and bridge the difference. Secondly, Eryximachus's speech does not stand up sensibly next to Agathon's – either in form or in content. Aristophanes, as mentioned earlier, is almost exactly opposite what Agathon offers. As a result, the two highlight each other's differences very well.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, it seems as though Plato is suggesting that the way of thinking proposed by Pausanias can be followed to the end proposed by either Eryximachus or Aristophanes – both are “most logical conclusions.” It can be taken as an assessment of the current laws, with the result being a far-reaching harmony to be achieved in human sciences – the *nomos* among them. Eryximachus takes this route by suggesting that “harmony” is something that all aspects of life ought to be turned towards. Inasmuch as Pausanias seems to be the political man, Eryximachus

is the doctor. Alternately, Pausanias also presents decency as a virtuous way to “earn” one's physical desires – a path which is followed to its end, although more nobly, by Aristophanes. The ultimate slavery to one's lover – a physical “welding” of bodies – will become a higher fulfillment of the devotion championed by Pausanias.

By drawing attention to the swapping of these two characters, Plato indicates both their interchangeable nature as well as the purpose for placing them where they ultimately ended up. Aristophanes needed to precede Agathon due to the theme of poetry which exists in the latter half of the dialogue, and Eryximachus needed to precede Aristophanes in order to demonstrate the function of comedy and to introduce the concept of “the good.” However, they are related to each other, and the arguments they present both find some source in the speech delivered by Pausanias.

With all of this said, and a remedy prescribed, we proceed to Eryximachus's speech.

186a-188e: Eryximachus's Speech

He begins by agreeing with the proposal that there is a “twofold division of love.” However, he is unable to accept that Pausanias has given us a complete view. Instead of “his hypothesis that love exists only in human souls of that is it stimulated only by human beauty... love is aroused by numerous stimuli and can be found in the whole spectrum of life forms.”⁶² He goes on to suggest that love is indeed found to be a part of animals, plants, and practically everything else; it permeates all matter and affects those things human and divine. What Eryximachus sees as “beautiful” and what

⁶² *Symposium* 186a

he sees as “love” relate to his profession. “Harmony,” in the sense that he talks about it, is this beautiful thing which inspires one to love – which is to say, one “uses” love in order to moderate the conflicting extremes (hot and cold, wet and dry, high and low, etc.) in pursuit of the beautiful: peace, balance, harmony. Love is the science; it is the process by which one achieves beauty.

He observes that “all bodies inherently exhibit this biform species of love. For it is axiomatic that bodily health and sickness are separate and unlike properties.”⁶³ From this, he goes to compare Pausanias’s assertion about men who are driven by the Vulgar Aphrodite to men whose bodies are stricken by disease – one must not “feed or satisfy the bad or unhealthy bodily elements, especially if one has any intention of acting like a skilled professional.”⁶⁴ Given this, Eryximachus asserts that medicine is simply the science which studies the effects of love and desire within the human body. The physician, then, must use this science and administer it in a method which “transmute[s] into friends and lovers those corporal elements, such as cold and hot, bitter and sweet, dry and wet.”⁶⁵ This, he says, was the very beginning of the medical science among human beings: the observation and controlling of love’s effects within the human body.

Having covered his own field, he goes on to discuss the field of music.⁶⁶ Agreement between musical notes, “or

harmony, is created when initially discordant high and low notes are later brought into concord... by means of the art of music.”⁶⁷ Rhythm is treated much the same way – an agreement of fast and slow. He does go on to recognize that the biform Love, as it manifests itself in the task of composition, is exceedingly difficult. Much like Pausanias suggested that it was wise to indulge only lightly in the vulgar affairs of love, so Eryximachus warns against the indulgence in vulgar rhythms or rich foods. For such a task, we must put our trust in those composers who show themselves to be truly capable of balancing the god of Love: “one must be always on the watch, ready to diagnose which of the two species of Love will emerge, since both of them are everywhere lying in wait.”⁶⁸

He takes this example further into two other areas – that of astronomy (which is the knowledge of Love and its effects in nature and the seasons) and that of prophecy (or moderating the relationship between gods and men). All of it, considered together, shows us the view of Love which is “huge and all-inclusive” (188d). He says that such a view might even consider Love to be “omnipresent.” It plays a hand in all things, and, when “Love is directed, with restraint and justice, simply toward the good in itself that it truly has the most power of all and is the source of our greatest happiness” (188d). In sum, Eryximachus took the concept which Pausanias observed in human affairs and pointed out its existence in all walks of life – Love, in its two parts, is merely the natural, quarrelsome state of things that can either be directed poorly or with prudence.⁶⁹

⁶³ *Symposium* 186b

⁶⁴ *Symposium* 186c

⁶⁵ *Symposium* 186d

⁶⁶ Bury, p. 48. In his consideration of Heraclitus, Eryximachus may be slightly missing the mark. Bury gives the following from Heraclitus: “as the arrow leaves the string the hands are pulling opposite ways to each other, and to the different parts of the bow; and the sweet note of the lyre is due to a similar tension and retention. The secret of the universe is the same.” Heraclitus suggests that *even* techné is composed of this two-fold tension.

⁶⁷ *Symposium* 187b

⁶⁸ *Symposium* 187e

⁶⁹ Eryximachus may arrive at a bit of a problem. He has identified Love in its “biform state,” as Pausanias proposed, but he seems to have identified something else as well. At first glance, it would seem like at he doesn’t actually love

Perhaps it is because of this that the image of Aristophanes in the background stimulating his proboscis is so humorous. This activity must be considered in light of the speech that was just given – one that centered on a sort of omnipresent force called Love that ought to be controlled and directed for harmony’s sake. Eryximachus also wanted to bring harmony to the points already raised by Pausanias and Phaedrus (that “logical conclusion”) via his speech. Aristophanes, by his mere presence, acts as a sort of “elephant in the room” to this whole proceeding – there’s an inherent problem in how these speakers have chosen to go about love, at least according to Aristophanes. He is the alternative explanation for Eryximachus: while he is structured, in the mind of Aristophanes, love is erratic and humorous. All of these speakers seem to already know the “end” before they even get into the business of loving – Phaedrus and his idols (Achilles, Alcestis, etc.), Pausanias and his decorum, Eryximachus and his harmony. They take a formula and fit love into it. Aristophanes gives his “other half” example, but his larger enterprise is rather chaotic: how you find the person, how you would know they were the “one,” and what such a relationship would look like – all of these things are left pretty vague. Aristophanes,

I think, makes it a point to take these conceptions of love and expose them to his larger, more “accidental” nature of *eros*.

All of this returns us to the issue of how these speakers ought to be recognized as a unit (or, at least, why they must progress in the way that they did). We have considered a bit of the relationship between Pausanias/Eryximachus/Aristophanes. For the group of Phaedrus/Pausanias/Eryximachus, we might say they moved forward firstly by eulogizing Love, then by defining it, and finally by applying that definition. The progression was from a beloved, to a lover, to a lover. The answer that seems most probable comes from how each of them approached the question of love in terms of “how it ought to be.” Phaedrus was full of stories and lavished praise on the god which gave men capacity for noble and glorious action. Pausanias took Love and divided the divinity into two parts – Heavenly and Vulgar. However, unwilling to depart entirely from Phaedrus, he still puts himself in support of appearances, decorum, praise, virtue, and so forth. It might not be as heroic or gallant and Phaedrus made it seem, but Pausanias’s case still seems to be pushing itself towards a nobler and more virtuous lover. Eryximachus, possibly more of a lover than expected, saw this capacity for virtue not only amongst human beings, but actually in all of the sciences – indeed, all men who engage themselves in an occupation would seem to him, in fact, to be taking the position of lovers. After he accepts Pausanias’s position of a biform love and the ability to disregard the Vulgar, he can go on to make love a thing which can be buried and ruled by “reason and justice” for the sake of happiness. The end of each of the first three speakers seems to echo a general formula: this is how men “ought to love.”

anything; since Love is simply the biform nature of all things, it is impossible to say that a human being (in a “beyond the body” sense) actually loves anything. Instead, there is only the exercise of “restraint and justice.” This begs a question of Eryximachus, however: why does he do what he does? What he pursues would seem to suggest that he has something like a yearning to create harmony – he considers disharmony to be vulgar and improper, after all. In a sense, it might even be said that he *loves* harmony (if it can be said that you love what is most good and beautiful to you). Yet that would mean that Eryximachus is a lover of harmony as part of being a physician, and the beloved is his patient.

189a-189c: Eryximachus and Aristophanes

After the end of his speech, Eryximachus and Aristophanes have a brief exchange. After trying the three remedies given to him, Aristophanes's was able to cure his hiccups in time to give the next speech. He gives his own "interpretation" of the attack, saying that it must have been "the orderly species of Love in [his] body... experiencing a powerful longing for the discordant wheezing and tickling brought on by the rather unharmonious tones of my sneeze, for my expectorations ceased immediately upon my last olfactory eruption."⁷⁰ This mocking actually seems to hurt Eryximachus, who warns him that this might not be the best setting for comedy. He tells the comedic poet that such jokes force him to "always be on the lookout, waiting for the punchline"⁷¹; similar to how a joke can sometimes go on for too long and become unfunny. When it comes to comedy, at least to Eryximachus, it seems that there's always going to be a time and a place – a serious symposium in praise of eros not being among them.

Aristophanes, however, gives an interesting answer. While he does offer an apology, he also makes a division between the comedic, which falls "well within the jurisdiction of [his] muse," and the "truly ridiculous." As silly as it might sound, we are reminded that the humor of a thing does not necessarily suggest that it is not serious; being both "comedy" and "truth" is not impossible.⁷² There is a sense, very much so for the comedian, that some sort of "beauty" exists in the disharmony – the "accident" –

of the world around us. This comes from a faith that, despite how accidental or chaotic the world seems, there is still some possibility for resolution and harmony. Eryximachus cannot understand this; he feels a need to do violence to *eros* – to "subject" it to some craft – in order to produce harmony. As the result, comedy's only real value is in the laugh produced, not so much in what was substantively being said. This is what he means by "waiting for the punchline." As we will see, Aristophanes suggests that the exercise engaged in by previous speakers – one which tried quite hard to take *eros* "seriously" and give it a some nobility beyond human love – misunderstands the ultimate place of love for human beings.

Eryximachus, because of how he views comedy, actually confronts Aristophanes with a challenge. "I demand that you speak right now as if you had been summoned before a public hearing, and later, perhaps, I will withdraw my charges and release you."⁷³ This phrase, a "public hearing," is an odd thing to say given the *Symposium's* larger context. As was mentioned before any of the speeches began, this particular meeting is far from "public." Socrates notes earlier that the larger ("public") event was held on the previous day, and Eryximachus recommends that the "flute girl" to play her music elsewhere. Again, this symposium is a private gathering of intellectuals; the public has no real place. Who Aristophanes must defend himself against, then, is the rest of those present at the symposium; what he must defend, as his speech will make clear, is comedy itself. This fact is interesting, never mind ironic, because it hints at something which will become very obvious: Aristophanes, perhaps more so than even Socrates, is the sort of "outlier" of the entire dialogue.⁷⁴ While his

⁷⁰ *Symposium* 189a

⁷¹ *Symposium* 189a-b

⁷² We might be reminded of Aristophanes's *Clouds*, where he claims to have written the "wisest of [his] comedies" (line 522). The comedian finds it possible to convey truth through his humor.

⁷³ *Symposium* 189c

⁷⁴ We are immediately reminded in the *Apology*, in which Socrates is put on trial for "investigating the

speech will, in its own way, answer that of Eryximachus, the speech must also be considered in light of its larger critique of those present – even of the *Symposium* itself.

189c-193e: Aristophanes's Speech

“Mankind,” Aristophanes begins, “still hasn’t learned the power of love, not in the least. For if we had we’d have built him the most impressive temples with altars laden with offerings from the richest sacrifices.”⁷⁵ This opening actually harkens back to how Phaedrus began his speech on *eros*. However, he also makes it clear that his method will be different from that followed by the previous two speakers, Pausanias and Eryximachus (confirming the grouping). Instead of examining the nature of Love – the heavenly division between noble and base, for instance – he sets out

things under the earth and the heavenly things, and by making the weaker speech the stronger, and by teaching others these same things” (19b-c). In many ways, the *Apology* is a statement about the “civic justness” of a philosophic life: Socrates must defend himself against those who accuse him of being a great evil to the city. The *Symposium* is not like this – it is a private gathering where Socrates has a certain license to speak freely and about his own brand of erotics. Needless to say, he would not speak as he did at the symposium in front of the Athenian people – we noted earlier that he seems to want nothing to do with the story (173b).

Aristophanes, on the other hand, is a bit out of place at this symposium. Plato seems to set up the dialogue in the following way: if Socrates is ultimately unjust to Athens, then Aristophanes is ultimately unjust to *Eros*. The comedian is called to make an apology of his own here, and he will be “accused” by Socrates in several ways throughout the dialogue – much in the same way that Eryximachus accuses him now. We will have to decide, in the end, who has done a greater violence to *Eros*.

⁷⁵ *Symposium* 189c

with the aim to convey the “true nature of mankind, how we looked at the very start of things and what we have suffered over time.”⁷⁶ In one sense, this sets the tone for the speech: Aristophanes is going to talk about human beings doing human things. The “high” and “low” is put aside, as is the technical harmonizing of Eryximachus. To do so, he offers the symposium a creation myth – not of *Eros*, as Phaedrus did, but of the individual human.⁷⁷

Aristophanes begins his mythos by telling us that, instead of two, there were three different kinds of human beings, with each being a compound of either two males, two females, or a male and female (*androgynē*). These beings were joined at the neck and waist, had four arms and legs, and shared a single head with two faces – each staring in opposite directions. This odd look would make sense, according to Aristophanes, once a person considered the parents of these beings: the males were the sons of “Father Helios,” the females the daughters of “Mother Earth,” and the *androgynē* the children of the Moon, “since the Moon shares in both the Sun and the Earth.”⁷⁸ The fault of these beings, however, was that their ambition moved them to rebellion against the gods of Olympus,⁷⁹ who punished them

⁷⁶ *Symposium* 189d

⁷⁷ *Dover*, pg. 113. “Plato’s reason for giving Aristophanes a speech of this kind may well be that he regarded comedy, fairy-tales and fables as reflecting the same popular attitudes and values; he was aware of the extent to which comic poets used fairy-tale motifs and techniques (e.g. in *Birds*).” This theme of developing a “mythos” to demonstrate the poetic *eros* is something we will see in Agathon as well.

⁷⁸ *Symposium* 190b

⁷⁹ *Rosen*, p. 145. Zeus, the de facto mastermind of the plan to split mankind in half, is very much an Eryximachus character. He is, with the skill and foresight fitting a god, able to utilize discord for the sake of manifesting a greater harmony between men and gods. *Rosen* states that “Aristophanes does not realize that Zeus's contrivance... is

quite severely: each would be sliced in two, with the threat that further misbehavior would result in being cut in half yet again – so that “they will have to make their way about by hopping around on one leg.”⁸⁰ In their newly halved state, human beings aimlessly tried to make themselves “whole” again, “casting their arms around each other, knitting themselves together and trying to bond and become one again.”⁸¹ This single purpose drove them to cling to their complements and ignore the demands of food and drink – which led to a dying off from things like “hunger and idleness.” The gods, in their pity, devised a plan for us. The sexual organs were moved from front to back so that man and woman, in their embrace, might produce offspring and the continuation of the race. In the case of man embracing man, “the two might at least get some satisfaction from the act and then cease their affections, turn back to their work and look to their other needs in life.”⁸²

So what does Aristophanes accomplish with this myth? In the first place, he lays the groundwork for his idea of “missing halves” which dominates the latter part of his speech. Secondly, and just as (if not more) importantly, he seems to take a broad shot at all of those who have spoken thus far – as well as those who have yet to speak. We see Aristophanes, with his spherical “first men,” bring up the topic of pride and ambition – “hubris.” As we find out, at least in the context of this myth, *eros* did not really “exist” for human beings until they were split; before this division, we thought too highly of ourselves – even to the point

already a result of the *techne* of logos.” I reject this understanding, and I would say that Aristophanes was entirely aware of it. By grouping Eryximachus with his characterization of Zeus, the comedian demonstrates how hubristic the physician is in his *eros*.

⁸⁰ *Symposium* 190d

⁸¹ *Symposium* 191a

⁸² *Symposium* 191c

that we rebelled against the very gods.⁸³ Yet after being split, Aristophanes suggests that our only true desire was trying to obtain the “wholeness” that was lost. Pausanias and Eryximachus, with the concerns for decorum, virtue, and harmony, actually come off as having already achieved their own sort of “fullness” – now they can concentrate on other, more “noble” things. Aristophanes sees this and, like the gods of Olympus looking down on spherical man, calls it arrogance. For him, these divisions between things like Pandemian and Ouranian are just constructions to avoid the basic truth we all know by instinct: human beings find their happiness in full, physical connections with another human being. To claim otherwise, as those before him do, is an injustice to the human condition.

This critique, by the way, manifests itself again at 191e. Unlike anyone else at the symposium, Aristophanes actually takes a moment to acknowledge the existence of lesbians – “women who were severed from the all-female type.”⁸⁴ Again, a lot of focus has been put on the supposed virtue of man-boy relationships because they do not submit to the “base desires” that are somehow connected with male-female relationships. If that is true, however, what can we say about lesbians? Are they also the seekers of vir-

⁸³ *Bury*, p. 58. Regarding the Aristophanic rebellion against Olympus: “We may compare also with Psalm [2:2], ‘The Kings of the earth set themselves... against the Lord’; and the Babel tradition.” Indeed, the story of the Tower of Babel began with the following thought: “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the sky, and so make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered all over the earth” (*The New American Bible*, Genesis 11:4). In a similar way, the Aristophanean wholes attempted to scale Mount Olympus as a result of their “terrible ambition” (190b). In both cases, the result was both a weakening and a scattering of mankind: God created different languages and spread us about the earth, while Zeus ordered us split in two and we scattered ourselves amidst the confusion.

⁸⁴ *Symposium* 191e

tue? Yet the symposium thus far has seen women in a generally negative light, with Pausanias sometimes speaking like a complete misogynist. Aristophanes knows that this relationship between a man and a boy ought to be compared to that between a man and a woman or even a woman and a woman. To somehow assign “correctness” based simply on homo- or heterosexuality is, to Aristophanes, a mistake. These attempts to mask what is ultimately physical are, again, displays of human hubris.

So this attraction, the desire for completeness that all human beings share, is what Aristophanes presents as Love. “It is Love that draws together the severed halves of our original state as we desperately try to make one out of two, to heal the human condition. For each of us is but the tally of some other half.”⁸⁵ Somewhat connected to this is the idea that love is not something one chooses to be a part of or not – it is not subjected to things like decorum or justice. Quite the opposite seems true: men are the undeniable subjects of love, and, for Aristophanes, that’s not a bad thing. Thus the myth, while in itself comedic at points, comes off as far from ridiculous. It is funny to imagine a being “cartwheeling” around at high speeds, but the thought of “incompleteness” seems to be something to take seriously. This might be considered the height of comedic talent: using humor (and speaking somewhat absurdly) to highlight an underlying truth about human beings.

Having defined love as a restoration of man’s original state, Aristophanes addresses the sort of relationship which has been given the most attention so far: that of a man and a boy. “Finally, all those cut from the all-male group are always drawn to other men. Once severed from another man, they naturally fall in love with men, and, as I see it, they are the finest sort we know. They are

inherently more manly and robust.”⁸⁶ Aristophanes is almost explicitly addressing Phaedrus at this point. Such a relationship, he says, inspires courage and manliness – conclusive proof lying in the fact that “the very same young men... later on in life choose to become politicians.”⁸⁷ This praise is probably not to be taken seriously; it is hard to imagine a politician ever being on the good side of the comedians. Indeed, Aristophanes suggests that following Love is the only way to become truly happy – he “promises us the greatest of hopes for the future”⁸⁸ – and yet it is this relationship in particular that, after getting “some satisfaction from the act” of lovemaking, “turn[s] back to... work and look[s] to... other needs in life.”⁸⁹ Clearly, for Aristophanes, such a relationship is missing the point. While he would certainly admit the legitimacy of a homosexual relationship – at least within the context of his myth – he does not accept this sort of pedagogical relationship from Pausanias. The attack being leveled here is at undue hubris, not homosexuality itself.

From here, Aristophanes goes on to talk about the effect that such a love has on human beings. He suggests that lovers, so taken with finding their “other half,” will be “suddenly enclouded by such a degree of affection and intimacy and love that they will refuse to be separated for even a moment. Yet these same two people... will never be able to explain just what it is that they hope to get from one another.”⁹⁰ Again, this effect is much less “sober” than all of the previous speeches have proposed. While the others attempted to step back and analyze *eros*, Aristophanes seems to suggest that true lovers will not have the ability, nor the desire, to consider their love reasonably.

⁸⁵ *Symposium* 191d

⁸⁶ *Symposium* 191e-192a

⁸⁷ *Symposium* 192a

⁸⁸ *Symposium* 193d

⁸⁹ *Symposium* 191c

⁹⁰ *Symposium* 192c

Taking Pausanias's idea of slavery to the ultimate end, Aristophanes concludes that the greatest wish of all true lovers would simply be for the gods to “weld the two [lovers] together, solder [them] into a single form.”⁹¹ This act is the ultimate “culmination” of the love presented by Aristophanes, and it stands in sharp opposition to the speeches which have been given thus far.

Alongside of this culmination, Aristophanes presents those around him with a warning, saying that “we must go about always in fear that if we misbehave we could be cut in two once more” (193a). If we can safely consider the union of two halves (two individuals) to be Aristophanes's understanding of a “whole,” it seems to follow that the punishment – another division – to be a sort of incompleteness within one's own person. Yet, to Aristophanes, this division would very likely not require divine assistance. With his understanding, one who does not follow his teaching of *eros* deprives themselves of the happiness to be found in another human being. They, in that lack of understanding, actually become less than they were before. Put in another way: one who has not found their mate may be a half, but one who is not even looking is even less than that – half of a half. They become inhuman.⁹² This is at the heart of Aristophanes's defense of the *demos*, or the “public” for which he is giving an apology; the group present at the symposium has disconnected itself from the “ordinary” and, as

a consequence, lost something essential about their own persons.

172a-193a: Reflections on the Narrative

In the most literal sense, Aristophanes marks a sort of “transitional point” in the dialogue. Firstly, as Socrates will do later on, he almost explicitly confronts each of the speakers who came before him. From here, he actually goes on to direct or influence a great deal of the remaining dialogue with the content of his offering to *eros*. Even the dialogue's final scene is, at least in concept, introduced by his speech: the *Symposium* ends with Socrates and the two poets passing a jug of wine and discussing whether a good poet should be able to write both comedy and tragedy. By remaining “within the jurisdiction of [his] muse,” Aristophanes begins that conversation here. This is one of several impacts Aristophanes makes – each of which has its own relevance and contributes to a more complete understanding of Aristophanes's place within the narrative itself. With this in mind, before moving on to the rest of the speeches – each of which grapple with Aristophanes in some way – it is important to understand his own contribution as fully as possible.

What Aristophanes means by a “different approach” has already been dealt with. This statement at 189e was made in reference to Eryximachus and Pausanias, and it mostly dealt with what he saw as hubristic tendencies within their arguments. Even Phaedrus, though not mentioned initially, has his argument confronted as well. While the two both began their speeches with a discussion of mythical “origins,” Aristophanes related his to human beings – Phaedrus to the god. Ultimately, this was the source of their disagreement:

⁹¹ *Symposium* 192e

⁹² *Newell*, p. 74. What Aristophanes is trying to do is suppress hubris. Unfortunately, men are often hubristic regardless, which prompts *Newell* to state that, “from a civilizational standpoint, the golden age – when we get what we want – is bad.” Further, he believes that “eros for Aristophanes is basically tragic and nostalgic; far from being drawn toward an object that will remove the pain of its neediness, eros cannot exist apart from the pain of its irredeemable deprivation. Love is a wound.” The irredeemable nature of man is something that will come up between Socrates and the poets later on.

Phaedrus's speech culminated in what pleased the gods, while Aristophanes culminated in human good and happiness. Thus, to put it concisely, Aristophanes looks at *eros* between human beings as a way, in and of itself, to “cure” the human condition. The other methods proposed – manly sacrifice, virtuous decorum, and sober *techné* – disagree with that which human beings are made for: loving one another. As a result, he suggests that they will ultimately fall short of true happiness.

The transition from lightweight to heavyweight drinkers is also interesting. As one reflects upon what Eryximachus calls the “feast of words” that has been had thus far, we find that little has been said about the relative “intoxication” of a person in love. Some of the passages in Aristophanes's speech, however, highlight just that. At 191d, he tells us that these newly separated halves would, once in the company of their other half, actually begin “to die off from hunger and idleness.” Again, at 192c, he states that such couples are “suddenly encloused by such a degree of affection and intimacy and love that they will refuse to be separated for even a moment.” This should immediately bring to mind Apollodorus, who becomes the “tireless companion” of Socrates, “setting down all that he says and does each day.”⁹³ We come to see from these examples that the division between drinkers is actually a sort of division between those who wish to subject love to other things and those for whom being in love is the greatest thing – the most powerful, the most intoxicating thing. Phaedrus, Pausanias, and Eryximachus have this tendency to try and “use” *eros* for the sake of the respective ends. As Aristophanes

⁹³ *Symposium* 173a. Also, given this understanding of Apollodorus, it becomes more clear why a name meaning “gift of Apollo” is fitting: he finds Socrates to “complete” him in some fundamental way.

says, however, his speech is given because “mankind still hasn’t learned the power of Love, not in the least” (189c). Each of the first three speakers are, to put it in drinking terms, far too “sober” in their analysis. Thus, in preparation for Agathon’s speech, it is important to remember that he and Aristophanes both fall under the same division. This is also why, as was mentioned earlier, Aristophanes, not Eryximachus, needed to precede Agathon.

In addition, Aristophanes has his role as the fourth speaker – the “middle” of the dialogue. This fact seems very closely connected with the “apology” he is called on to deliver for Eryximachus. Being in the middle, he is both literally and textually surrounded by others who strongly disagree with his understanding of Love. While Phaedrus and Agathon or Pausanias and Eryximachus may have individual differences, none of these compare to what separates them from Aristophanes. The result is that the comedian, here a lone voice for comedy, finds himself largely out of place. Yet this position within the narrative gives him an ability to speak loudly and in a way which actually permeates the rest of the dialogue: he addresses the first three speeches directly, he contrasts directly with Agathon, he is confronted by and objects to Socrates, and he is involved in the final scene with these two as well. From the moment that he begins hiccupping to the moment that the dialogue ends, Aristophanes is difficult to ignore.

Now, all of this said, one particular aspect of Aristophanes's speech has been ignored thus far. “Therefore,” he states, “we should urge all men to be obedient and deal *piously* [emphasis added] with the gods and to keep Love forever as our guide and leader.”⁹⁴ While the majority of the focus has been on human love and relationships –

⁹⁴ *Symposium* 193a-b

a sort of “back to body” argument – Aristophanes has this running theme of piety behind the entire speech. After all, it was an arrogant offense of the gods, at least in the “Aristophanean mythos,” which created *eros* in the first place. From that point on, we can trace the involvement of the gods: the initial cut⁹⁵, the gift of *eros*⁹⁶, the threat of future arrogance⁹⁷, and the reward of piety.⁹⁸ In each of these cases, human beings proceed by virtue of some grace of the divine powers.

This should be a striking fact. Aristophanes stands behind the ability for human beings to find *eros* within their own physical and emotional union – what place might the gods have? As it turns out, this highlights the unique role of Aristophanes's piety: humility in gratitude. If we remember that Aristophanes's speech is, in part, a critique of the hubristic tendencies shown by the previous speakers, then his peculiar brand of piety makes a lot more sense. As was mentioned at the beginning of the symposium, all of the speakers have isolated themselves from the general public; what has been said thus far, then, has been said privately and in the confidence of those present. Aristophanes must be concerned at how quickly, given the opportunity, each of the speakers throws off the traditional piety and creates their own understanding – one that is generally modeled after their own, personal desires. Instead of following this trend, Aristophanes creates a situation in which man is actually grateful for the position in life he has been given; he is grateful for having been given the *privilege* of experiencing something as wonderful as human

eros. Instead of creating their own brands of *eros*, then, the other speakers should be trying to more fully experience the love which exists in front of them.⁹⁹

For Aristophanes, piety's function is to bring men to an “appropriate” level. While he sees other speakers at the symposium as modeling *eros* after their own, selfish hubris, Aristophanes crafts a pious warning which suggests that *eros* is not something we have the power to define or control for ourselves. We are the recipients of it – not the creators. This view will present itself in opposition to each of the remaining speeches in the *Symposium*, but it is perhaps the most powerful in contrast to the tragedian and host, Agathon.

⁹⁵ *Symposium* 190d-e

⁹⁶ *Symposium* 191b-d

⁹⁷ *Symposium* 193a

⁹⁸ *Symposium* 193c-d. It is interesting to consider all of this in light of an old, traditional Christianity or Judaism. The intense feeling of humility, piety, and devotion – never mind human self-loathing – is hard to ignore.

⁹⁹ Dover, p. 113. “Aristophanes, unlike all the other speakers in [the *Symposium*], recognizes that when you fall in love you see in another individual a special and peculiar ‘compliment’ to yourself; for you, union with that individual *is an end* [emphasis added], most certainly not a means, not a step towards some ‘higher’ a more abstract plane, and very often you continue to love and desire that person even when much more powerful sensory or intellectual stimuli impinge upon you from alternative sources. Having composed for Aristophanes the only speech in [the *Symposium*] which strikes a modern reader as founded on observable realities, Plato later makes Diotima reject and condemn its central theme.” (continued on next page)

While we should have some reservation about Dover's commentary, he is largely correct about Aristophanes's peculiar station. It does not seem to me that other speeches are somehow not “observable” in reality, but Aristophanes does seem the *most* observable. Further, Dover points out the “end in itself” that is the union – an important point for Diotima's speech to come.

193e-194e: Socrates, Agathon, and Phaedrus

As we return to the narrative, we see Eryximachus has actually received Aristophanes's speech favorably. "Besides," he tells the comedian, "I actually enjoyed your speech. And if I didn't know that Socrates and Agathon were true experts in the ways of Love I'd be worried that there would be nothing left to contribute. But I remain confident."¹⁰⁰ It is important to draw a line here, however, between simply "enjoying" and actually taking something important away from the speech. Eryximachus may have been "disarmed," in a sense, by the words of Aristophanes, but he is far from bent or convinced. After all, when we hear from him later on in the dialogue, he is admonishing Alcibiades for drinking in "without decorum[,] like the thirsty rabble."¹⁰¹ He then immediately finds an ordered solution which brings Alcibiades into the symposium's praise of *Eros*. Alcibiades will hail him as the "noblest son of the soberest sire," and we are given no reason to consider him otherwise. Again, this is the noble physician's view of comedy: it has its place as amusement, and nothing more.

Following this, Socrates breaks in. He tells Eryximachus that, while he "performed quite well" himself, he should "imagine if you were in my shoes at this very moment, or rather after Agathon has spoken. Then you would have good reason to worry, as I do now."¹⁰² We should note, before going anywhere, that Socrates is being deceptive. Not long after Agathon finishes speaking, Socrates takes it upon himself to insult the way in which all of the speakers present

chose to praise *Eros*,¹⁰³ Eryximachus included. At the time, however, he uses this praise as a way to elevate Agathon – a way of saying that, yes, Eryximachus performed well, but Agathon is going to make an offering superior even to that.

Why would he do this? Again, we have to look at this as a form of Socratic seduction. Before the topic of discussion was presented at the beginning of the symposium, all Socrates knew was that he would have the opportunity to speak with Agathon in a small, relatively private setting. The entire conversation about *eros* is something which Socrates neither prepared for nor proposed – he merely assented to the idea. He finds a fortunate opening here to taunt Agathon and bring him into a discussion – an opening which he fully exploits.

Agathon, piqued by the comment from Socrates, again warns him against praising him too highly. He believes it to be an attempt to "fluster" him, a fact which Socrates denies. "I'd be foolish indeed," he responds, "if I thought I could make you nervous in front of this small gathering... [after] standing their face to face with the entire audience as you began your play."¹⁰⁴ Agathon responds by suggesting that, quite opposite to the previous comment, Socrates is now thinking too little of him: Agathon knows that "a knowledgeable speaker has much more to fear from a single thinking man than from any senseless mob."¹⁰⁵ Socrates takes this and splits it into two sides: fear of acting shamefully ("unseemly" at 194c) in front of a truly clever man, and of doing the same in front of the crowd ("general public"). Agathon agrees that he would certainly be ashamed of the former, but Phaedrus cuts off the conversation before he can respond to the second point.

¹⁰⁰ *Symposium* 193e

¹⁰¹ *Symposium* 214b

¹⁰² *Symposium* 194a

¹⁰³ *Symposium* 198b-199b

¹⁰⁴ *Symposium* 194b

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*

Now, the above summary does not do their brief discussion from 194a to 194d much justice, but it is important to put this section into focus before going on. Two different threads actually run through this discussion simultaneously, and both are immediately relevant to the dialogue. In the first place, Socrates flirts with Agathon to provoke him into “proving” himself. As has been said, Socrates has come to the symposium in order to speak with the victorious poet – he wants the best presentation out of him. At the same time, this is not simple seduction: the conversation topic itself is relevant during the speech that Agathon is about to give; and not only that, but it further prepares us for the final scene of the dialogue between Socrates and the poets.¹⁰⁶

So before we proceed into Phaedrus's comments, the dynamic between Socrates and Agathon must be considered a little more closely. Back at 175d-e, Socrates began to seduce the tragic poet by making a slight jab and hinting at physical intimacy; he makes another advance here. As before, he chooses to reference Agathon's winning performance at the drama festival, but this time he follows that with something new: a contrast of the crowd and the individual, “clever” man. By suggesting here that Agathon is a crowd pleaser, he puts the young man in a position of having to “prove himself” to the older, presumably clever Socrates. After all, we know from the earlier conversation that Agathon thinks very highly of Socrates already – repeatedly calling after him, asking him to share his couch, and so on. As Socrates goes on to say, “were you to meet someone you considered clever, you'd think more of him

¹⁰⁶ Again, we should not lose the ever-interesting thought that Agathon is a stand-in for the “Good” or “Virtuous.” Taken in this way, the whole conversation about being ashamed or in service of the few or the many is seen in an entirely new light.

than just about everyone here in Athens.”¹⁰⁷ If we have been convinced about the Socratic motives so far, we can pretty comfortably say that this is his way of prompting Agathon to be as impressive as possible – not for the rest of the symposium, but for Socrates.

He does seem to back off a bit, however, by reassuring Agathon that he should refrain from “includ[ing] us among the clever, for we too were at the theater yesterday as part of that mob.”¹⁰⁸ Socrates had been putting a good bit of pressure on Agathon, who warns against what he perceives as an attempt to “fluster [him] by making [him] think the audience is expecting some tour de force.”¹⁰⁹ Of course, this “tour de force” is precisely what Socrates came to see; he cannot have Agathon's performance become distracted. By offering some reassurance here, Socrates is able to both direct the poet's attention towards himself and still preserve the integrity of the coming speech; in contextual language, it a speech for the clever man which Agathon believes he is delivering to the mob.

This is not seduction simply, however; it also creates the beginnings of a trap for the poet. As is immediately apparent to Socrates – perhaps from his relentless decorum, perhaps his poetry – Agathon is a lover of praise and recognition. He loves to awe the people and be praised because of it. The thought of appearing before them in a way which runs contrary to that, then, is extremely unappealing to him. This stands in contrast to someone like Socrates, who is willing to appear ignorant or even unseemly before a great many people – the image of his standing idly on the neighbor's porch comes to mind. Indeed, Socrates is in many ways famous for his willingness to profess ignorance. For Agathon, however, this is a

¹⁰⁷ *Symposium* 194c

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*

¹⁰⁹ *Symposium* 194a

shameful thing – and, as we will see, appearing shameful before anyone at all is quite a problem for him. Ultimately, and for that reason, Agathon will show himself as unable to draw an effective distinction between the clever man and the mob; it is not too difficult to make a prediction which of them he ends up catering to.

We can actually make an interesting observation about the function of shame for these two – the philosopher and the tragedian. Socrates, as he tells the story, began his well-known process of questioning others based off of a divine message from the Delphic Oracle that none were wiser than he.¹¹⁰ Rather than being prideful, however, he was actually quite puzzled by the whole event. After all, he knew of his own ignorance, and certainly someone existed who could prove to be wiser; the only way he could figure it out would be to question all of those who claimed to hold wisdom. This lack of knowledge, far from causing shame, is what ultimately gives him a reason to pursue philosophy – we might even say the *freedom* to pursue philosophy. One would actually be somewhat defective, at least for Socrates, if they came to an awareness of their own ignorance and still chose to avoid the philosophic life. Agathon cannot quite grasp this: his words and actions are careful – to use one of his words, “delicate.” We must pay attention, therefore, not only to what he is saying, but how he is saying it. In doing so, we will find that Agathon’s sense of shame actually constricts

¹¹⁰ *Apology* 20e. One sees the massive difference between Socratic motives here: in the *Apology*, he justifies his philosophy as a function of humility because he is trying to prove that the gods have overestimated his wisdom. In the *Symposium*, philosophy is justified based off of some new sense of the gods and the Beautiful that, culminating in some final “vision,” prompts him to pursue only that thing. Again, the *Symposium* is a much different setting – one more conducive to erotic honesty.

his ability to talk about *eros*. Thus, while the Socratic shame grants him the liberty of a philosophic life, Agathon’s sense of it prevents him from even a full poetic life.

None of this, however, is given the opportunity to mature – Phaedrus breaks in and cuts off the conversation between the two. He warns the poet that “everything else fades from view as soon as he’s [Socrates] found some youngster to speak with, especially if he’s good-looking.”¹¹¹ Socrates, evidently, has pretty well-known antics. Yet Phaedrus, probably much to the pleasure of his lover Eryximachus, is able to maintain the structure of the evening and encourages Agathon to begin his praise of *eros*. Perhaps because he is eager to speak, or perhaps because he simply wishes to get away from Socrates’s questioning, Agathon quickly agrees and begins his offering to the god.

194e-197e: Agathon’s Speech

“I would prefer, however, prior to my speech, to propose the proper way to speak, and then I will proceed.”¹¹² We see echoes here of Aristophanes and his “different approach” at 189c. Agathon, like the comedian, is breaking off from the group’s direction, and he explains this by saying “there is but one correct way to praise any man for any thing... to describe in words his actions and benefactions. It is only right, then, that we praise Love first for who he is and then for what he gives.”¹¹³ While some limited discussion has taken place about the nature of *Eros* as a god – Pausanias and Eryximachus making their division between heavenly and vulgar – it

¹¹¹ *Symposium* 194d. This thought is raised again by Alcibiades at 213c, 216d.

¹¹² *Symposium* 194e

¹¹³ *Symposium* 195a

has not really gone far at all. Yet this method makes good sense: one ought to speak about the individual before the gifts that they give. It would be odd to eulogize someone simply for what they gave to you without speaking at all about what they were like as a human being – or god, in this case.

This is a significant point about the poets. In both cases, they radically redirect the flow of discussion and speak in a way independent of those before them. Aristophanes might have some thematic roots in Pausanias, as was discussed earlier, but his actual approach was quite new and unique: painting for us a mythos of humanity. We were whole, spherical, strong, and “terribly ambitious.” He creates this image out of an appreciation for what he feels human beings can be, and he does so in a way that is decidedly different from something like the *Clouds* or the *Birds*. While these plays and others so often utilize the vulgar, the humor here is light and surprisingly clean. We ought to be surprised that, called to offer an apology for his antics, Aristophanes returns with a genuine defense of what he believes to be the height of *eros* in the human experience – two individuals sharing in the process of becoming “whole.” We see a lot more of the man than we do the comedian, and the fact of his sincerity ought not to be lost in any serious reading of the text.

In all, his is a position is not easily overcome or dismissed. While this is a somewhat lengthy digression, it helps us to realize that he is making a remarkable proposition: by coming together, two people who are themselves not good are able to create something which is good in itself. In spirit, he and Agathon are displaying what we might call the poetic excellence: the ability to manifest a reverence for their inspiration.

Agathon must now answer the excellence of Aristophanes, and he does so by again redirecting the flow of discussion.

Here, instead of picking up on the history of man, he paints the symposium a picture of a living god Eros¹¹⁴ – we will see how it stands against the comedian’s art.

Agathon starts by presenting Love as the happiest of the gods, “for he is the finest and most beautiful god.”¹¹⁵ His beauty is due largely to his youth – for the god of Love is not only young, but is indeed forever young. This leads him to conclude that Love is, in addition to being young itself, also attracted purely to youths (“like likes like,” as he puts it). While Phaedrus found the poets to support the opinion that Love is among the oldest of the gods, Agathon (quite respectfully) disagrees. Instead, he suggests that “if those ugly old wars between the gods in those stories Parmenides and Hesiod really did take place, it must have been Necessity, not Love, who caused the strife.”¹¹⁶ After all, if Love had been present from the start, “they [the gods] would have been peaceful and loving, just as they are now, ever since Love began to reign in heaven.”¹¹⁷ This is the beginning of a subtle poetic ambition which Agathon brings out again later on in his speech; Love, as he understands it, has been entirely misunderstood by these poets. As the deity from which “came all good things for gods and men,”¹¹⁸ Love does not strike Agathon as a god who is in the war-making business.

From there, we move to consider Love’s delicate, tender, and gentle nature. Agathon notes Homer’s description of Ate as the goddess who “steppeth not on earth, / But treads instead on the heads of men.”¹¹⁹

¹¹⁴ Note the great contrast here. Aristophanes, as a comedian, talks about man and man’s origins. Agathon talks about the origin of the gods. Socrates, for the record, falls much closer to Agathon than Aristophanes in this regard.

¹¹⁵ *Symposium* 195a

¹¹⁶ *Symposium* 195c

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*

¹¹⁸ *Symposium* 197b

¹¹⁹ *Symposium* 195d

Love, he asserts, is similar in nature, but he desires even more gentle surroundings. Instead of treading on the *heads* of men, “He makes his home in the minds and hearts of gods and men.”¹²⁰ He takes care to note, however, that Love makes such homes only in those who possess a “fine and soft” disposition; the hard-hearted give no good home for Love. From this tendency, Agathon concludes that Love must be a delicate divinity. He also observes that Love must be a flexible god due to his ability to “wrap himself so completely about us or slip in and out of each of our souls.”¹²¹ He finds even clearer evidence for this in Love’s “grace and beauty, qualities about which everyone agrees, for ugliness and Love are always at odds.”¹²²

Young, delicate, supple, and with a lovely complexion; always at odds with ugliness and in the constant company of beauty: one must wonder if Aristophanes has been able to keep a straight face. Agathon is rejecting two things here: firstly, that Love is among the first of the gods, and secondly, that Love serves only human beings; it is neither a god which has “always been,” nor is it somehow only “here for us.” Phaedrus holds the former position while Aristophanes the latter. Agathon, however, suggests both that a time existed when gods were not ruled by Love (instead by Necessity), *and* that human beings do not have a natural or exclusive relationship with the deity. This is linked with Agathon’s idea that Love can never be a part of unseemly behavior: the wars of the gods were not during the rule of Love, and those poor human actions must be attributed to their being “hard of heart,” which repulses Love. He is negotiating a fine line here, but it is all part of the attempt to absolve Love of any

and all involvement in ugly events of the past. This picture must be perfect in every way – for to Agathon it may actually be – that his audience might be held in reverence.

We see Agathon picking up a couple lines of thought here which, though familiar, have some nuances to them. Much like the other speakers (Aristophanes excepted), we see that the god and the young tragedian bear a striking sort of resemblance to one another – a young and beautiful divinity who has nothing to do with ugliness. Yet, being a poet, we must differentiate between what he is doing and what we see from, say, Eryximachus. If we remember that Agathon’s first and most important goal is the glorification of Love – his true inspiration – he would certainly not assume to model it after himself. Indeed, if anything, it is Agathon who is following Love. What we see, then, is a reversal of roles: Agathon’s tribute to Love is actually a lot closer to humility than it is to arrogance.¹²³ The most impressive section of his speech, at least from an aesthetic perspective, comes in his closing “song” – a song which only came about because he felt himself “in the presence of the Muse... swollen with song.”¹²⁴ He is in complete service to the deity. It would be unfair, then, to put Agathon in the

¹²⁰ *Symposium* 195e

¹²¹ *Symposium* 196a

¹²² *Ibid*

¹²³ *Rosen*, p. 171. “What we may call his [Agathon’s] egoism is inseparable from a pride of workmanship that necessarily takes him beyond himself. His self-intoxication, which leads him to portray Eros in his own image, is at the same time an intoxication or drugging of the self by Eros: a love of beauty.” I take issue with this interpretation because it lowers the speaker to the level of a base narcissist. I grant that Agathon feels a pride in himself, but this interpretation ignores the larger enterprise Agathon embarks upon for the good of man. Similar to Aristophanes, Agathon has put together a new piety – one which hopes to escape Necessity on a large scale.

¹²⁴ *Symposium* 197c

same group as the first three speakers – he is in a league of his own here.

We also know that Agathon cannot believe “those ugly old wars” could have come from Love – which also makes for a solid break with the manly virtue which Phaedrus attributed to those in love. Indeed, while his lovers could band together and “conquer all the world,” Agathon’s Love is “everywhere incompatible” with violence.¹²⁵ The opposition of the two should not be so surprising: Orpheus, the great charmer whom Phaedrus views very poorly, is in many ways similar to the character we see emerging from Agathon. It is a softer and more delicate soul which is in conflict with the manly and sacrificial thrust of Phaedrus’s speech. Yet what is manly in Phaedrus might be regarded as bestial by the poet. After all, even though Phaedrus wants to use Love’s gifts as a means to do great heroic and courageous acts, they remain destructive acts. Agathon would be content to enjoy the beautiful, inspirational gifts of Eros and share them with other human beings – a process of creation. For Agathon, once removed from the “tyranny of Necessity,” all things were peaceful and inspired by Love’s tender nature – nothing else would be adequate for a true lover.

With a physical description of Love complete, Agathon continues on to discuss the “moral excellence” of the god, beginning with his complete sense of justice. “He is never the cause of any violence to others, nor has he any need to, since people are always willing to become slaves for love.”¹²⁶ Agathon, again, is almost explicitly calling up Phaedrus’s argument about sacrifice and manly virtue. He makes an interesting comment immediately afterwards, however, by

saying that “people are always willing to become slaves for love. And whenever two parties are willing and agree, all is fair and just: *the law which rules the city.*”¹²⁷ We actually see a sort of self-reflection here on Agathon’s part – this is essentially the relationship that he has with the deity. The tragic poet is a slave to Love’s inspiration, and the god finds pleasure in filling him up with beautiful poetry. This relationship is slavery, and in a sense it is sacrifice, but it is done via agreement and consent on behalf of both parties. Poetry thus becomes, in its own way, a form of prophecy: it divines for us the images of beauty as the god reveals them. Agathon is the privileged prophet, and he seems to acknowledge the importance of this position.

Next is the discussion of bravery and temperance. Of the latter, he simply points out that Love is the strongest of our pleasures and desires – none exert more control over one’s soul. With this rule, he concludes that Love must also be a personal master of his own desires. It is a reasonable assumption: if one embodies the strongest of desires, then certainly one will not be drawn by a weaker one. We might be reminded here of Aristophanes and his newly separated human beings who began to “die off from hunger and idleness” as they tried to reunite with their former halves. This force of *eros* exceeds, in the poetic description, even our desire for food and drink. Yet we can also see a problem here: one who refuses to indulge in food and drink may be moderate, but he may also be incredibly immoderate. Aristophanes’s lovers, for instance, did not refuse food out of a noble sense of diet; it was refused because they were so taken with returning to their state of wholeness. If Love overcomes the lower desires, does it truly display moderation? Or has it simply become immoderate in another way? This point matures more fully in the

¹²⁵ The contrast between Phaedrus and Agathon is almost as strong as that between Agathon and Aristophanes. This will become clearer later on, but it suffices to say that Phaedrus is not a very seductive character, despite his best efforts.

¹²⁶ *Symposium* 196b-c

¹²⁷ *Symposium* 196c

speech of Socrates and Alcibiades, but it suffices to say for now that the poets do not find this to be a reasonable objection. “Moderation” has never been a trademark of the poetic – it would degrade the art. The speech’s concluding song, a verbal feast if ever there were one, gives us sufficient evidence of the fact. Still, we ought to assume that Agathon, who has thus far displayed a great awareness of his craft, has a full understanding of this. What we must remember is that this is a speech of praise: Agathon is not charged with speaking of Love’s faults, but to glorify it with an offering to its beauty. Thus, while he remains brief, he is fulfilling his obligation to the assembly and the god.

On the subject of Love’s bravery, Agathon takes an interesting approach. He begins by quoting from Sophocles, who wrote that “even Ares cannot withstand Necessity.” By replacing Necessity with Love, Agathon looks to be taking another jab at Phaedrus, Hesiod, and Parmenides: he will dethrone their champion even in the realm of courage and bravery. This is a difficult task: making courageous that which has “nothing to do with violence” seems impossible at first. To do this, he borrows from Homer’s *Odyssey* and recalls Love’s “trapping” of Ares. As Homer tells it, Hephaestus was married to Aphrodite, but she had taken to Ares and the two were in the midst of an affair. Upon learning this, he set up a snare trap which caught the couple together in bed and humiliated them before all of the gods. Thus, while the god of Love committed no act of violence personally, it was the effect of *eros* which brought Ares blindly into the bed where he could be captured. Here we see that Love’s profound effect caught hold even of the god of war – allowing him to be conquered even by Hephaestus, who was lame from birth. Even the strongest of hearts are therefore susceptible to Love’s power, and, since “the captor

is naturally stronger than the captive,”¹²⁸ it must be that Love is the strongest and most courageous of all. While this sounds a bit silly initially,¹²⁹ we must keep something in mind: no other speech, with the possible exception of that of Socrates, is able to “conquer” the audience like Agathon’s. How does he do this? If the poet is to be believed, it is through Love’s inspiration.

Finally, Agathon arrives at the last of Love’s virtues: wisdom. In an attempt to “honor [his] craft as Eryximachus has his own,”¹³⁰ Agathon first refers to Love as a “wise and gifted poet.” His talent is so great that, even when dealing with those who were previously “deaf to the muses,” he is still able to create poetry and inspiration. He goes on to remind his listeners that Love does not serve men alone – “Hephaestus in metallurgy, Athena in weaving and even Zeus in the *piloting of gods and men.*”¹³¹ What Agathon is doing here is a sort of argument for cultivation – for civilized being. When human beings and gods lived under the reign of Necessity, the rule was brutish and fierce – a violence that Love could have nothing to do with according to the characteristics attributed by Agathon. “It was only with the arrival of Love – the love of beauty, of course, since there is nothing ugly about Love – that the work of the gods was begun and organized.”¹³²

What Agathon is doing in his speech, then, is defending a way of life. More than that, it is a *reason* for living well.¹³³ This

¹²⁸ *Symposium* 196d

¹²⁹ *Dover*, p. 127. Indeed, this particular piece of Agathon’s speech is somewhat misleading. While Hephaestus did indeed trap Ares, “the plan misfired, for the gods laughed and envied Ares, chains and all.”

¹³⁰ *Symposium* 197d

¹³¹ *Symposium* 197b

¹³² *Ibid*

¹³³ Much of the outside literature takes Agathon a bit too lightly. As readers, it seems easy to do: his speech seems silly at face value. *Dover* remarks

picture of a god which he crafts has every characteristic of softness, grace, and beauty that he tries so hard to embody personally. He does this, which is also to say that his tragic poetry must in some measure do this, to manifest a reverence for that which elevates human beings to their highest capacity. Why does Agathon throw himself in such staunch opposition to Aristophanes, Hesiod, Parmenides, and Phaedrus? It is because they advocate things which, to him, embrace the “dreadful” tyranny of Necessity – warfare and base (though admittedly not all) sexual satisfaction. He cannot see the inspiration, the reverence, or the beauty behind these lovers, and so he rejects them as harmful to the human condition. Agathon’s speech, then, sees the beautiful as that unique thing which human beings and gods are able to recognize, that single thing which pulls them out of this world and into something greater. His final song, able to leave the audience “gaping in awe” at its brilliance, is the tragedian’s best attempt to preserve the good as he is able to understand it.

197e: Conclusion of Agathon -- A Note on the Poets

“Such is my offering, Phaedrus, in part serious and in part fun. It is the best I can do. I dedicate it to the god.”¹³⁴ With this, Agathon concludes his speech, and “out of the silence around unanimous applause. Everyone gaped in awe at how brilliantly the young man had spoken, both for his own sake and for the god’s.”¹³⁵ We might want to question the use of “everyone” here: it is hard to imagine Aristophanes being struck dumb by anything – least of all the idealist deity described by Agathon. Perhaps we can again make exception for the narrator – Aristodemus was likely as stunned as anyone else. Still, the tragic poet receives the most positive reception of any speaker thus far. Just as *Eros* “conquered” Ares, so Agathon seems to have conquered the symposium. Indeed, if the excellence of poetry is the inspiration of reverence, then the audience’s “gaping awe” certainly gives us a good indication of his poetic success.¹³⁶

Still, before looking into the response that Socrates offers, there is an odd bit in Agathon’s closing remark that requires

that “the speech is appropriate to a man whose business in life is the manipulation of language... it may be regarded as expressing, although in ways which make it immediately vulnerable to systematic criticism, some degree of ‘right opinion’... on the role of Eros as Diotima sees it” (p. 123). Not bad, but this makes Agathon seem far more marginal than he ought to be: he is proposing a poetic upheaval, after all.

Allan Bloom follows suit in his reading “The Ladder of Love” (hereafter ‘*Bloom*’). He calls Agathon a “distinct decline from the level set by Aristophanes. It is an interesting question,” he writes, “why we should be given the peaks of comedy and philosophy in this dialogue, but only a sadly diminished representation of tragedy” (p. 112). Agathon is doing something quite deliberately, and we ought to reject readings that do not recognize it.

¹³⁴ *Symposium* 197e

¹³⁵ *Symposium* 197e-198a

¹³⁶ *Bloom*, p. 121. “Hearing this [Agathon’s poetic conclusion], however, to our regret, appeals enormously to audiences, and Agathon’s speech is greeted with thunderous applause. Agathon has turned the group into the audience at the theater, who like to be flattered and who like virtuoso displays. Even in Athens, the public can have very bad taste.”

We should take issue, as serious readers of Agathon, with this suggestion of flattery and bad taste. First of all, the symposium is not “the public,” a distinction drawn at 174a and 194b, for instance. Secondly, the goal of any artist is to redeem via glorification: if Agathon is trying to commit himself to a triumph over Necessity, then the glorification of *Eros* is a good and necessary end. The inspiration of awe is a means to that end.

some consideration: that is, which aspect of his speech are we intended to consider as “in part fun?” It is tempting to say that his speech was serious up until the point where he began to “feel the presence of the Muse.”¹³⁷ This seems like a reasonable conclusion: the rest of his speech was purposefully organized and divided. After proposing how to speak, he presented two major sections: first, Love’s physical appearance, and secondly, Love’s moral excellence. He divided both of these into four sub-sections: the first being youth, delicacy, flexibility, and fine complexion, and the second being justice, temperance, bravery, and wisdom. If not for his final presentation, the speech was set to be quite orderly, even symmetrical. As a result, we might suggest that this was the orderly and serious part of the speech, while the latter half was Agathon having fun as a poet.

Yet this approach asks us to assume a certain amount of naiveté on Agathon’s part; can we really assume that he believes all of the things he attributes to Love to be true? He is a young man, certainly naïve in some ways, but he is also a talented and intelligent man – one who caught the earnest attention of Socrates. In looking closely at the speech, there is a lot of evidence to suggest that Agathon is working to support a larger framework or way of life – he has a goal in mind. Rather than simply praising the god, he is colliding with Phaedrus, Aristophanes, several prominent poets, and indeed the audience of the entire symposium. Instead of simply assigning “in part fun” to the last section of his speech, then, it might be worthwhile to consider applying it to his entire speech. Naturally, we would also then extend the “serious in part” to the entirety of the speech – even the musical finale. For proof of this, we return to a

¹³⁷ *Symposium* 197c

model established by Aristophanes: the crafted myth.

It is worth remembering here just how much Aristophanes invests himself in his myth. From the moment he tells his audience that they “must first come to understand the true nature of mankind,”¹³⁸ to the moment he promises us we can again become “blessed, whole, and happy,”¹³⁹ the speech is knee-deep in imagery. It is not something which gets left behind as he goes on to a more serious understanding; it is not him speaking purely “in fun.” The comedic poet, so much as he is in excellence, will never speak completely serious or in fun; rather, he will speak in each sense as it appropriate to the end of reverence. So we see, in the same sense that Aristophanes talks about us “twirl[ing] round and round like gymnasts” with “all eight of their limbs” extended, Agathon speaks of how Love “caresses with his feet and hands... the softest hearts of the gentlest creatures”¹⁴⁰ or “lives only and always among flowers.”¹⁴¹ The poets speak for the sake of creating something beautiful and complete – words which stir an emotion or inspire an idea. His speech is his attempt to create, in words, an image similar that which so draws his poetic soul. Plato’s craftsmanship here on behalf of both Aristophanes and Agathon is phenomenal – a reflection of what must have been a legitimate respect for both men and their work. Thus, while the previous interpretation is reasonable on its own, a greater

¹³⁸ *Symposium* 189d

¹³⁹ *Symposium* 193d

¹⁴⁰ *Symposium* 195e

¹⁴¹ *Symposium* 196a. Also, *Dover*, p. 126: “Since the colour and texture of human skin is much more like flower-petals in youth than in later years, and the smell of flowers... is sexually stimulating, the idea that flowers are the preferred abode of Eros is long-standing in Greek literature... and in vase-painting he is sometimes shown holding a flower or associated with floral patterns.”

justice seems to be done to both of the poets through this reading.

198a-199c: Socrates and Eryximachus

Returning to the narrative, Socrates is the first to find words after Agathon's awe-inspiring conclusion. He addresses Eryximachus and asks if he had spoken "prophetically when [he] said that Agathon would put on an amazing show and leave [him] at a loss for words."¹⁴² Eryximachus is quick to agree that Agathon delivered a most "remarkable speech," but he also finds it hard to believe that Socrates could ever truly be struck silent. Socrates responds to this by comparing Agathon to the famous rhetorician Gorgias and to Homer's Gorgon, saying that he "was afraid that just as Agathon was about to conclude his speech, he would hold up that snakey Gorgian head and turn me to mute stone."¹⁴³ Socrates seems to pay due respect to the tragic poet's command of language: he had coaxed out a superior performance from Agathon, who had offered the "best [he] could do." From here, however, Socrates makes a sharp turn.

"It was then that I realize what a fool I'd been to join your celebration of Love, telling you how expert I was in all that concerns Love when really I had no idea how to deliver this kind of eulogy. I was naïve to suppose that the way to compose a good speech was merely to tell the truth, selecting the most impressive facts

and then presenting them in the best possible light."¹⁴⁴

With this Socrates begins a sizeable monologue which must have struck everyone else as quite out of step with the rest of the night's proceedings. Still, we know that the narrative has introduced almost every speech in some unique and significant way – how will his words affect the speech to come?

To begin with, we notice something a bit weird about how Socrates defines "telling the truth": collecting the "most impressive facts," and then delivering them in the best way possible. It nearly goes without saying, but there are definitely reasons why that is not the oath everyone swears by when taking the stand at court.¹⁴⁵ Such a setting asks us to tell "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." Socrates seems to agree to the first, neglect the second, and, depending on what he considers the "best possible light," leaves the third up in the air. We might call this "cherry-picking" evidence, and it seems to suggest that Socrates has a specific set of "truths" he wishes to discuss – a fact that must be kept in mind from this point on. Still, it could very well be said that Socrates is only submitting, in part, to what the other speakers have already been doing. After all, these are speeches of praise; to speak harshly of one's topic would be quite an inappropriate display.

Yet Socrates is not quite finished. He also draws attention to the "outlandish attributes" and "preposterous qualities" as-

¹⁴² *Symposium* 198a

¹⁴³ *Symposium* 198b-c. Agathon was a student of the sophist and rhetorician Gorgias. We see the Medusa-like effect that Agathon has on the symposium; this is the strength of the poetic craft.

¹⁴⁴ *Symposium* 198c-d

¹⁴⁵ *Newell*, p. 83. "Diotima's majestic rhetoric directs us toward the fulfillments that summon eros forth in its most expectant, optimistic manifestation, and only implicitly toward the anger, jealousy, and competitiveness that spring into consciousness when erotic longings are frustrated. Diotima presents eros as a steady, seamless ascent from lower to higher, from particular to more general pleasures."

cribed to Love by the former speakers. This targets the poets most directly – their use of imagery and rhetorical flourishes in speech makes them susceptible to such charges. Socrates, however, is unsympathetic. In describing the preposterous qualities, he explicitly references Agathon’s speech, which told listeners how Love “looks like this, [and] that he gives us that.” He believes that such a speech only attempts to “dazzle the ignorant” rather than convince those who already have some larger idea of the truth in mind. Socrates tells the assembly that, if such a speech is expected of him, he will have to recant on his former agreement – it is impossible for him to provide. He is, however, willing to provide another speech: “a true one about Love, where the words and phrases just tumble out in any old scattered way.”¹⁴⁶ Again, we are mindful of what Socrates means by “true.” Whether Socrates plans to speak as a poet, or in some other fashion altogether, is uncertain at this point.

Still, if one thing does become certain, it is that he will begin as a philosopher. Socrates asks Phaedrus whether he might ask Agathon a “question or two” before beginning. He asks this delicately, claiming that he will be “ready to begin his speech” after only a few points are agreed upon. Phaedrus, despite having cut Socrates off earlier in the evening, grants the request, and Socrates engages the young tragedian. Again, that the speech of Socrates is prefaced by a dialogue with Agathon should not surprise us – this was his original purpose for attending the symposium.

199c-201c: Socrates and Agathon

For the first real time in the *Symposium*, we see the emergence of a traditional, “Socratic dialogue” format. Much like the hiccups prefaced Aristophanes and a short dialogue set the tone for Agathon, now an extended dialogue will introduce the speech of Socrates the philosopher. That speech, interestingly enough, will itself take the form of a dialogue – with Socrates eventually taking the place of Agathon.

We begin with a simple enough point: Socrates agrees that any discussion should begin with a consideration of Love’s nature, and he asks whether it is within the nature of Love “to be relative or to stand in relation to something.”¹⁴⁷ He uses examples of family members to illustrate the point: one is always a “father of,” and “mother of,” or a “brother of” something else. Agathon agrees (impatiently) that Love is always relative to the thing which is loved – although Socrates asks that he “keep what it is that Love happens to love a secret for now.”¹⁴⁸ He agrees also that love must also be for something which is desired, and something which is desired will always be something which is not completely within one’s possession. This makes sense as well – why desire something which is completely within your grasp?

Using these three points, however, Socrates begins to unravel the poet’s presentation. As a paraphrase, he asks whether Agathon said in his speech that “all things have been organized through the god’s love of beauty, for Love shuns all ugliness.”¹⁴⁹ Agathon agrees to this, but agreement implies that “Love must be in love with beauty.” Following the argument, this would

¹⁴⁶ *Symposium* 199b

¹⁴⁷ *Symposium* 199d

¹⁴⁸ *Symposium* 200a

¹⁴⁹ *Symposium* 201a

suggest the Love, as a god, has a desire for beauty, and a desire is always of a thing which is lacking. The conclusion of this train of thought is that Love, in some form or another, lacks beauty. Indeed, for Agathon, who believes that “what is good must also be beautiful” (201c), this amounts to a lack of goodness as well. This is quite a problem: Agathon based his speech upon Love being the greatest guarantor of goodness and beauty that man could hope for. Through this argument, however, Agathon is left without solid footing. Instead of resisting, he gives, tells Socrates that his “head is spinning” and that he “cannot refute [Socrates] any longer.”¹⁵⁰

201d: Agathon Reconsidered

These questions are very important to the narrative: after all, these are our two “main characters” in action. We have Agathon, the tragic poet and host of the night’s symposium, and Socrates, the philosopher who captivates our narrator and vies for the poet’s attention. Before moving on to this final speech on Love, some reflection is necessary on what has been said and if it should affect how we consider Agathon’s speech. Remember: Agathon offered a challenge to Socrates back at 175e – a competition on the “stage of wisdom.” If we are to sort out this contest and crown a winner, then this brief dialogue must be sorted out.

If one were to summarize the Socratic interrogation of Agathon, it would be most accurately described with the word “desire.” Yet throughout everything that Agathon presented in his speech, he never once spoke of Love as being a god who sought to possess anything at all – indeed, if we are to be precise readers, we should note

that Agathon never once makes the claim that Love is in “love with beauty.” So why should he agree to this? The closest he comes to such a claim is his use of the phrase “like likes like” – a reference to how Love prefers to settle in places of beauty. Yet to compare this to the definition of desire which Socrates gives – that is, a wish to possess something which one does not currently possess – seems a tad farfetched. Indeed, Agathon is very careful to separate the god of Love from the actual love of beauty: his entire paragraph from 196e-197b¹⁵¹ is dedicated to making the distinction. Here it is made clear: the love of beauty is the wisdom which Love gives as a gift to gods and men.

So where does this problem come from? It seems like Agathon agrees to something which he should not have: that Love is bound to the same love of beauty which he had previously only inspired within the rest of the gods. This is a question which Agathon is being forced to confront: to what extent does Love’s nature conform to the erotic desire with which he is associated? If Love does not love beauty, what does it love – or does it love at all? This gets into some murky waters as it makes Agathon sort out the issue of talking about the god of Love and the concept of love. This is intrinsic – though not *necessarily* problematic – for the inspired poetic disposition which is so drawn to image and sensation.

Certainly, we have taken Agathon’s speech under the strongest and most persuasive light. To handily dismiss the man who won the Athenian drama festival and caught the attention of a man like Socrates would be hasty analysis. It seems as though he has crafted a view of Love which is quite consistent with itself and powerful in its message. Having done this, it should be shocking that he is undone in such a short

¹⁵⁰ *Symposium* 201c

¹⁵¹ Paragraph discussing *Eros's* gifts to man and the gods.

period of time. This is, of course, exactly what Socrates is going for. He wants to grab the poet by the philosophical collar and shake an admission out of him. While he claimed that Agathon was playing the role of the Gorgon, we see how quickly the roles have been switched – it is now the poet who is struck speechless by the philosopher’s questioning.

Now why is this? We know early on that Agathon does not particularly enjoy being questioned: he gives an “impatient nod” at 199d, suggesting he isn’t wholeheartedly invested in this “Socratic” conversation. It is a rather “un-poetic” approach to a thing which Agathon considers to be wholly poetic: Love infuses all things.¹⁵² Yet should a mild case of impatience be enough to collapse one’s entire poetic worldview? This is improbable at best: something more is at work in the conversation. Agathon holds his view of Love dearly; his speech suggests Love to be the essential element of man’s departure from savagery – he would not see it undone simply to avoid a conversation.

We might consider another point: Socrates is careful to tell Agathon, at 200a, to “keep whatever it is that Love happens to love a secret for now.” This is the sticking point upon which Socrates will turn Agathon’s speech over later on, but it is tempting to speculate why exactly this could not be raised immediately. Is it a possibility that Agathon, given a chance to answer the object of Love’s love for himself, would have produced something different than that which he agreed to with Socrates?

This is a difficult question to answer, but tentatively, we ought to conclude that he would not. Agathon agrees that Love is a “desire,” a “lacking,” and his fate seems sealed from that point – truly, he may not

even know how to respond to such a question. So why does Socrates refrain? Certainly, it tells us something that we ought to already know: Socrates did not go out of his way to attend the symposium just so that he could prove Agathon wrong.

In context, we know of several instances from which Socrates may have formed his opinion of Agathon. He attended the dramatic festival,¹⁵³ held a brief conversation about the mob and the clever man,¹⁵⁴ and listened to the poet’s speech about Eros.¹⁵⁵ All of this has come together within the mind of Socrates; and through it all, he has found Agathon to possess something worth going after. In a sense, the poet continues to “pass the test.”

So instead of trying to win an argument, he actually seems to be concerned with arriving at a certain conclusion with the tragedian. It might be worth remembering the thought experiment back at 174d that considered why Socrates decided to step out on the neighbor’s porch – was he considering the task that was ahead of him? If so, perhaps he already has some mind for what it is he wants to know from Agathon; again, if this is the case, we can only read the Socratic questioning as a method which is meant to bring out something within the tragedian. We know that two points are raised after Socrates asks Agathon to keep the object of Love’s love to himself: firstly, that which is loved is desired, secondly, that which is desired is not possessed. These are not irrelevant things. Agathon’s speech focused on using the beautiful as a means to escape or improve upon what he called the “tyranny of Necessity”¹⁵⁶ – or what Aristophanes might flatly call “reality.” This might not be just a comedic critique, however;

¹⁵² Decidedly different sentiment from Eryximachus’s “omnipresent” *eros*.

¹⁵³ *Symposium* 194c

¹⁵⁴ *Symposium* 194a-c

¹⁵⁵ *Symposium* 194e-198a

¹⁵⁶ *Symposium* 197b

things get a bit more difficult when we realize that Socrates actually shares this view of the world. Evidence can be found in the fact that Socrates is bringing Agathon to see that Love – while it participates in the beautiful – cannot actually *be* the Beautiful. Love is an inward desire, a lacking, and a want: those who are without desire do not love. We remember Aristophanes's spherical men: they were ambitious beings, not lovers. Yet what the tragedian is suggesting by his emulation of Love, both physically and in his speech, is that he somehow feels that Love actually *is* the beautiful; and, being beautiful, is still somehow continues to both love and be Love. It might be a bit much to say Agathon believes that he can become Beauty himself, but he certainly suggests that for the god. What it comes to, and what Socrates is aiming at, is this: Love, as the tragedian presents it, is in love with Love. Yet if this is so, and we know that one loves what they lack, then Love must indeed lack itself. This is nonsensical: Love, ultimately, must love something else.

This idea that “Love loves love” is perhaps the most important point about Agathon – it must be understood before we can understand Socrates and Aristophanes. Why might the tragedian make this mistake? It has to do with the “aspirational” quality of love which so often characterizes tragedy. Love is the mighty inspiration – in the same vein as Phaedrus, oddly – which brings men into their greatest effort; it gives purpose. We reflect on how Agathon described the gods becoming lovers and employing themselves in various crafts or virtues¹⁵⁷, and we also see how he extends this to human beings.¹⁵⁸ The greatness of tragedy’s inspiration is in the ability to give itself *almost*

entirely over to the power of lovers – having them fall short due to something which we have come to call a “tragic flaw.” Does it seem so surprising, then, that a soul which is so intimate with Love and its effects would begin to see it as the highest thing? Perhaps men love imperfectly, and we know that they do, but that there may be the man who loves to perfection – he who overcomes the tragedy of reality – who could resist the thought? It is the essence of tragedy that this tantalizing possibility be hung before men; perhaps Agathon even hung it before himself. Yet, in the search for perfect Love – so free from the world’s tyrannical necessity – our tragedian may have lost his own footing. Aristophanes may not have looked up, but Agathon has forgotten to look down.

It ought to be understood why Agathon is impatient with this questioning. Can one not feel the tyrannical necessity is every question Socrates poses? He speaks of our strength, health and wealth – all things which the world will slowly take from us. Again, we will learn later of the Socratic tendency to speak of “pack-asses and blacksmiths and cobblers and tanners” (221e) – hardly the things with which our poet concerns himself. After all, Agathon has shown us the tragic hero – he who can be soft and yet strong, inspiring all things with a beauty undiminished by age. Now this hero must answer to petty concerns over decaying health? Yet what seemed a mere inconvenience is exposed as a significant error; one which, as we are soon going to find out, Socrates is rather familiar with himself.

¹⁵⁷ There is actually a good deal of Eryximachus here. The key difference is that the physician chose his craft and pursued it in his own way; Agathon wants to be possessed by the deity.

¹⁵⁸ *Symposium* 197d-e

201: Preface to Socrates and Diotima

What follows is a wide-ranging, lengthy, often digressive speech which addresses a dizzying number of topics. It is a remarkable fact that Socrates, faced with such a diverse group of lovers, attempts to craft a speech which would be best described with the single word “comprehensive.” The result is understandably difficult to follow: while consistent in its topic of *eros*, the *Symposium* has given us a cast of lovers who are anything but. Indeed, they have shown us five decidedly different ways of looking at love, and each one of them seems to have made sensible points of their own – even if, like the poets, they sometimes stand in blatant contradiction with one another.

Still, it quickly becomes clear that Socrates feels himself up for the task. For instance, we know that Socrates continues the thread of his conversation with Agathon from 202a to 204e. Similarly, from 205a to 206b, he addresses himself to the arguments of Aristophanes – to say nothing of the passages devoted to Eryximachus (203a) and Phaedrus (208c-d). As if all of this were not enough, we must remember that Socrates has also made a claim of wisdom here; love is the “only subject [he’s] ever claimed to understand.”¹⁵⁹ Thus, in addition to answering the claims of others, we’re also expecting a unique argument all his own. So while all of this is impressive to take on, it necessarily becomes a bit messy for readers – perhaps even more so for the listeners. It is

¹⁵⁹ *Symposium 177e*. This calls our minds to the *Apology* at 21d, where Socrates claims that “I, just as I do not know, do not even suppose that I do. I am likely to be a little bit wiser than he in this very thing: that whatever I do not know, I do not even suppose I know.” Indeed, Socrates rarely claims a position of knowledge in any conversation – his claim here is thus important.

certainly an easy speech to get lost in; to “lose sight of the forest for the trees.” As readers, we find ourselves in the position of trying to make note of each tree while keeping the forest in mind; a task which is rarely simple in execution. Yet it is precisely this position which Socrates, at once noting the “trees” of former arguments and keeping the “forest” of Agathon’s education in sight, has taken upon himself. If this is the situation, then, our thought must follow it in a similar fashion: should he call upon a former argument with some criticism, then the point will have to be revisited. Should he make some point which applies to Agathon, it ought to be considered in light of the larger end Socrates is pursuing with the tragedian. Finally, if Socrates is presenting his own wisdom on the topic of *eros*, that must be held up against all other “wisdom” which has been presented thus far. While experience will certainly be the best teacher, it suffices to say that our approach will not be unlike that of Apollodorus’s: “tireless companions” of the speech, as presented.

201e-203b: Socrates and Diotima Part 1 – Correct Opinion and *Eros* as a Great Spirit¹⁶⁰

After Socrates “lets Agathon go,” he changes direction and introduces the incred-

¹⁶⁰ *Newell*, p. 97: “By helping the young to see how their need for knowledge emerges from their need to understand their own desires and ambitions, Socrates fulfills the role of demonic eros in Diotima’s Ladder, linking man with the gods.” We are still a ways off on this, but the same principle that guided our understanding of Agathon should guide that of Socrates: if they see their god *Eros* in a way similar to themselves, it ought to be assumed that they modeled themselves after it – not vice versa.

ibly interesting character of Diotima,¹⁶¹ “a priestess from Mantinea” who “was famous for her expertise in all areas of Love.”¹⁶² This marks the first, and last, introduction of any prominent female figure into the dialogue. This becomes significant later on, but for now, we are simply told that she “taught [Socrates] all [he] knows about Love.”¹⁶³ Throughout the entire speech that Socrates is about to give – again, the longest speech in the *Symposium* by far – Diotima will play the primary role as speaker. Indeed, a majority of the passages feature Diotima more or less speaking by herself; Socrates will offer a minor contribution, but rarely anything of significance.

Picking up from where he and Agathon left off (Love lacks beauty/goodness), the first question asks whether the implication is that Love is therefore “ugly and bad.”¹⁶⁴ Diotima reacts strongly, telling Socrates (now as a “young boy” [201d]) that he should “bite his tongue.” She explains this as an amateur conclusion to make. After all, if one were to come across a beautiful woman somewhere in the world, it would hardly make sense to say that all other women lacked beauty entirely. Again, if she was beautiful, but not the *most* beautiful, could we say that she is therefore not beautiful after all? Even crafting the thought gives one a sense of its ridiculousness.

Diotima illustrates the point by using the “extremes of wisdom and ignorance.”¹⁶⁵ She asks whether or not Socrates has “considered that there might be something in between” these two things. When he is unable to provide her with any answer, she tells him

that we might give out the example of “correct opinion.”¹⁶⁶ This is when someone holds a particular opinion that seems right but fails to display an actual knowledge of the subject; in other words, they are unable to justify their opinion.¹⁶⁷ As Diotima explains, this does not qualify as a wisdom since “you must be able to explain anything that you truly know and understand”¹⁶⁸ – as Agathon just discovered. At the same time, one who is completely ignorant will have “nothing to do with the truth” at all; the result being that even correct opinion will not come about. So the individual holding this opinion cannot be classified as either entirely ignorant or completely wise – rather, he is something in between. Extending this out to the conversation about Love and beauty, Diotima takes the assertion that Love is “ugly and bad” and chastises Socrates for immaturity. “The truth,” she tells him, “is [that] he’s somewhere in between those two extremes.”¹⁶⁹

This example, while applicable to the argument about Love as a god, clarifies the principle mentioned earlier about how we must approach the speech that Socrates gives. In the sense that Socrates is grappling with all of the previous speakers, he does so by identifying the “correct opinion” in their speeches and elaborating.

Returning to the conversation, Socrates is willing to admit that Love possesses something between beauty and ugliness; he still asserts, however, “everyone agrees that [Love’s] a most magnificent god.”¹⁷⁰ Diotima responds to this with a sort of disbelief, asking “how could the very people who deny he’s a god at all say that

¹⁶¹ *Dover*, p. 137: “‘Diotima’ could be analysed as ‘honoured by Zeus’s... or as ‘honouring Zeus.’”

In this sense, Diotima is the first character to take on the “great spirit” definition of *Eros*: she both receives and gives to the gods.

¹⁶² *Symposium* 201d

¹⁶³ *Ibid*

¹⁶⁴ *Symposium* 201e

¹⁶⁵ *Symposium* 201e

¹⁶⁶ *Symposium* 202a

¹⁶⁷ Interestingly, one could label the Aristophanean “spherical man,” Agathon’s delicate and forever-young *Eros*, and Socrates’s single, infinite vision as all forms of some “correct opinion.”

¹⁶⁸ *Symposium* 202a

¹⁶⁹ *Symposium* 202b

¹⁷⁰ *Symposium* 202b

he's a 'magnificent' one" (202c)? The young Socrates is understandably struck by this remark, and his natural reaction is to accuse her of blasphemy. At the same time, this is a natural sort of conclusion to come to. As Diotima elaborates, a god is necessarily beautiful and happy, for they "possess good and beautiful things."¹⁷¹ If this is true, then Socrates would only need to consider the earlier conversation to see that this was exactly what they had decided Love lacked. This should be obvious enough: since Love does not possess the various qualities of a god, it would be wrong to still consider it as such.

Naturally, Socrates asks if this makes Love a mortal; however, this question is again a product of the preference for extremes that he displayed earlier. Again, if something is not entirely beautiful, that does not mean that it is ugly. Interestingly, Diotima uses the same argument to assert that there is even a middle ground between gods and men. This is somewhat less intuitive than the other examples. A woman who is neither ugly nor beautiful, in the most extreme sense of each, might be called "attractive" or "pretty." Something similar could be said for wisdom and ignorance. Yet when we try to talk about what it is that exists between men and the gods, our intuition begins to fail us. When Diotima tells us that Love is "somewhere in between the two [god and mortal], just as we were saying earlier," Socrates responds with an incomplete thought: "Then he is..."¹⁷² This is a sympathetic moment: who would know how to respond?

Diotima, fortunately, is willing to elaborate. She tells Socrates that Love is a "great spirit... a spirit of the threshold, one of those who shuttle between men and

gods."¹⁷³ These are, in other words, the spirits which enable mortals to have any association whatsoever with the gods. This is a useful thing, since, as she also points out, "there is normally little hope of even the slightest association between gods and mortals."¹⁷⁴ While this draws a natural connection to the realm of prophecy – naturally well understood by a talented prophetess like Diotima – she also goes on to say that these spirits "fill up the space between heaven and earth and help bind the whole universe together."¹⁷⁵ This comment should bring us back to the words of Eryximachus, who told the symposium that "this god's [Love's] influence permeates all matter, human and divine."¹⁷⁶ Again, at 188d, he tells us that it would not be too much to call Love's power an "omnipresent" one. We see a bit of an agreement here between the two: Love, regardless of what it actually happens to be, affects nearly everything. Still, Eryximachus extended this omnipresence into even the world of "animal and vegetable" – a consideration which Diotima does not address.

Certainly, this section does seem to dedicate itself to the case of Eryximachus, even as it is part of a larger address to Agathon. We have the use of opposing extremes, a middle ground, "omnipresence" – even the understanding of Love as a sort of "in-between" force is very Eryximachean: the physician would utilize *techné* and manipulate Love to achieve harmony. It can be seen, by the strength and number of these similarities, that Eryximachus was certainly on to something here. Still, if we are adhering to the aforementioned principle of "correct opinion analysis," then we know that his speech must have contained some flaws.

¹⁷¹ *Symposium* 202c

¹⁷² *Symposium* 202e

¹⁷³ *Ibid*

¹⁷⁴ *Symposium* 203a

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid*

¹⁷⁶ *Symposium* 186b

While he arrived at several convincing conclusions, his explanation and reasoning may be where we can find the difficulties.

To begin with, it ought to be noted that a similarity does not mean that the two speakers are in complete agreement. When speaking of “opposing extremes,” Diotima talked about wisdom and ignorance, while Eryximachus spoke of clear and overcast skies. While the former’s middle ground was correct opinion – a foundation of philosophical inquiry and the Socratic lifestyle – Eryximachus’s could be illustrated by “partly cloudy.”¹⁷⁷ Again, we could also return to the extension of Love’s “omnipresence” to plant and animal life – something which Diotima does not seem willing to admit. Finally, there is a distinct difference between accepting the aid of Love as a messenger to and from the gods and trying to subject Love violently to the measured conclusions of a physician’s reason and Justice. While the two use very similar terms, it should also be evident that they are remarkably different.¹⁷⁸

Which of them, then, is closer to wisdom? The immediate problem which presents itself with Eryximachus is its overwhelming pettiness. While it should be granted to him that the art of prophesy and music – though he has difficulty with the

¹⁷⁷ This is a bit unfair to Eryximachus, but not entirely so. It is meant to show the level of pettiness that can be found in his love; Diotima focuses solely on achievements of the human mind and soul.

¹⁷⁸ *Dover*, p. 7. As a possible point of comparison, *Dover* writes on Anaxagoras: [Plato] portrays Socrates as dissatisfied with Anaxagoras’s explanation of the working of the physical universe because Anaxagoras failed to show why it is *best* that things should work as they do – in other words, because Anaxagoras seemed to him to deal with causation and explanation at a trivial mechanistic level and not to answer the questions which really matter.” Eryximachus seems to understand something about why the natural world is insufficient, Socrates would claim that he has not found the *best* way of dealing with that fact.

latter – were not entirely forgotten in his speech, they were mentioned right alongside things like agriculture. Indeed, even the vital art of botany would thus become a lover’s enterprise. It should be no wonder Diotima tells Socrates that “if anyone acquires any real experience in this area [prophecy], he tends to develop a very spiritual disposition, while skill in nearly all of the other professions renders a man coarse and materialistic.”¹⁷⁹ Could this be to anyone else but the physician? While it is true that there seems to be an overriding sense of love within Eryximachus – he finds “harmony” to be beautiful and thus desires it – his skill and his profession have turned him off of its recognition. He has fallen victim to something like a “professional sobriety,” and he is unable to respect the actual power of something like love.

203b-207a: Socrates and Diotima Part 2 – The Good, the God, and Birth in Beauty

It seems, then, like Diotima has diagnosed him correctly. Yet having established just what sort of role this “great spirit” plays, it remains to be seen what the spirit is actually like. At the request of Socrates, Diotima begins the story of Love’s birth. Oddly enough, Love was conceived in a setting similar to the one being discussed in the *Symposium* – a drinking party at Zeus’s mansion celebrating a truly beautiful event: the birth of Aphrodite. Alas, lacking an Eryximachus, the handsome god Where-withal found himself intoxicated from nectar and fell asleep in Zeus’s “extensive” gardens. There, he was discovered by the goddess Want who, “inspired by her lack of

¹⁷⁹ *Symposium* 203a

resources,” laid with Wherewithal and conceived of Love.

Here we are given yet another origin story of Love.¹⁸⁰ Phaedrus gave us the Love who was “oldest” – or very nearly so – among the gods, whereas Agathon gave us the god who usurped Necessity. Even Aristophanes seems to imply that Love’s birth has some relationship to the man’s being split from his other half. Socrates presents another view here through Diotima: Love’s origin coincides with the birth of the Beautiful. Indeed, the entire scene is remarkably symbolic: on the celebration of Beauty’s birth, “resourcefulness” (Wherewithal) loses itself in intoxication and is overcome by Want, and the two together give birth to Love. Anyone who has had the fortune of beholding someone or something truly beautiful will understand what is being implied here. It is the experience of standing before a Beauty which is beyond and above your usual resource; the singular greatness of the beautiful thing is enough to intoxicate you. Put simply, you must have it. This sudden awareness of a desire – in the Socratic sense of implying a lack – comes together with the introduction of the goddess Want. Thus we see how Diotima’s phrase, “inspired by her lack of resources,” is so indicative of the human experience of loving. It is this awareness of a wanting which inspires one to *eros*. Clearly, this is a poetic description in the vein of Aristophanes and Agathon: both introduce Love, symbolically, as a means to amend some defective condition.

With the birth and parents of Love explained, Diotima continues to describe what Love is like as a divine. The prophetess provides a very complete description –

rivaling even Agathon’s. She notes that the god is actually not at all “delicate or handsome. On the contrary, he is a vagrant with tough, parched skin.”¹⁸¹ She describes him as “homeless,” “always in need,” “clever and ingenious,” “daring,” and an impressive hunter, magician, and herbalist. Further, he does not live the life of either a mortal or immortal, but of some mix of the two: “on some days he blooms like a plant and is in full flower, only to wilt and die that very evening. But straightaway he revives, thanks to his father’s influence.”¹⁸² Finally, he does not possess a supreme intellect – “divine omniscience” – but Diotima also notes that he is far from ignorant.

All considered, this is no small description to confront. Perhaps in harshest contrast to Agathon, Socrates has no problem with Diotima’s description of Love as a generally unattractive divine. While Agathon took a great deal of trouble to make Love into the most thoroughly handsome and youthful of all gods, Diotima dismisses that idea immediately. Indeed, this is perhaps the first mention of Love as a somewhat ugly affair.¹⁸³ All of the other descriptions follow from this: he is homeless, clever, and resourceful; he is good with words, magic, medicine, and hunting.¹⁸⁴ In a sense, he is the ideal adventurer. Of course, this makes sense to us when we consider the Socratic origin of Love: it is born out of the knowledge of one’s lacking the truly beautiful – a fact that leaves you intoxicated and (quite literally) *overcome* by wanting. If this is true, the soul really does prepare itself for a battle. A man who believes he has met

¹⁸⁰ Again, an important point: Socrates engages in the origin and character of gods. Aristophanes does the same for man. Socrates is actually quite silent on man’s origins throughout the dialogue.

¹⁸¹ *Symposium* 203d

¹⁸² *Symposium* 203e

¹⁸³ I say “somewhat” because it is clear that the ugliness of *eros* is not legitimately explored until Alcibiades (215d-216c).

¹⁸⁴ *Memorabilia* 3.11.16-17 Socrates discusses his “studying potions... and spells,” as well as “magic wheels.”

the most beautiful woman in the world will fight for her as if it truly were a war being waged. In another sense, we might think of musicians who spend many hours in practice, or perhaps writers who will revise a single paragraph countless times until it achieves some beautiful effect. In every case, there is a certain lacking or need which the individual sets out to fill for himself, and the process is rarely simple.

Yet we are not speaking here of writing or music; Diotima makes it clear that “Love loves wisdom because wisdom and knowledge are the most beautiful things we know of, and Love is always drawn to beauty.”¹⁸⁵ This draws the line quite clearly between the tragedian’s Love: living “only and always among flowers”¹⁸⁶; and the Love of Diotima: “homeless,¹⁸⁷ sleeping under a roof of sky or in the doorways of strangers.”¹⁸⁸ Diotima clarifies this and offers an explanation which we should already understand quite well: “you thought that Love always played the role of the beloved, the object of love, rather than the pursuing lover. That’s why he struck you as necessarily quite handsome.”¹⁸⁹ This returns to the earlier commentary on Agathon’s condition as a tragedian: his idea of Love is an embodiment – literally “putting into a body” – of the great image that he, as a talented poet, aspires to.

With the image of Love as a hardy adventurer, Socrates asks the next logical question: what does such a great spirit do for

us? “That’s your next lesson,” Diotima says, and she asks Socrates what exactly a lover desires “when a lover desires *beautiful* [emphasis added] things.”¹⁹⁰ He gives the obvious answer: the lover wants to have these things to himself.¹⁹¹ Taking the beautiful woman mentioned earlier as an example, would it not be odd for one to love her for the sake of someone else possessing her? Yet this does not satisfy Diotima. She refines her question by asking what exactly it is that one will *gain* (“what exactly will the lover get”) by possessing the beautiful thing he loves. Socrates actually finds himself in a difficult place here; his mind cannot come up with any answer. This should be a bit striking: if we return to the example of the beautiful woman mentioned earlier, most men would say that possessing her would lead to great happiness.

At the same time, that example is a bit misleading. A beautiful woman does not make us happy as a result of “possessing a beauty”; in fact, she makes us happy because we generally consider beauty to be

¹⁹⁰ *Symposium* 204d.

¹⁹¹ To begin a later conversation, we could consider this idea of possession in light of someone like Stendhal. In his essays *On Love* (hereafter ‘*Stendhal*’), Stendhal offers a redefinition of Beauty via “crystallization,” which he says is “something like this: whenever all is not well between you and your beloved, you crystallize out an *imaginary solution* [sic]. Only through imagination can you be sure that your beloved is perfect in any given way” (p. 51). Thus, Stendhal has redefined Beauty as something thoroughly dependent on the individual and his imagination – something Aristophanes might not disagree with. Further, he echoes what is likely another Aristophanean sentiment, that “Beauty is only the promise of happiness,” and that “thus *ugliness* [sic] even begins to be loved and given preference, because in this case it has become beauty” (p. 66). We will pick this up again on the way to the Final Scene, but it is important to start thinking about now: Socrates will suggest that Beauty is (perhaps) never possessed, but experienced; Stendhal, and probably Aristophanes, disagree.

¹⁸⁵ *Symposium* 204b

¹⁸⁶ *Symposium* 196b

¹⁸⁷ *Benardete*, p. 193. “Rather, Diotima implies, Eros is completely at home in his homelessness. He is ever at home with neediness. He is indifferent to comfort. Eros, then, *never mistakes the local for the universal* [emphasis added]. Love of country is not part of his makeup.” This idea of homelessness is an important one for the character of Socratic *eros*: it is part of a self-sufficiency that is vital for the dialogue.

¹⁸⁸ *Symposium* 203d

¹⁸⁹ *Symposium* 204c

an aspect of a “good” woman – she is *principally* “good,” not “beautiful.” This is not exactly obvious, but another example may help clarify the point: in Agathon’s speech, we remember that the “finale” came about when he felt himself in “the presence of the Muse.” This is not exactly “possessing”; it is more a form of admiration – an offering. What would Agathon receive if he were in possession of this Muse? Or, in another way, of Love himself? While one could return to the “happiness” answer, it becomes less convincing as we increase the power of the beauty in question. To behold this Muse that Agathon speaks of – to behold Love as he describes it – would be quite a thing to experience. The beauty of these things extends beyond a simple utility: it’s actually a bit frightening. This is why, when it comes to the most beautiful things, we do not “possess” them; we are possessed *by* them. We see now why a man will not approach riches in the same way that he approaches Beauty: the first is merely possessed, the latter strikes him dumb.

So now Socrates, a young boy, is asked what would come from possessing these awesome things. And indeed, just as Agathon would likely have no answer for Socrates, he is unable to make a sensible reply. It is important to remember that this entire speech began as a continuation of the conversation that he and Agathon were having; the young Socrates is, presumably, speaking from a disposition not unlike that of the tragedian’s. In other words, we are being shown something like a philosophical turning point; the reason why Socrates became Socrates instead of Agathon. As the discussion continues, then, it is important to note these differences and consider how they may affect both the young Socrates and, possibly, the tragedian.

So since Socrates has no ready answer, Diotima adjusts the question by replacing the “beautiful” with the “good.”

This strikes Socrates as an easier question, and he provides the answer given above: once the lover possesses good things, “he’ll be happy.”¹⁹² Of course, this gives rise to another problem: it seems like everyone wants to be happy; in this case, to “possess good things.” Yet instead of saying that everyone is a lover, “we say that only certain people are in love, while most others are not.”¹⁹³ This strikes us as an odd condition of things: convention tells us that Love ought to apply primarily to the act of sex and sexual intimacy, while it actually seems to have a much larger range.

Before moving on, it should be abundantly clear that Socrates is addressing Aristophanes at this point. Our first indication, at 204e, came from the switching of “beautiful” for “good.” The speech of Agathon, which focused itself on the beautiful and how it inspires us, avoiding speaking at all about the “good.” Aristophanes, on the other hand, neglected any commentary on the “beautiful” and talked about how human beings can be “happy.” This makes sense for reasons already mentioned: for the former, the beautiful is the good; for the latter, the “good” is the “beautiful.”¹⁹⁴ Secondly, we see Diotima invoking convention (“always tend to” at 205b) in her description of love

¹⁹² *Symposium* 204e.

¹⁹³ *Symposium* 205a

¹⁹⁴ Note the quotations – Aristophanes would likely not accept Good and Beauty in the way that Agathon or Socrates go about using it. Consider again Stendhal, who writes that Beauty is merely “a new potentiality for pleasure” (*Stendhal*, p. 59).

Again, he suggests that the man in love (much like the Aristophanean “other half”) will pay little or no attention to this thing Socrates might call the objectively Beautiful. “You see,” Stendhal explains, “to what extent *beauty* [sic] is necessary is love is to be born. Ugliness must not present an obstacle. The lover will soon come to see beauty in his mistress whatever she looks like, without giving a thought to *real beauty* [sic]” (*Stendhal*, p. 58). The Aristophanic lover does not explain his love, he simply falls into it.

as an exclusively sexual passion. Aristophanes's speech, while nobler than simply sex, certainly gave a great deal to credit to the act; indeed, the symbolism of being attached at "head and hip" would not be lost on even a surface reading.

Thus, with Aristophanes in view, Socrates continues on. Diotima tells him to consider Love as something similar to the word "Art." While artists are involved in drawing, building, music, theater, ceramics, and countless other fields, Diotima remarks that the normal usage of "artist" in Athenian society was as a reference to painters. While the word "ought really to apply to any creative person,"¹⁹⁵ it was narrowed into one meaning. This example does not really resonate in the modern world – defining someone as an "artist" will draw the question "what does he/she do?" – but the analogy to love certainly does. If one were to declare that they were "in love," the natural question would be some variation of "with who?" It is not a part of the language or convention to understand love as anything other than the relationship with another man or woman – we have a decidedly narrow meaning attached to the word. Diotima goes so far as to call it an "impoverishing."

If this were not explicit enough, we are treated to a small digression about the "dead wrong" (for Diotima) idea of finding one's "other half." This seems to come without any real prompting on the part of Socrates, and it ought to strike the reader as an oddly specific attack on a previous speech – "veiled" would be giving too much credit. Diotima states that "true love," even if it were searching for some half or some whole, would never be able to settle upon a thing unless it were deemed to be "good for its own sake."¹⁹⁶ Her proof for this statement

comes,¹⁹⁷ firstly, from the earlier idea that Love would hardly desire something which is not good in itself; Diotima's *Eros*, after all, is a pursuer of the most beautiful thing of all: wisdom. Her second proof is that "most people are ready to amputate their arms and legs if they are informed that these parts are somehow bad or diseased."¹⁹⁸ The natural assumption here seems to be thus: if someone would literally cut off a thing from themselves which possessed some badness, certainly they could not love an "other half" which was not perfectly good within itself.

So not only is our comedian narrow-minded and too focused on sex, but it turns out that he did not get that right, either. One gets a sense in reading this argument just how much Socrates worries about Aristophanes as a force in the dialogue; he provides one of the few credible alternatives to the present argument. After all, Socrates does not seem to have a sufficient answer here. While he suggests that Aristophanes is narrow in his description of love as between human beings, the comedian may simply ask Socrates to observe the world as it is. Indeed, it seems a rare thing for a man to simply leave behind his wife or family to pursue some goal; often, it is the other way

¹⁹⁵ *Symposium* 205c

¹⁹⁶ *Symposium* 205e

¹⁹⁷ *Stendhal*, p. 69. "As Rousseau says, you look at your lover, you don't examine her." Again, the Aristophanean lovers are silent before Hephaestus, not knowing how to talk about their love or what they want from it – all they know is the joy that surrounds them. This Diotimatic examination already goes too far in the comedian's understanding.

¹⁹⁸ *Symposium* 205e. We should wonder about this: consider Tolstoy's *War and Peace* – specifically the couple Mary and Nicholas. In describing his peculiar love for her, he says: "But do I love my wife [Mary]? I don't love her, but... I don't know how to put it. Without you [Mary], or when something comes between us like this, I seem lost and can't do anything. Now do I love my finger? I don't love it, but just try to cut it off!" (p. 1018-1019). We, too, should consider how willingly we would be separated from a part of our body. Would we not feel less whole?

around. Socrates may have been able to “cure” himself of this – being a notoriously poor family man – but that is precisely why the comedian finds him so dangerous. He has, to Aristophanes, plucked a vague idea of love straight out of the clouds and used it to turn convention on its head. The very same hubris which Aristophanes saw so prominently in the speeches from Eryximachus, Pausanias, and Phaedrus is also seen in Socrates: in the *Clouds*, it is his peculiar philosophizing which causes an upheaval of the family – a son beating his own father and even going so far as to threaten his very own mother¹⁹⁹; in a word, chaos.²⁰⁰ It is after one becomes guilty of the Socratic hubris, seeing themselves as hardy suitors of “wisdom” instead of incomplete halves, that one becomes dangerous to society as a whole. Should we wonder, then, why the comedian has Socrates replacing the sovereign gods with a chaotic, “ethereal Vortex”?²⁰¹

Further, Aristophanes would seem to have very little trouble responding to the “good for its own sake” criticism. After all, while the halves are both incomplete, they come together to form a whole which is, in itself, a good thing. It is difficult, if not impossible, to draw an effective distinction between loving something which is “good for its own sake” and loving something “for the sake of what is good for its own sake.” The only difference we can readily observe is that Aristophanes does seem to draw on some poetic creativity here: the entire process of finding one’s other half is not

really explained or elaborated upon.²⁰² Of course, this is not something which lovers will ultimately find surprising: a relationship is often comprised of two people who love one another for reasons beyond their ability to explain. Again, it seems as though Aristophanes has experience in his corner.

And yet, it is this very experience which throws his entire argument into question. How so? Back at 204d-e, Socrates told Diotima that men become happy when they possess “good” things. This is a fine Aristophanean sentiment. Yet while Socrates tells us that this was an “easy” answer to give, he only gave it after being speechless about how a man might react to being granted the beautiful things which he desires. Having already discussed why this makes sense, could one help but wonder whether or not we would be able to apply this situation to the loving halves Aristophanes? After all, as both Diotima and the comedian make clear, these “halves” are quite far from being, themselves, “good.” Yet while the poet makes no real issue of this, Diotima implies that this is precisely the thing which must be thought out. When confronted by Hephaestus, she might say, the lovers are speechless because they are in *awe* of their own love – it takes a god to explain their own desires to them. This awe finds its source in the peculiar fact of the other half’s attractiveness: if it is true that the other half is not “good in itself,” why desire it? Why does one find themselves so drawn to another? Diotima offers a possible

¹⁹⁹ *Clouds*, lines 1325 for the father; 1445 for the mother.

²⁰⁰ *Clouds*, lines 420-425. Interestingly, Aristophanes puts a peculiar sort of god in the mouth of Socrates, having him ask of Strepsiades: “Now won’t you believe in no god but ours: this Chaos, and the Clouds, and the Tongue, these three?”

²⁰¹ *Clouds* lines 375-380.

²⁰² While I have made some personal identification with the philosophy of Stendhal, this is an interpretative assertion and may not be entirely faithful to the character or philosophy of Plato’s Aristophanes. Diotima details her pursuit convincingly in her Ladder, while Aristophanes prefers to give us the nature of man and leave the details vague.

explanation: the other half is *beautiful*.²⁰³ Yet an admission of beauty is the starting point for the entire Socratic experience of Love. Remember: Love's birth coincided with the symbolic birth of Beauty in Aphrodite.

Of course, this is merely the Socratic critique – Aristophanes is far from converted. He needs only to contend that the lovers' speechlessness is a display of their own limitations. After all, Socrates does not invoke a Hephaestus, but Aristophanes places him there quite purposefully. It is the gods who advance the narrative for Aristophanes; the gods who allow us to overcome our otherwise sad and lonely state.

All considered, we can only state that there is a difference between doing something well and doing something badly. The difficulty, at this point, is that each would accuse the other of being a poor (or dangerous) lover – and neither one seems obviously wrong. In the simplest sense, they actually agree on the object of Love: possession of the greatest good. To solve this argument, then, we must begin a discussion of method.²⁰⁴

After establishing that we only “really love what is good” for us, Diotima restates the case simply: “all men love what is good.”²⁰⁵ Further, we want to take these good things and possess them forever. Taken together: “Love is each person's desire to acquire the good for himself, and to

possess it forever.”²⁰⁶ Still, these are some pretty vague terms, and it leaves some major questions unanswered. For instance: are all loves equal? How does one go about pursuing the object of their love? Or, as Diotima adds, “what is Love's aim and what does it accomplish?”²⁰⁷ Socrates, of course, is quite interested in learning the answers to such questions, and he encourages Diotima to continue. Indeed, as readers, we may have settled the issue of the good and its relation to Love, but the role of beauty currently exists in a sort of nebulous state. Aristophanes, Agathon, and Socrates should each seem, for reasons already discussed, unconvincing in their case for beauty's purpose or effect on lovers.

In approaching this question, we close the first half of Socrates's speech. Diotima's following statement, that “the aim of Love is to give birth in beauty, in both body and soul,”²⁰⁸ will provide the direction for the second half. Everything Socrates presents from this point on will return, in some way, to this assertion.

The young Socrates, as is becoming normal, reacts to this with a general bewilderment. “To give birth? Come now, Diotima, I'll need a prophet to divine what you mean.”²⁰⁹ Luckily, he had chosen to speak with a prophetess, and she offers him a more thorough explanation. All human beings, she says, are “pregnant or fertile in body and soul,” a fact which creates within us a desire for birth and children. Even the act of birthing, since it gives us a way to “impart a certain immortality to a human being,” is actually somewhat divine exercise: our children represent us, and therefore give a roundabout way of overcoming mortality. While it is a far stretch from Love's “fleet footed flight” from old age, it is

²⁰³ Again, to be precise: we are talking about *Diotima's* understanding of beauty.

²⁰⁴ To clarify this point: Aristophanes has both a purpose (happiness via wholeness) and a method (the other half); Socrates has both a purpose (birth, in Beauty, to true virtue and happiness) and a method (Diotima's Ladder). In the same way, we can actually say that Stendhal's seven-step approach to Love – Admiration; Delight; Hope; Love; First Crystallization; Doubt; Second Crystallization (*Stendhal*, p. 50) – is also a sort of “method.” These are the sort of things I mean by a “discussion of method.”

²⁰⁵ *Symposium* 206a

²⁰⁶ *Ibid*

²⁰⁷ *Symposium* 206b

²⁰⁸ *Symposium* 206b

²⁰⁹ *Symposium* 206c

doubtlessly something which most human beings see as true within their children. This is certainly why we take such pride in our offspring, and why parents are so often compelled to impress former dreams or career path upon them. We really do tend to see them as a little “us.”²¹⁰

Further, this birthing must occur within the presence of beauty, for it is “impossible for the soul to conceive in the presence of anything ugly.”²¹¹ Beauty, in fact, is generally the first thing which attracts any individual to another – birth cannot occur without it. In the face of ugliness, a lover will be disgusted and shrink away in pain. Thus, in order to achieve the good for birth and participate in this peculiar immortality, a lover must find a suitably beautiful body and conceive. In other words, it is not simply about observing Beauty, but conceiving in its presence. Conception is the means to immortality, and immortality is the means to securing the good to ourselves and “possessing it for-ever,” which was agreed upon as an aspect of Love.

Any reader who has made note of Socrates and his reactions should now find little mystery in the fact of Diotima’s womanhood. At this point, more than any other in the conversation thus far, Socrates has submitted himself to ignorance. In the previous case of the beautiful versus the good, he was simply unable to provide an answer; here, he is actually unable to make good sense of the terms being used. Indeed, instead of asking for a prophet, Socrates ought to have simply asked for a woman: the concept of birth is something which is intuitively best understood by a female. Yet, as soon becomes evident, this is not merely a question of physical conception and birth;

²¹⁰ This, by the way, is about as far as Diotima goes as an exploration of man’s nature/origin/character. He is mortal, seeks immortality, and possesses a pregnancy in body and soul.

²¹¹ *Symposium* 206c

rather, Diotima notes that one desires to conceive in “both body and soul.” While it generally goes without saying that a man cannot fully experience physical pregnancy, Diotima actually talks about a “discomfort” which stems from “bearing the burden of... potency”²¹² on both the physical and soulful level. So a woman has some basic understanding of this relative to her gender, but a man must have this phenomenon explained to him – failing this, his pregnancies will bear poor children. Thus Agathon, who literally “swells” up when in the presence of the Muse, gives birth to a speech which he cannot justify or give a defense of. Should such a child be pleasing? We would hesitate to say so.

As men, then, they are in need of some basic lessons. For Socrates, he is learning about a concept which is entirely new to him at this point in his life; however, for Agathon, the presentation is trying to explain and enhance his understanding of a potency which he has already experienced. Indeed, as we again reflect on this speech as a lengthy lesson for the young tragedian, this exchange acts as an indication that he does not understand his own potency – if he did, then he would conceive of beautiful children. In this case, that would imply speeches which are both attractive rhetorically and contain within them some form of explicable wisdom.

207b-208e: Socrates and Diotima Part 3 – Immortality and Glory

At this point, Socrates actually breaks off the conversation momentarily. He says that “all of this was taught to me by Diotima when she lectured on Love. Then

²¹² *Symposium* 206d

one day she asked me..."²¹³ This break gets at a point of structural significance; "giving birth in beauty" is a pretty big statement to make, but this confirms our idea that this "birth" will be the purpose for the second half of Diotima's speech.

The break also gives us a moment to think about the implications of what has been said up until this point. Again, it is important to keep the entire Agathon-Socrates-Aristophanes dynamic in front of us as the speech progresses. Our principal problem, one which remains unresolved, is how the argument presented by Socrates will be able to answer the critiques of Aristophanes. The previous section offered two strong arguments based on Love's methods which seem to run contrary to Aristophanes's understanding: in the first place, Diotima introduces the idea of offspring into the discussion as a means for achieving immortality. If one recalls the role the children played in the Aristophanean mythos, a very strong difference will present itself. When Aristophanes described lovers in a state of "wholeness," they produced offspring by simply dropping seed upon the ground; even after being split, the act of conception was a mere accident that came from trying to reunite with one's other half. Children were reduced to an afterthought; the primary reason for reuniting halves was a return to the previous state of wholeness. Even immortality, especially as Diotima talks about it, is left unconsidered by Aristophanes. Take his lovers' dialogue with Hephaestus, where he tells them that "I can weld the two of you together, solder you into a single form. Then *for as long as you live*, you will share this *one life* together, and *when you die* you will be carried in a single bier to Hades."²¹⁴ The closest we get to immortality is a single existence in Hades – a long way

from both physical children and soul children. Yet even then, man himself gives no consideration to the afterlife until the god speaks to him; our thoughts rest squarely upon the object of our love. This makes sense, of course: the Aristophanean "wholes" were prideful and pleased with their own existence. For them to think about children is, in a sense, to turn away from the pride they feel when looking at themselves.²¹⁵ The child, instead of being a vehicle for man's immortality, might at best be considered the fine representation of a couple's "wholeness." Diotima's higher good – immortality – is therefore beyond the human scope.

In addition, Diotima introduces the concept of love as an interaction with the beautiful. We have already mentioned that Aristophanes gives little consideration to beauty as an objective "thing": he never once used the word during his speech. Diotima herself dropped the use of the word when Socrates was unable to say how he would react to the possession of beautiful things – she moved, instead, to using the word "good." The reintroduction of beauty comes from a slightly different angle. Instead of actually trying to possess it, Diotima suggests that what we desire is a "giving birth in beauty."²¹⁶ This returns the challenge to Aristophanes because it very specifically proposes a *method* of love which involves beauty. Aristophanes may have been able to challenge the role of beauty in love as an end to be possessed, but

²¹³ *Symposium* 207a

²¹⁴ *Symposium* 192d-e

²¹⁵ This concept is fascinating. Recall that Apollo had to "twist our heads" (190e) around to face the gash made during man's initial separation. Before this, we never even had to look at our partners.

The strangest part of the myth, however, lays in the fact that man's ability to perceive one another (never mind the gash) does not translate into an ability to talk about one's *eros*. Somehow, the intimacy of both sex and conversation – body and soul – is not inspired by facing one another.

²¹⁶ *Symposium* 206b

Diotima sidesteps this by contending that men merely desire the *presence* of beauty. The reason that this argument sustains itself so well is that it allows for human beings to both interact with beautiful things and conceive amongst them, despite being unable to completely *comprehend* them. We can see an admission here which is actually quite powerful: Aristophanes claims that the other speakers were hubristic and that Socrates, in particular, was inviting the chaotic “Vortex” to rule human affairs. Yet Socrates, through Diotima, is laying the groundwork for something which is at once decidedly above human beings and yet offers itself to human initiative. This thing is complex and not readily apparent – which is why Aristophanes tends to accurately describe so many couples – but one can perhaps discern its presence if they apply themselves to the task. Aristophanes gives nothing comparable to this: his gods descend to man at their pleasure and direct earthly affairs – the closest we come to this, as human beings, is offering a “savory sacrificial smoke.”²¹⁷ The difference is huge: with regard to divine things, the Aristophanic lovers are thus dependent, ignorant, and incomplete; the Diotimatic lover is incomplete, certainly, but he is also independent and clever.

With these ideas in front of us, we rejoin Socrates and his conversation with the prophetess, Diotima. She begins by what Socrates thinks may be the “cause of Love and desire.”²¹⁸ The question strikes her as important because animals – despite being less reasonable or far-sighted – seem to mimic several behaviors of human beings in love. She notes how they “become sick with the yearning to mate” and “seem so terribly

driven to nurture and protect their young.”²¹⁹ This might make sense for humans, since we have some sense of the “benefits involved,” but it seems like animals would just go about the business of sex and childbirth in some ordinary fashion – in a sort of “it happens” kind of way. Protection of children, especially, seems to violate the instinct of self-preservation which most animals appear to hold to. Diotima, in observing this, feels compelled to refer to it as “Love,” and asks Socrates why it is that both animals and human beings are able to participate in it similarly.

Socrates, again, has no response for Diotima. Again, this may be initially confusing, but we should also remember that Socrates is presumably having this conversation as a “young boy,” and he may not have the same understanding of children and family that Diotima possesses. Beyond that, he most certainly has an inferior understanding of what Diotima will call “our mortal nature.”²²⁰ Indeed, it would be rare for one to look at young people and say that they possess a sound understanding of their own mortality; it often seems the exact opposite. So Diotima explains that this “mortal nature” is something which does not merely affect human beings – it pulls all mortal creatures to pursue immortality via conception. What this means is that every animal, in attempting to avoid the inevitable end of mortality, is going to both conceive of children and do what they can to ensure that those children live on. Love between animals, from Diotima’s point of view, participates in the collective desire of all mortal things to avoid the looming end of mortality.

²¹⁷ *Symposium* 190c. Which, by the way, also makes the Aristophanean gods quite selfish – an additional play on Eryximachus.

²¹⁸ *Symposium* 207a

²¹⁹ *Symposium* 207b By the way, note the insinuation: Aristophanes puts human beings below even animals.

²²⁰ *Symposium* 207d

Mortality is something, Diotima adds, that we all experience in numerous ways. Man will always be facing “all kinds of decay and renewal... in his skin, in his hair, his bones and blood.”²²¹ Thus our bodies are constantly reminded of the fact of mortality; but more than that, our very souls are victim to similar changes. “[Man’s] thoughts and ways and beliefs, his pleasures, pains, and fears, nothing remains the same.”²²² In other words, the inclinations of our soul are going to be pulled in numerous directions depending on our experiences, conversations, environments, friends, and innumerable other factors. Our intelligence is much the same: Diotima tells us that the very act of studying is simply a way of directing the process of acquiring, forgetting, and remembering.

Why go through all of this trouble to prove how intensely mortality desires to be immortal? Again, we must return to the conversation with Aristophanes and Agathon. The thought of immortality strikes the comedian as a difficult and dangerous thing for human beings to be enamored with; they will blow themselves up with lofty thoughts and attempt to overthrow established orders. A comedian will even make a fool of men like Achilles or Odysseus for the sake of good humor – comedy, after all, rarely ventures to elevate a great soul. Yet what Socrates is trying to accomplish here is quite powerful: not only is immortality a human goal, but he also suggests that is not something reserved solely for Agathon’s tragic heroes. Instead, immortality is something that all beings understand on an entirely basic and natural level. This is relevant to the argument because it actually chains Aristophanes and Agathon together; one poet lives entirely in the world of “decay and renewal,” while the other is off talking

about “remaining the same forever.”²²³ Neither option, according to Socrates, can be attributed to any mortal being – we all exist somewhere in between.

Still, this is the presentation of a mature Socrates. As a young boy, he remained unconvinced by Diotima’s explanation. After she had finished talking about the “all-consuming” desire for immortality, Socrates concedes that this must be the case since Diotima is the “expert” on Love. He asks, however, if this can “really be the way it is,”²²⁴ and Diotima gives him a lengthy reply concerning one’s pursuit of honor.

“If you have any doubts,” she tells Socrates, “just consider the way men pursue honor.”²²⁵ She goes on to cite the accomplishments of great historical figures like Alcestis, Achilles, and Kodros – the last Athenian king who sacrificed himself to save the city – and asks whether or not they would have performed such acts if they did not think that they would “go down in history... as immortal examples of courage and virtue.”²²⁶ She goes on to suggest that all heroes, no matter who they are, begin their efforts with the basic desire to win a lasting immortality for themselves and their great deeds. Indeed, such a goal transcends even the desire to protect one’s own life.

The invocation of certain names – Achilles and Alcestis – should have immediately brought Phaedrus’s speech into mind. In fact, it seems as though this section is speaking explicitly to Phaedrus and his ideas on manliness, shame, and sacrifice. Taking a second to recall the thrust of his speech, we remember that it dealt with the ability of Love to push men into actions which appeared virtuous. It accomplishes this by “instilling in us that piecing shame we feel

²²¹ *Symposium* 207d

²²² *Symposium* 207e

²²³ *Symposium* 208a

²²⁴ *Symposium* 208c

²²⁵ *Symposium* 208c

²²⁶ *Symposium* 208d

when we act ignobly, as well as the yearning that incites us towards any noble pursuit.”²²⁷

We found fault with this speech because it seemed to suggest that an action which is performed due to some outside compulsion – in this case, shame – could actually be counted among the virtuous acts. Still, it should be noted that honor is necessarily connected to shame: one is rarely honored when they act shamefully, but rather when they act commendably. At the same time, being honored is not a virtue.

So looking at this in a manner similar to how Socrates has been addressing Eryximachus and the poets, we ought to ask how exactly Phaedrus's speech is being critiqued. In the first place, Diotima replaces the force of shame with that of immortality – a man does not perform great deeds simply because he is afraid of appearing badly in front of his beloved; instead, he does so because he desires for his name to be remembered throughout history as a model of courage, sacrifice, or nobility. This is a point, by the way, which is not entirely lost on Phaedrus: remember that his speech concludes with Achilles earning eternal life in the Isle of the Blessed. The greatest good, the greatest end and reward, is the achievement of immortality. If this is the case, however, can Phaedrus honestly suggest that the goal of love is simply to sacrifice nobly for the sake of the lover or beloved? Certainly, acting ignobly should be shameful, but not simply because it offends one's beloved; it is shameful because it takes away from the honor which a man seeks to earn for himself. What Diotima critiques here is the placement of immortality as a mere accident of acting for one's beloved; instead, she suggests that immortality was the goal all along. Without that goal, without the basic desire for eternal life that all mortal beings share, none of these noble sacrifices

would have occurred. In the larger sense, then, it is not that lovers only avoid shame in front of their beloveds – the great lovers will do their best to avoid shame because it detracts from achieving immortality.

The very concept of “death for the sake of immortality” is being echoed by Diotima, but she has clarified the desire which presented itself within Phaedrus's thought. For as much as he spoke about the nobility of self-sacrifice, Phaedrus ultimately gave himself over to his selfish desire, as a beloved, to achieve immortality. Diotima is not so much changing the argument as she is refining the underlying purpose – a purpose which Phaedrus may not have been entirely conscious of himself.

Diotima's critique has had a rather dramatic effect: if a great man acts for the sake of immortality through honor, what has become of the lover or beloved? This is perhaps a subtle shift, but once one is operating for the sake of their personal honor and immortality, the need for a single human lover or beloved seems to fall off. Phaedrus happened to use examples which occurred between lovers, but the example which Diotima adds in place of Orpheus is Kodros, a *single* man who died for the sake of his *city*. In other words, Diotima is not giving a commentary on those who sacrificed for their lovers or beloveds, but rather on those who sacrificed nobly in general. This has the effect of pulling Phaedrus into the conversation: now that his previous identification of lover and beloved has been taken down, every man has been made a *lover* of that which would immortalize him. We can recall Diotima's belief that Love is the desire to “give birth in beauty,” and it seems that Phaedrus must now reconsider what he considers to be beautiful.²²⁸

²²⁷ *Symposium* 178d

²²⁸ *Rosen*, p. 257-258 “Diotima introduces Athenian or public-spirited legend, as the selfish citizen Phaedrus did not. The king [Kodros/Codrus]

**209a-210a:
Socrates and Diotima
Part 4 – A Potent Soul**

With Phaedrus considered, Diotima returns to the previous conversation about potency. This is another natural break in the conversation, and it indicates a new direction for Socrates's speech. If the previous section could be loosely summarized, it would be an elaboration of the “giving birth” part of “Love is the desire to give birth in beauty.” We mentioned that Aristophanes is being confronted in two ways here: firstly, on account of man’s desire for immortality; and secondly, on account of man’s ability to apprehend and understand the Beautiful. It is obvious enough to associate man’s ability to apprehend Beauty with man’s desire to give birth *in* beauty, and it also makes sense to associate “immortality” as an explanation of our desire to “give birth.” Thus, we can say that the previous section was dedicated to presenting – both to Agathon and Aristophanes – the best possible case for understanding Love as man’s desire to give birth; further, it can be presumed that the remainder of the speech will be dedicated to proving the second half of Diotima’s argument: that birth must occur with the apprehension of beauty.

To begin this conversation, Diotima again picks up the issue of potency. “Any man whose potency is strictly physical will probably confine himself to the pursuit of women and will express his love in that activity alone.”²²⁹ Glory, in this case, almost takes on a sense of landed nobility; one’s “undying repute and happiness” comes

complements the wife and the warrior: these are the three “dimensions” of political life. In any of these dimensions, one may win a “deathless memory for virtue”... the political version of the recollection of the deathless Ideas.”

²²⁹ *Symposium* 208e

about as a result of having children and passing one’s name over to them. We can see here the erotic base of an institutionalized aristocracy. One might even reflect just how odd it is that we are given the last names of our parents instead of something entirely unique and our own. Still, this is a physical potency which human beings as well as animals, and potentially even plants, all partake in.²³⁰

Unlike animals and plants, however, human beings also experience a soulful potency. “There are some,” Diotima tells us, “who have greater mental than physical potency, [and] will one day become pregnant with what the soul eventually conceives and gives birth to.”²³¹ These “children” take the form of “wisdom and all the rest of the virtues, which the poets have begotten, along with those artists who are true creators. But the finest creation... is that which concerns the proper managing of both cities and households: good judgment and a sense of right.”²³² Put more simply, all of the ideas which happen to solidify themselves in noble creations or actions are the products of soulful potency and conception; soul children. This is where the Diotimatic structure of *eros* takes on an exclusively human form: animals, in her understanding, have no ability to conceive via the soul.

Of course, using animals has its advantages: most human beings do not need much explanation or coaching when it comes to the act of physical conception. Soul children, on the other hand, strike us as the result of a more unique and involved process. To begin, Diotima returns to the man-boy pederasty which has remained a theme for the majority of the *Symposium*.

²³⁰ Socrates must make himself intelligible to mankind. In an effort to present all speeches in the best light possible, it is appropriate to note just how immensely life is associated with bringing forth life.

²³¹ *Symposium* 209a

²³² *Ibid*

Pausanias, who has been somewhat neglected by the conversation thus far, was actually the main carrier of this topic; his speech was dedicated to the virtuous combination of “two customs, the one governing the love of boys and the other governing boyhood education and virtue in general, that one may create the proper conditions in which any boy might honorably gratify his lover.”²³³ The problem with Pausanias, at least as it first appeared, was that his personal desire for things associated with the “Vulgar Aphrodite” guided him as strongly, or even more so, as those of the “Heavenly Aphrodite.” Several passages (182a, 184c, 185b) suggest that Pausanias finds physical pleasures intimately connected – necessarily connected, even – with the development of virtue in a beloved.

Of course, Pausanias is not all bad: he does, after all, encourage a relationship even when a beloved is “not particularly good looking” (182d). Further, while he does link the physical and the spiritual, he does deserve credit for suggesting that any physicality outside of a mutual pursuit of virtue deserves denunciation (181c-d, 183d-e, 185a). Yet the larger message falls flat because he still has to defend this odd submission to physicality and what we could call “water-jug pedagogy.”²³⁴ In order to achieve these physical pleasures, Pausanias allows for prospective lovers to endure a great deal of shame, humiliation, and discomfort. If, however, a potential “suitor” were only pursuing the soulful things – those of the “Heavenly” kind – would such

trials be necessary? While Pausanias has noble thoughts about the practice of pederasty, it does not seem as though he has been able to separate it from vulgar actions; further, he provides no convincing link for both a physical and spiritual intimacy – the former seems to be a simple indulgence. It ought to be granted, however, that simply dismissing pleasure as an unworthy pursuit is somewhat unfair – surely there exists a “good” sort of physicality? What must be considered, then, is whether or not the “Vulgar” and “Heavenly” Aphrodites are forever linked or if one is able to simply indulge in the more noble of the two.²³⁵

So, with Pausanias at attention, Diotima begins with a young man who “reaches the age where he yearns to be a father and to have his own children,”²³⁶ and then goes into a discussion of his ideal beloved. He will, in the first place, seek out a “beautiful body in which to give birth,” but he would be “even more delighted if he should find that the body which he decides on has a soul which is also beautiful and noble and gifted.”²³⁷ Pausanias would certainly be in agreement here. Indeed, she suggests that the very sight of such a boy would be enough to inspire numerous lessons on the subject of virtue. This is something like a kindred soul; a man sees a young boy in whom a great or potent soul resides, and thus he feels compelled to partake in the fruits of such a soul. The parallel to physical conception is not exactly lost, either: one who has a yearning for another beautiful soul will find such a soul and try to conceive. This is not so distant from a physical relationship in which one has a yearning for a beautiful body, finds it, and conceives.

²³³ *Symposium* 184c-d

²³⁴ Reference to Socrates's example at 175d: a strip of wool physically connecting two water jugs, one empty and one full, that the empty one might become full with water. This is similar to Pausanias's brand of *eros*: a physical connection that allows for the flow of wisdom into one who is supposedly empty – from the older lover (*erastes* in Greek) to the younger beloved (*eromenos*).

²³⁵ We will see, in the speech of Alcibiades, that Socrates does not connect physicality with *eros* proper (219d).

²³⁶ *Symposium* 209b

²³⁷ *Ibid*

The fruits of this conception, however, are quite remarkable. A soul child, much like a physical child, will actually be “raised” by its parents. “When the two [lovers] are together,” Diotima explains, “they will share the labor of raising their brood of thoughts.”²³⁸ To use more simple terms, we might think of it in terms of a political conference, brainstorming a business, or the collaboration of musicians; the “parents” of these soul children are coming together to form great thoughts, and by discussing these thoughts they are able to come to even stronger or more beautiful creations than they would have been able to otherwise. Indeed, she says that the love which each parent has for such children will be greater than even the love for those they conceived physically, “because the children which they’ve produced and share are more beautiful and immortal than our own.”²³⁹ To support this, Diotima gives examples of various soul children throughout history: the poetry of Homer and Hesiod, the society established by Lykourgos, and the laws left to Athens by Solon. Such men are not only honored by men in society, but she notes that others have had sanctuaries built in their honor.

Of course, none of this tells us anything very new. If not for the broader implications of having a “spiritual pregnancy,” this section would have certainly fit better with the previous discussion of immortality. Yet there is an important point to consider here which acts as a launch for Diotima’s lesson on her infamous ladder of Beauty: what exactly is a “spiritual potency?” While it is easy to see why everyone is born with a physical potency, Diotima makes it clear that not all men are born with potent souls.²⁴⁰ Instead of universal potency, the

ability to give birth to soul children is dependent on something other than simply “being human” or “having the anatomical requirements” to reproduce. It almost goes without saying that all men are not wise, virtuous, courageous or poetic, but Diotima makes a point of separating the two forms of “birth.” Pausanias, while he separates between Heavenly and Vulgar, makes sure to indulge in each appropriately; he never reaches a Diotimatic level of separation. The thing which separates the two, and what makes it so important for the final discussion, is the ability to apprehend and appreciate a suprahuman beauty. This is the reason why, at least it seems to me, Socrates has held back this part of the conversation until now: he has done everything possible to bring Phaedrus, Pausanias, Eryximachus, Aristophanes, and Agathon with him, and if any have a soul attuned to Beauty, they will continue on.

210a-212c:
Socrates and Diotima
Part 5 – The Ladder of Love

“Now it is here, Socrates, that we must decide whether you are to continue on your journey into the mysteries of Love. For I’m still not sure if you’re ready for the final revelation, the goal for which all of this discussion has been a mere preview. Nevertheless, I will conduct you further and offer you every support. Try to follow me as best you can.”²⁴¹

With these words of caution, we begin the final stretch of Socrates’s presentation. Again, we have established the function of immortality in Diotima’s under-

²³⁸ *Symposium* 209c

²³⁹ *Symposium* 209d

²⁴⁰ *Symposium* 209a “However, *those who are potent in their souls* [emphasis added], and *there are*

some [emphasis added] who have greater mental than physical potency...”

²⁴¹ *Symposium* 210a

standing of Love – all that remains is an explanation of what it means to “give birth *in beauty*.” The previous section established that only a fraction of human beings possess a potency of the soul, and that the potency has something to do with the appreciation of a beauty above man; still, a great deal remains a mystery. What such a beauty is like, how one pursues it, and what effects its apprehension may have – all of these questions remain to be answered by Diotima.

We must remember also that this speech is given primarily for Agathon’s sake. The poet’s idea of Beauty was embodied in the single god of Love, whose perfection and inspiration drew both men and gods away from the tyranny of Necessity. Yet Socrates dethrones this god and reduces it to a “great spirit” – one which acts as a mere messenger between the gods and men. Even worse, the god’s “supple” and “delicate” nature is replaced with hardness and a “tough, parched skin.”²⁴² The differences, in short, between the two divinities are as vast as the differences between the two men themselves. Still, if Socrates wants to win over the tragedian’s soul, he must replace the Beauty he pulled down; certainly in a more convincing manner than flatly stating “wisdom and knowledge are the most beautiful things we know of.”²⁴³ All of the previous speakers have had their interest piqued in some form or another, Agathon perhaps most of all, and they now await a fitting conclusion.

Diotima begins near the beginning: “to proceed in the right way one must start at an early age, learning while still a boy to admire every sort of physical beauty.”²⁴⁴ In addition to admiring, he is also encouraged, “under the proper guidance, to fall in love with a single beautiful person and in such

company to give birth to fine ideas and conversation.”²⁴⁵

While this may sound a bit un-Socratic initially – a singular, physical attraction – common sense tells us that it really could be no other way. After all, the first thing a young boy is attracted to is physical beauty; this is fact of the human experience. If done well, Diotima tells us that the relationship will prompt the youth into soulful births and presenting fine ideas. This should also not be unusual: children are already known to draw pictures, write poems, or sing songs for their beloveds. Assuming that a child is “potent in soul,” and that his love occurs “under the proper guidance,” giving birth to “fine ideas and conversation” should hardly strike one as odd. Indeed, the majority of human beings seem to begin at this stage and stay there rather comfortably.

Diotima, however, has other plans. “Soon,” she tells the young Socrates, “he [the young lover] must come to realize that the beauty of this one body is brother to the beauty of any other.”²⁴⁶ This is an interesting movement of the mind; it takes a step that most contemporary lovers do not. While certain people will avoid individual relationships and indulge in physical acts with many partners, it is rare to think of such a lover who will not, at some point, return to the love of an individual described previously. As Diotima makes clear, however, these are not steps which one is meant to turn back from: they are best thought of as if one is “climbing the steps of a ladder.”²⁴⁷ Thus, while one may generally descend a ladder at

²⁴² *Symposium* 203d

²⁴³ *Symposium* 204b

²⁴⁴ *Symposium* 210a

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.* One sees the issue raised of the “guide” in *eros* – something that very few commentaries make any mention of. In light of *Dover*’s earlier assertion that Diotima was proposing a smooth ascent up her ladder, I do think Diotima has some recognition of the difficulty.

²⁴⁶ *Symposium* 210b

²⁴⁷ *Symposium* 211c

will, the ultimate goal of Diotima's teaching is an ascent to the highest rung.

How should this stage be considered, then – especially in light of the previous, individual love? In the first place, there is a definite appreciation for what might be called “beauty generally.” Consider the physical attraction which first involved the young lover and attempt to break it down: it might be some combination of the beloved's hair, their smile, the figure of their body, or the color of their eyes. While Aristophanes may wince at the notion of deconstructing the nature of one's physical attraction, Diotima insists that such a process is not only possible, but necessary to progress. Of course, if one admits that their beloved's eyes are lovely, then the young lover's “guide” may ask them whether or not another potential beloved is in possession of similar eyes. This process could be repeated until every single aspect of the lovers physical attraction is again seen elsewhere and in someone else. There is no use shying away from the results of this fact, either: once a lover realizes this, he will feel compelled to indulge. The most basic representation of this is the general desire of young men and women to take more than one lover in their lifetime; a physical attraction can manifest itself in many different ways, and it is perfectly human to want to participate in it. As Diotima puts it, “the initiate will become a lover of all beautiful bodies without distinction, and his obsessive attraction to any single boy should begin to diminish and will soon seem trivial.”²⁴⁸ This does not necessitate that the young lover associate with multiple lovers sexually – though that is certainly a possibility. It simply asks that the lover find some way to indulge in, and therefore to appreciate, the “beauty inherent in all the world's beautiful bodies” until he is able to

conclude that all such beauties are really “one and the same.”²⁴⁹

We mentioned Aristophanes briefly, and it is important to keep him in mind during all of this. His lovers would presumably stop comfortably at the first “rung” of Diotima's ladder. Indeed, he might want to point out that Socrates has very quickly departed from common experience with this idea of finding all physical beauties “one and the same.” We ought to note here that Diotima actually takes his critique very seriously. One of the subtle and yet necessary facts of progressing the ladder is that one must often remain “under the proper guidance.” As the above paragraph may have shown us – and as Aristophanes's speech also shows us – we are not exactly moving along in the mind's comfortable or instinctually natural way. In order to learn these things, in order to avoid being “enclouded” as the Aristophanean lovers are, one must have an outside influence upon their heart and mind. This is what Socrates hoped himself to be to the young Alcibiades, and it seems to be what Socrates hopes to achieve with Agathon.

This fact explains, at least in part, three things: firstly, it gives a reason why Aristophanes seems to be “right” when observing the majority of human beings. Not many men have a trusty, personal guide when it comes to love, much less a guide who has stayed with them since their youth. Even if they do, it often comes in the form of another lover who seems to support Aristophanes and would simply advise you to keep looking until you find “the one that's right for you.” Secondly, it gives a reason as to why Socrates engages in dialogue with those who may not immediately be able to teach him anything – young boys, for instance. If proper love requires a guide, and such guides are few and far between, Socrates may feel compelled to become one

²⁴⁸ *Symposium* 210b

²⁴⁹ *Symposium* 210b

himself. Thirdly, it gives us a greater liberty – though perhaps a greater direction, as well – in approaching the transition between each “rung” of Diotima’s ladder. Instead of restricting ourselves to the mind and soul of our young lover, we may also attempt to understand the influence of an outside mentor or teacher.

Now, many young people have many sexual partners. At the same, not many young people come to the “all physical beauty is one in the same” conclusion. How does this movement come about? First, we should return to the process of deconstruction that the lover performed on their first beloved. Eventually, after realizing that a beloved’s eyes are shared by another – and so also their hair, smile, nose, legs, arms, and everything else – one comes upon an idea. The term for this idea is actually something used quite often: it might be referred to as the “perfect” or “ideal” man or woman – your “type.”²⁵⁰ Of course, in constructing such a mate, the mind is actually trying to take what it knows to be attractive and combine it in a peculiar way to form an individual. As a young lover indulges in various beauties – either through sex, paintings, sculpture, or anything else – that image of the perfect mate undergoes constant refinement and change. This produces an interesting effect: one becomes aware of the fact that the perfect individual mate has a certain mutability which is connected to the experience, apprehension, and indulgence of (and in) beauty. Perhaps without realizing it, the young lover has undertaken within himself the impressive task of *constructing*

the height of human beauty. It is never beheld directly, but all experience feeds into a singular image within the mind. This is what Diotima means by “one in the same”: all instances of human beauty are representative of some aspect of this human height. It is perhaps remarkable that so few actually think in this way; the “perfect mate” tends to be dismissed as a relative construction of what a single individual finds beautiful. While this is somewhat true, it is the essential mutability of this image, its constant *improving*, which tells us that something more important is going on.

“At this point,” Diotima continues, “the lover must begin to transfer his love of beauty from the body to the soul.”²⁵¹ She goes even further, saying that a potential partner could be physically ugly so long as their soul was beautiful. The purpose of this – the next “rung” on the ladder – is to “glimpse the beauty of many different laws and customs.”²⁵² Two movements occur here: in the first place, physical beauty is replaced with beauty of the soul. While Diotima is again vague regarding the process itself, we might be able to think about how such a change could come about. As our young lover has starting associating various aspects of human beauty with their single “ideal” mate, the entire process of association may have aroused their interest. While beautiful bodies would likely consume the majority of their time, why not consider the associations attached to boats? We know about many different types of boats – an Athenian, for instance, would be quite knowledgeable about naval affairs; could we not, therefore, start thinking about what the ideal boat would look like? Or perhaps, instead of boats, the lover thinks about buildings, or shoes, or chariots. There is a definite pleasure in thinking about

²⁵⁰ The exercise we will do with this idea is not an exclusive one. It can be done with trees, politics, poetry (Final Scene), and a thousand other things. This is why Diotima has an all-inclusive view of Love (205c-d), and one presumes it to be the reason why Socrates attempts to make Agathon into a better poet instead of a Socratic philosopher.

²⁵¹ *Symposium* 210b-c

²⁵² *Symposium* 210c

beautiful things and picturing them to oneself. Could anyone doubt that such things would form the foundation of the “rich conversation” Diotima expects at 210c? These are the soulful things: associations and the construction of ideals.

At some point, however, our lover comes to a unifying thought: the things being experienced are “Athenian” things. Here, then, is the second motion: finding beauty within law and custom. As he observes Athenian ships, buildings, shoes, and chariots, the natural movement of the mind is to associate them all with one another; to think about what exactly it means to be “Athenian.” It would be a great mistake, after all, for the lover to conclude that Athens was the only city in the world’s history who discovered how to make a vessel float; the things he observes are not, therefore, the things themselves, but Athenian manifestations of those things. Once the lover comes to this conclusion, he will naturally begin to consider what exactly it is that makes a thing “Athenian.” The natural place to look: the city’s “laws and customs.”

It might be noted here that this process, while taking Diotima only a brief time to describe, is a slow and trying process for a lover to get through. There is a great difficulty in leaving the beauty of a potential beloved – an erotic exercise – in order to contemplate the ideal of a shoe. We ought to invoke both the aforementioned “guide” and the “rich conversations” – each of these contributes to moving the lover’s mind towards broad considerations. No illusion ought to be entertained, then, of a quick and easy ascent up the ladder: every upward movement is both quite reasonable and yet almost entirely against one’s instinct. We see the importance of both guidance and dialogue here – the lover is not to be left alone.

Diotima moves on, again rather quickly, to say that “in time he [the lover]

will see, even here [laws and customs], that the beauty inherent in all of these different institutions is really one and the same.”²⁵³

Of course, we should immediately recognize a similar phrase: “one and the same.” This was the same way in which Diotima described the beauty inherent in all of the world’s beautiful bodies, and the lover had to consider what he may think of as a “perfect” mate. He was able to unify his various experiences, observations, and indulgences into a single, beautiful thought or image. Now, it seems as though Diotima is asking the lover to perform a similar task for all of a city’s laws and customs.

So if Athens is a woman, what then? This may not be as weird as it seems: the terms “Motherland” and “Fatherland” are already a regular part of our language, and they both invest the laws, customs, and even the land itself with a certain beauty and mystique. As our lover takes in all of those things which might be called “Athenian,” could he not do the same for Sparta? Much like our lover took himself away from his single beloved in order to indulge in all of the different forms of beauty he saw in the human form, so does he tear himself away from those things which are “Athenian” in order to observe the different forms of beauty present in all regimes. When talking about Athenian ships, how might he compare them to the ships of the Spartans or the Persians? What about rituals, gods, and laws? Much as our lover found the beauty of a single beloved, so too has he found the beauty of Athens; yet just as he left the single beloved behind, so too must he progress beyond his singular love for the Athenian regime. Just as he took his love from the one body to the many, now he pursues the beauty inherent in all of the world’s regimes.

Having again broadened his sights, the lover has progressed to the next rung of

²⁵³ *Symposium* 210c

Diotima's ladder. "The next stage will take the initiate from the study of law and ethics to the various branches of the sciences. Here he will learn of the beauty of knowledge itself and he will see before his eyes not just a single instance of beauty, but beauty abounding."²⁵⁴ Law, no matter how well informed and intentioned, is often flawed; customs are greatly affected by tradition and, therefore, historical accidents. This will be true regardless of whether one is an Athenian, Spartan, or a Persian – a human institution is always given to imperfection as a result of circumstances. What does the lover perceive as beautiful, then? If one were to find beauty in the American founding, would the institution of slavery to be as beautiful as the Declaration of Independence? It does not seem so. Slavery was an offensive degradation of human beings, and the Declaration of Independence laid out a philosophical case for the individual's rights as endowed by a Creator.²⁵⁵ If our lover is drawn, by virtue of his spiritual potency, to "mental beauty" and beauty of the soul (210b-c), then his love would hopefully be repulsed by slavery and more drawn to the Declaration.

Similarly, if our lover is looking at the Spartan or Athenian regimes, he would find things to love within both of them. At the same time, would he not also find things which repel his love? To use Diotima's language, would not some things cause him to "shrivel up and shrink back in pain?" Just as physical ugliness may have repelled him at the beginning of his journey, a maturing lover would find himself more and more offended by ugliness of thought and soul;

²⁵⁴ *Symposium* 210c

²⁵⁵ From the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness..."

and where the young lover's response was to go out in search of more beautiful bodies, so too does the more advanced lover venture out in search of beautiful regimes, studying their laws and their customs. Eventually, however, it must again occur to the lover that his attractions are not accidental; these various regimes are the product of deep thought and deliberation – they are the soul children of great lovers. Our lover's movement of mind has graduated from an indulgence of "what is" – physical manifestations of beauty, accidental laws and customs – into an appreciation of what is, was, and ought to be. A law may be a law, but what was behind the law? In another sense, what could the law have been?

Our lover has thus found himself in the realm of idea. Just as the lover of physical beauty began to love "all beautiful bodies," so too does the spiritual lover come to love all beautiful ideas – as Diotima puts it, the "beauty of knowledge itself."²⁵⁶ It is important for us to note the strong parallels between the development of both physical and spiritual love; the two progress almost identically. To put the end in sight, let us say this: from the moment that our lover began to construct his "ideal mate," he had already taken some small part in the height of the philosophical experience.

We have the ability to say this because of everything which goes into creating what is truly a sort of "beatific vision" on the part of the lover. Consider: what are the various "rungs" of Diotima's ladder thus far? Firstly, we have the "single beautiful person"; secondly, the beauty of "all the world's beautiful bodies"; thirdly, the beauty of "many different laws and customs"; and fourthly, the beauty of "various branches of the sciences," or the "beauty of knowledge itself." It is easy to see how the first two rungs are incorporated: the

²⁵⁶ *Symposium* 210c

ideal lover is an individual – as in the first rung – but also a collage of all the various beauties our lover has encountered. With this, the second rung is incorporated. The third and fourth are more difficult, but if one remembers that the human ideal is both physical and spiritual, the task becomes easier. If we recognize terms like “gentleman” and “lady,” upon what do we base them? Just as one might call a boat “Athenian,” as explained above, so also might we say that a man or woman exemplifies the ideal of their particular society or regime. Of course, these ideals are not purely physical: they also call for certain talents, manners, and virtues within the individual. What formulation of an ideal mate would remain entirely physical? We ask for kindness, humor, intelligence, and much more. Once this is established, the third and fourth “rungs” present themselves much like the first and second: individual, Athenian standards of the ideal give way to the larger perfections of man and woman.

All of this can be drawn from the simple desire of a human being to find a beautiful beloved – Diotima merely expands upon this inclination in crafting her ladder of Love. To put the sentiment into context, the ladder presents a potentially troubling question to Aristophanes: if I, Diotima, am able to recognize such a philosophical disposition in the normal process of finding a suitable lover, what grounds do you have to claim it as outside of human contemplation?

Diotima, however, does draw some important lines during the lover’s ascent. “He [the lover] would have to be terribly immature if, at this stage, he were still obsessed or attracted to the beauty of just one boy or the goodness of any one law.”²⁵⁷ This, of course, might sting our young tragedian, Agathon; his relationship with Pausanias is certainly being called into question. The prophetess reasons that a lover

²⁵⁷ *Symposium* 210d

who has reached this “rung” will turn himself to a “vast ocean of beauty” found within the various branches of knowledge, and such a lover would certainly not lower himself to indulge in the beauty of a single boy or law. His ascent has prepared him for the contemplation of a “most singular kind of knowledge,” and his search for that singular beauty prevents him from returning to the lower rungs.

Here, however, we make a brief stop: Diotima calls for Socrates’s attention, and tells him that he must “try as hard as [he] can to stay with me.”²⁵⁸ After someone has dutifully followed her advice and “contemplated, step by step, all of the different kinds of beauty in the proper ascending order,” he will be ready for his final teaching in the lessons of Love.²⁵⁹ She asserts that such an experienced lover will come upon a vision of

“Beauty, in itself and by itself, alone, endless and whole. And only then will he understand how all beautiful things derive their beauty from this alone, and that while all beautiful things may come and go and change, this Beauty will never grow nor diminish nor suffer any change, but will remain always one and the same.”²⁶⁰

She was certainly right to brace Socrates for this final teaching. While everything thus far seemed to have a reasoned argument behind it, this final rung of the ladder seems more like a leap than a step. She goes on to

²⁵⁸ *Symposium* 210e

²⁵⁹ In his *Clouds*, Aristophanes has a student of Socrates’s Thinkery advise Strepsiades to “believe that these things [what he will learn] are Mysteries” (lines 143-144). You get a sense for the high drama set down by Socrates/Diotima as well as how the comedian Aristophanes might find such a thing humorous.

²⁶⁰ *Symposium* 211a-b

suggest, however, that this vision has great benefits. “Remember,” she tells Socrates, “that it is only there, in the mind, looking at the Beautiful in the only way it can truly be seen that one may give birth... to true virtue, virtue itself... if anyone could reach immortal godhead, Socrates, he would be the one.”²⁶¹

So what do we make of this? Socrates has presented Beauty to his listeners as a grand vision – one that eludes all precise description, but somehow contains within it the beauty of all things. We should note, of course, that this “singular vision” has been the trend of Diotima’s speech from the very beginning. As demonstrated in the above analysis of how one thinks about their “ideal mate,” the mind has a unique disposition to move from the peculiar to the general; in this case, the movement was from a single, physical lover to what the ideal man or woman would be like. If this analysis is applied to all things – physical bodies, laws and traditions, branches of science, etc. – then a cumulative observation would suggest that the beauties of each rung would fold over each other and become one, singular thing called “Beauty.” Not too hard.

The difficulty, of course, is trying to hang a label over what exactly this vision is.²⁶² For each previous rung, it was easy for us to say what exactly the previous rung went into. One could reason about why the beauty of a single body would fold into the beauty of many bodies, and why “proper

guidance” would help a lover to discover the beauty of laws and customs – which is to say, the beauty of different regimes. We could also see how these peculiar beauties would again consolidate into the larger study of the sciences – the study of knowledge itself. There is a natural flow to Diotima’s logic – even Aristophanes would seemingly be forced to agree. At this final rung, however, we seem to have run out of aesthetic real estate. Indeed, Diotima actually appears to agree: instead of remaining in this world, the lover’s search for Beauty has retreated completely within his own mind. The easiest and most natural answer to give here is to say “God” and move on, but we should certainly pause to be impressed by such a conclusion. After all, Diotima reaches well beyond the pagan Greek mythology in order to assert the presence of some perfect, virtuous vision of Beauty; for such an assertion to be made when the gods themselves are below it – a fact which Agathon’s speech makes clear – is truly impressive.

212a-212c: Socrates Concluded

Socrates, at least, certainly seems taken with the idea. He concludes his speech by saying that it is “what Diotima taught me and what I try to teach others. I am convinced that there is no better ally than Love for those who want life immortal. Therefore I myself revere and practice keenly all that has to do with Love, and I counsel everyone I know to do the same.”²⁶³ There are two things of interest here: in the first place, we must note that Socrates makes an admission to teaching here. This is interesting to stand next to something like the *Apology*, where he claims not to be a

²⁶¹ *Symposium* 212a

²⁶² *Dover*, p. 159 “Diotima has not offered us a good grounds for believing any of her psychological, religious and metaphysical assertions, nor does she (any more than Socrates elsewhere in Plato) say ‘I’ve *been* [sic] there!’; from 209e onwards she has adopted the tone of an initiator [as in the *Mysteries*], confident that ineffable vision and knowledge are attainable, raising the hopes of a candidate for initiation.” This is a huge point, one that will be explored as we move towards the Final Scene.

²⁶³ *Symposium* 212b

teacher at all.²⁶⁴ In addition, we are struck by something else: a claim to immortality via philosophy. We ought to keep in mind here that Socrates is the only one – with Phaedrus as the sole exception – who brings up the goal of Love as immortality for human beings. Unlike Phaedrus, however, he makes no mention of a particular afterlife; he proposes nothing equivalent to the Isle of the Blessed that Phaedrus cited as a reward for Achilles. Instead, he simply relates Diotima's assertion that what is "dear to the gods" must *certainly* grant one favor in the afterlife.

For the former point, Socrates is trying to draw out exactly how to teach. Really, his entire doctrine of education is wrapped up in this single statement. A lover may be taught mathematics, the physical sciences, rhetoric, or facts of history, but his complete disposition as a lover will dictate how he applies what he knows, how he lives his life. Who could live on skills alone?²⁶⁵ One who knows a great deal about physics could quite easily put his knowledge towards destructive ends; similarly, he could also put it towards the curing of a serious disease. He may also, as is more common in a field like theoretical physics, apply what he knows in attempting to explain the universe and provide an account for man's presence and worth. What makes the difference here is the development of his lover's soul. What does he find beautiful? How does he seek it out? These are the sorts

of questions that Socrates puts to the "student," just as Diotima did for him. Is it any coincidence, then, that Socrates was careful to bring up points raised by every other speaker before he revealed Diotima's final teaching? Certainly not; the purpose of his speech is not to exclude, but to include. Let us be clear: Phaedrus excluded the lover, Pausanias excluded the sexuality of woman, Eryximachus excluded erotics as a whole, Aristophanes excluded the divine, and Agathon left behind the human – what did Socrates leave behind?

The answer is one of two things: either he left all of them behind, and the philosopher has mercifully lowered himself to speak of such things, or he left none of them, and all of the speeches have been somehow redeemed through him. We ought to feel comfortable making such a conclusion for two reasons: in the first place, he took obvious pains to bring elements of every argument into his speech; secondly, he prefaced his questioning of Agathon with an admonition directed towards all of the speakers present. Indeed, the brief monologue he delivered before questioning Agathon seems evidence for the first conclusion: he scolds the other speakers for the "preposterous" and "outlandish" qualities they give to Love, and only agrees to speak after being reassured that he would be allowed to speak as he saw fit. This is the sort of arrogance – the hubris – that Alcibiades will charge the old philosopher with later on. And, in some senses, it does not seem to be a misplaced charge. Socrates, if his ladder is to be taken literally, does in fact place himself above his fellow men; Aristophanes, for instance, would quite plainly be left back on the first rung.

In another sense, though, we ought to be hesitant about this conclusion. Consider, for instance, the end of Diotimatic love: a man sits alone, having given birth to many beautiful ideas and speeches, and dances

²⁶⁴ *Apology* 19d-20c Socrates makes two claims: in the first place, he does not charge a fee like others do ("Gorgias of Leontini, and Prodicus of Ceos, and Hippias of Elis"); secondly, he does not possess knowledge of the "noble and good," which is required for the proper education of human beings. Thus, he cannot be classified as a teacher. There is a certain "public discretion" attached to this explanation – one which is lost during the private affair of the *Symposium*.

²⁶⁵ This sentiment echoes both the Aristophanean critique of Eryximachus's *techne* and the Socratic critique of Agathon's rhetorical poetry.

about within his own mind. He nurses something called a “true virtue,” one that is “virtue itself” because it occurs within the solitude of the mind’s eye. This image, one of a lone lover caught up in his own musing and broken off from humanity – does this sound at all like Socrates? Socrates the incessant questioner, the teacher of the great Alcibiades, the man who was put to death for corrupting the youth of Athens – is this the man who has reached ladder’s end?²⁶⁶ Our instinct should say not, and this should call into question what exactly he intends the other speakers to take away from his presentation; after all, at least the other speakers had the integrity to “practice what they preach” – the same cannot be said for Socrates.

So while his larger purpose remains a bit of a mystery, we leave it here unsolved in anticipation of Alcibiades, who will provide further insight with his Satyric/Silenic characterization of Socrates. We still have a point about immortality to discuss. Phaedrus is the only other speaker at the *Symposium* who recognized the desire within human beings to aim for god-like immortality. In order to understand Socrates a bit further, it helps to recall how Phaedrus introduced it into the conversation earlier on. His closing lines, for instance:

“In sum I believe that Love is the oldest and most venerable god. He is the one who most surely determines which men will win lasting virtue

and happiness, whether they are alive or dead.”²⁶⁷

These words are actually quite similar to those spoken at the conclusion of Socrates's speech: he states that “the man who could give birth to and nourish true virtue in this way would certainly be dear to the gods. If anyone could reach immortal godhead... he would be the one.”²⁶⁸ Perhaps the most bizarre fact of this similarity is that the two speakers seem to be opposites in most every way: one is young, the other old; one speaks about Love as a beloved, the other as a lover; one speaks of masculine glory and sacrifice, the other credits the majority of his speech to the words of a woman.

Still, it is perhaps this opposition that places the two in such proximity to one another. We mentioned previously that Phaedrus is one with a manly yearning; after all, he did put Achilles, a beloved in his understanding, in the highest position of sacrifice during his actual speech. Phaedrus is not one who simply wants to coast on the merits of his lover – he himself is a young man of desire. If anyone is in need of a feminine teaching, it would be the young Phaedrus.

So what does Socrates mean by immortality? It seems as though he defines, through Diotima, three ways in which men achieve some form of immortality: firstly, through children; secondly, through actions, speeches, and ideas (Achilles, Lykourgos, and Solon); and thirdly, through being “dear to the gods” by reaching the top of the ladder. We see how the first option corresponds with the first and second rungs of the ladder, while the second corresponds with the third and fourth rungs, and last option with the “completion” of the ladder. Of these, Diotima also suggests that the first is

²⁶⁶ When Socrates says, “I myself revere and practice keenly all that has to do with Love... [and] offer the highest praise I can muster, today and every day, to the power and daring of Love” (212b-c) he is speaking in a very religious way. This fifth rung is a distant conclusion, and it appears to be taken on faith (see note 255 from *Dover*). The life Socrates lives, which is explained in depth by Alcibiades, should thus be considered as the Socratic “ascent” up Diotima’s Ladder.

²⁶⁷ *Symposium* 180b

²⁶⁸ *Symposium* 212a

the least permanent, the second more so, and the last most of all. What Phaedrus lacked, perhaps naturally, was an object toward which he might be able to act as a lover – Socrates has given him Diotimatic Beauty. Yet in all that he does amend in Phaedrus, there is one thing that he does not touch: he does not remove the potential of something like an Isle of the Blessed for those who pursue Diotima's ladder. While we should be careful about drawing this out too far from textual evidence, it should be striking that Diotima's final rung leaves behind the likes of Solon and Lykourgos: the only sort of immortality left does seem to be that which was posited by Phaedrus earlier on.

212c: Aristophanes's Response

“The applause began as soon as Socrates had finished speaking. Aristophanes alone held back, struggling amid the noise to answer Socrates's criticism of his earlier remarks.”²⁶⁹ It is important for us to note that there is a natural break in the dialogue immediately following this point: the speeches began with Eryximachus sending away the flute-girl for the evening (176e), and the arrival of Alcibiades is preceded by the “high-pitched voice of a flute-girl wafting above a noisy, drunken crowd.”²⁷⁰ The implication appears to be that the comedian has earned a single chance to distance himself from the philosopher's speech; indeed, while all of the previous speakers had their viewpoints attacked in some way or another, Aristophanes is the only one who seems bold enough to muster a defense.²⁷¹

²⁶⁹ *Symposium* 212c

²⁷⁰ *Ibid*

²⁷¹ Also worth mentioning is the absolute difficulty Plato forces upon Aristophanes throughout the dialogue. He is called to defend himself against

Granted, the comprehensive nature of Socrates's speech is more than a little stressful for us as readers. We remember, however, that we made two general assertions at the beginning of his speech: firstly, that the speech was delivered primarily for Agathon; secondly, that it was going to be most strongly opposed by Aristophanes. With that in mind, how did Socrates approach each of these facts?

Socrates's presentation of Diotima's teaching, if summarized, can be put as follows: all men love in order to “acquire the good for himself, and to possess it forever.”²⁷² That one might possess the good forever, their love dictates that they will desire to “give birth in beauty”; such a birth allows for one to produce children – both physical and mental – which will outlast a single lifetime and bring a mortal being closer to “immortal godhead.” In this case, we “possess” our “children” and the rewards that such children bring us. Diotima draws three categories of increasing rewards: in the first, we give birth to physical children and are honored through their accomplishment; in the second, we produce spiritual children (poetry, laws, courageous acts, etc.) and are honored based on their merit; and in the third, we view the Beautiful within our mind's eye and there give birth to “true virtue” that seems to be honored by the very gods themselves. We move through these categories by ascending Diotima's “ladder” of Love, which is composed of five “rungs”: the “beauty you can see in somebody's

Eryximachus, he has no lover or beloved present, Socrates insults his argument outright, he is silenced (by Alcibiades's entrance) in his objection to that insult, and he is the first to pass out during the Final Scene. The *Symposium*, as we have been getting at, could most certainly be seen as Plato's reaction to the *Clouds*. Again, if Socrates was put on trial in the *Apology*, Aristophanes is put on trial here in the *Symposium*.

²⁷² *Symposium* 206a

body,” “physical beauty in general,” “the beauty of law and custom,” “the beauty of the different branches of knowledge,” and “then, finally... the recognition and study of that ultimate knowledge which is the knowledge of Beauty itself.”²⁷³ Of these, the first two rungs correspond with the first category of reward, the next two with the second category, and the fifth rung with the third.

To all of this, Aristophanes feels capable of making an answer. The most explicit attack made upon the comedian was certainly back at 205e: Diotima supposedly tells Socrates that the “other half” argument must be false because “true love” can only pursue a thing that is “good for its own sake.” For Diotima, this would certainly be the “eternal and infinite” Beauty at the top of her ladder; indeed, her final lover’s aloneness testifies to his own satisfaction. How does Aristophanes answer this? Two ways: firstly, man’s nature is not a lonely one; secondly, the comedian’s love *does* aim at something “good in itself.” To the former, Aristophanes must certainly question how man’s situation has much improved from the first rung. One of the great difficulties of Diotima’s teaching on Love and Beauty is this: the lover *never possesses either the Good or the Beautiful*.

Truly, the importance of this cannot be overstated: nothing Diotima produces gives us a concrete point at which to say “finished.” What we are given is a vague notion of something seen within the “mind’s eye,” but who could be convinced of such a vision? This height of the ladder, by the way, is the thing in which all other rungs justify themselves: Diotima states that only upon reaching the final rung will the lover “understand how all beautiful things derive their beauty from this alone.”²⁷⁴ No grand vision, and the whole thing crumbles; is it a

wonder that Aristophanes sees only “Vortex” here?²⁷⁵ The comedian grounds himself in man’s demonstrated desire for a tangible lover and partner – nothing about this end should be surprising for any of us.

To the second point, the Aristophanic “whole” *is*, for the comedian, a “good in itself.” Before the gods sliced man in half, he did not seem to be a lover: the god of Love did nothing for us. After this, however, the instinctive memory of our wholeness caused us, via Love, to seek out the other half and become whole again. This satisfies his desires and gives him the thing for which he yearns: the resulting union leaves a man or woman no other desires. For Diotima to criticize the individual halves as incomplete ignores the instinctual feeling, the “prophetic sense”²⁷⁶ of completeness that we feel when united. That the Aristophanic mythos has Hephaestus offer the lovers a physical “welding” into one further strengthens his stance: the lovers mean to be judged as a union, not as individuals.

Our comedian thus remains unsatisfied. Indeed, so should we: Socrates has not buried his argument sufficiently. Instead of answering Aristophanes’s arguments, the Socratic presentation delivered us a most singular lover: one with many children and yet no wife. He scatters his seed all about, birthing speeches and grand ideas, but never once gives himself fully to his beloveds. How like the behalved spherical man is this

²⁷³ *Symposium* 211c

²⁷⁴ *Symposium* 211b

²⁷⁵ *Stendhal*, p. 51. It is interesting to note that Stendhal actually echoes Diotima in places. For instance: “After intimacy, ever-resurgent fears are lulled by more real solutions. Thus happiness never stays the same, except in its origin; every day brings forth a new blossom.” We get a sense of the “endless and whole” Beauty here, but Stendhal is speaking strictly about an individual beloved. We ought to wonder: if we can so completely give ourselves over to the Mystery and the Vision of Diotimatic beauty, why not an Aristophanean lover?

²⁷⁶ *Symposium* 192c

Diotimatic vision – we are rendered lonely, prideful adventurers, forever chasing an obscure sight just over the horizon; one written high in the lofty skies of our own minds. In all things man perceives the fruits of his own imagination, believing the world ennobled, redeemed by the power of his Love. What remains for him but to ascend Mount Olympus and receive his due punishment?

212c-215a: The Entrance of Alcibiades²⁷⁷

“Moments later the voice of Alcibiades was echoing in the hallway. He was obviously drunk, crying out like a bull: ‘Where’s Agathon, I want Agathon.’” So enters the mighty Alcibiades, our image of Dionysus and the prophesied²⁷⁸ judge of the night’s contest between Agathon and Socrates. Accompanied by a “throng of admirers” and “crowned with a leafy garland of violets and ivy, over-topped by a wreath of ribbons in his hair,”²⁷⁹ Alcibiades’s entrance spares little in terms of grandiosity. This image is a strong divergence from everything we have seen thus far: we are

²⁷⁷ *Plutarch*, p. 261. “He [Alcibiades] esteemed these endeavours [philosophic conversation] of Socrates as most truly a means which the gods made use of for the care and preservation of youth, and began to think meanly of himself and to admire him [Socrates]; to be pleased with his kindness, and to stand in awe of his virtue; and, unawares to himself, there became formed in his mind that reflex image and reciprocation of Love, or Anteros, that Plato talks of.” If Plutarch is to be believed, then Alcibiades is a great insight into the life and mind of Socrates.

At the same time, Plutarch writes, “never did fortune surround and enclose a man with so many of those things which we vulgarly call goods, or so protect him from every weapon of philosophy, and fence him from every access of free and searching words, as she did Alcibiades” (p. 260).

²⁷⁸ *Symposium* 175e

²⁷⁹ *Symposium* 212d

now in the presence of passions and publicity – a ways away from the private, sober discourse suggested by Eryximachus.

This is an important theme to keep in mind for the remainder of the dialogue. Until the Final Scene, the *Symposium* dips itself into the passionate, unrequited love of an undeniably great man: Alcibiades. Every speaker thus far has placed himself under the advantage of his sobriety; that is to say, he has not necessarily spoken candidly, but with the object of presenting his *eros* in the best light possible.²⁸⁰ While Socrates speaks to this from 198b-199b, it would be hard for us to say that he did not do something similar during his own speech. Now, with the effects of wine and music bursting back on to the scene, *Eros* is given a new voice. Alcibiades will speak of tears, shivering, and snakebites; he will speak as a lover whom Beauty has deserted.

Alcibiades, of course, is naturally being stood next to the speech just “given” by Diotima; he will be the “putting into practice” of all that was just presented. The previous speech concluded with Socrates saying he practiced all things having to do with *eros* and attempted to teach others the Diotimatic way. Now Alcibiades, a former lover and beloved of Socrates, has come and will present Socrates through his actions. Together, it might be said that Diotima and Alcibiades form a sort of “full representation” of Socrates as a human being – one cannot be taken without the other.

Alcibiades states his purpose in coming – to “crown Agathon” with his ribbons – but is beckoned by all to join the group. Alcibiades begins to crown the tragedian, but “with all the colors dangling before his eyes, he hadn’t noticed Socrates, who’d moved to the other side of Agathon’s couch during the ruckus.”²⁸¹ Upon turning around, Alcibiades jumps to his feet and im-

²⁸⁰ See note 246 or 263 from *Dover*.

²⁸¹ *Symposium* 213a-b

mediately accuses Socrates of trying to pursue Agathon.²⁸² “I suppose,” he says, “you tried to avoid sitting by Aristophanes or some other comedian, and in that mysterious way of yours you manage to end up next to the most beautiful man in the room!”²⁸³ Socrates responds in a panic, asking Agathon to help defend him from the jealous affections of Alcibiades, and Alcibiades responds by splitting the ribbons evenly between the tragedian and the philosopher. It seems that our contest remains unsettled. As our analysis has progressed, we seem to be in agreement with the judgment here: if neither Socrates nor Agathon have made convincing arguments to deter Aristophanes, can either of them be crowned with victory over the other?

With the two speakers awarded, Alcibiades turns to address the group as a whole. He complains of their sobriety and elects himself “Commissioner of the Wine.” This draws another line between himself and the earlier speakers, who agreed quite democratically to avoid excessive drinking for the night.²⁸⁴ Eryximachus, understandably a bit miffed, asks whether the company is “simply to drink without decorum like the thirsty rabble,” and Alcibiades turns to address the physician: “O Eryximachus,” he sings, “noblest son of the soberest sire, good evening.” Certainly, if any one character should stand out as being in almost complete opposition to Alcibiades, it should be clear that the character is Eryximachus. His holistic, technical view of *eros* runs quite opposite to the indulgent, singular eroticism of an

Alcibiades: while the former moderates itself through just technique, the latter views justice as somewhat of an inconvenience.²⁸⁵

The sober physician explains that the group had formerly been giving speeches in praise of the god *Eros*, and Alcibiades responds by asking whether it is fair for a drunken man’s speech to stand next to the sober “disquisitions” of the others. “And besides,” he states, “Socrates is the real problem. I mean, I certainly hope you didn’t believe a word he just said about me, did you? Why, it’s just the reverse. He’s the one who gives me a beating whenever I praise anyone other than him, god or man.”²⁸⁶

This is a most interesting passage for a couple of reasons. In the first place, Alcibiades has pushed aside both Phaedrus and Eryximachus to take control of the night’s proceedings. He introduces alcohol into the symposium, an act that was advised against by Eryximachus, and he refuses to offer a speech in praise of *Eros*, the plan of action inspired by Phaedrus. This is a tyrannical entrance well befitting the giant character of Alcibiades, and it signifies the biggest “structural shift” in the dialogue since the hiccups of Aristophanes. At this point, Agathon’s symposium is effectively over: instead of praising *Eros*, we are now praising the objects of our *eros*.

Not only that, but Alcibiades has made quite the serious charge: if it is true that Socrates scolds him for praising the

²⁸² It is fun to compare Socrates here to the trap-setter Diotima described *Eros* as earlier on (203c).

Alcibiades’s reaction is very much like one who has been caught in a trap: “Heracles, what’s this? How long have you been hiding there? You’re always angling for a surprise attack, turning up when and where I least expect you” (213c).

²⁸³ *Symposium* 213c

²⁸⁴ *Symposium* 176a-e

²⁸⁵ Coincidentally, this subject – justice – is precisely what Socrates and the young Alcibiades speak about in the *Alcibiades I* dialogue. Alcibiades claims that he is able to assist Athens in “deliberating on war... or on peace, or on some other of the city’s affairs” (107d). Socrates leads him to admit the following: “that Alcibiades the fair, the son of Kleinias, does not have knowledge concerning just and unjust things but supposes he does, and is about to go to the assembly to advise the Athenians on things he knows nothing about” (113b). The

²⁸⁶ *Symposium* 214d-e

gods in his presence, then Socrates seems to be jealous of the gods themselves. While the *Symposium* has teetered on impiety throughout, this would be the most outright instance of it. What is more distressing for us is that, despite his upcoming speech, the issue is actually never again raised: the closest we come is a bit of mock-humility in the face of Alcibiades's praise later on.²⁸⁷ Certainly, this sets the tone for the speech as a whole: however prideful – hubristic – Alcibiades may be considered, he has leveled and even stronger charge at the philosopher, one that strongly echoes Aristophanes.

Socrates, perhaps understandably, cries out for Alcibiades to hold his tongue,²⁸⁸ but Eryximachus suggests that a speech in praise of Socrates might be quite fitting for the occasion. Alcibiades cooperates, but only with the agreement that “if I say anything that’s not true I want you to stop me right there and point it out. I don’t want anyone to think I’m creating some fiction.”²⁸⁹ It suffices to say that, since Alcibiades goes uninterrupted throughout his entire speech, everything he says about Socrates is either to be taken as fact or as something that Socrates does not feel a need to correct. It also suffices to say that Socrates, in telling Alcibiades to hold his tongue earlier, may have a ready response to the charge of hubristic jealousy previously given. We find our response during the pair’s most intimate moment together: sleeping side by side under a single cloak.

215a-217a:

Alcibiades

Part 1 – The Satyr and Silenoi

Alcibiades begins his “praise” of Socrates by drawing two comparisons: in the

²⁸⁷ *Symposium* 219a

²⁸⁸ *Symposium* 214d

²⁸⁹ *Symposium* 214e

first place, he calls him the “splitting image of those statues of Silenoi you see lying around the sculptor’s workshops with a flute or a pan-pipe in their hands.”²⁹⁰ The Silenoi were companions of Dionysus, and the reference to “tiny statuettes of the gods hidden in their bellies” is a doubtless reference to the god as a symbol of fertility.²⁹¹ He also makes a comparison of Socrates to the Satyrs, in particular Marsyas. This is an important connection to draw: the Satyrs were notorious for arrogance and forwardness – their usual crime being sexual assault²⁹² – and Alcibiades declares that Socrates shares in their hubristic nature. In the peculiar case of Marsyas, Greek myth held that he had – again, in his arrogance – challenged the god Apollo to a contest of music. While Marsyas was generally understood to be both wise and clever, his eventual affront to the gods proved to be his undoing.²⁹³ While the Satyrs and the Silenoi are not traditionally different from one another,²⁹⁴ we will maintain this division as drawn by Alcibiades.

So Socrates seems to be considered on three fronts. He is, firstly, connected with fertility by way of the Silenoi statues; how-

²⁹⁰ *Symposium* 215a-b

²⁹¹ *Bury*, p. 143. “These were statuettes representing a Silenus playing a flute or pipe; the interiors were hollow and served as caskets to hold little figures of gods wrought in gold or other precious materials. But the precise fashion of their construction and how they opened... is by no means clear.”

²⁹² *Dover*, p. 166. “The usual hybris of satyrs is sexual assault, when their natural shamelessness is fortified by wine and overcomes their natural cowardice.”

²⁹³ *Dover*, p. 166. Marsyas was “a legendary satyr... who competed in music with Apollo and was flayed by the god.” We should see the obvious connection being made: Marsyas, an impressive musician who taught Olympus his wisdom, is flayed by a god for his arrogance and impiety. Should Socrates be careful?

²⁹⁴ *Bury*, p. 144. “This second comparison arises out of the first, since the Satyr is himself akin to the Sileni.”

ever, since Alcibiades raises this point again at the conclusion of his speech, we will leave it momentarily unconsidered. Secondly, he is shown as being wildly arrogant – going so far as to challenge the gods for supremacy. This, of course, is a theme that Aristophanes has already presented to us, but Alcibiades may bring a new perspective into the discussion. Finally, Socrates is being somewhat indirectly connected to rape. We are not into entirely foreign waters with this, either: at the conclusion of Aristophanes’s hypothetical “rebuttal,” we characterized the Diotimatic lover as one who leaves many children behind but has, for himself, no wife. That is not necessarily an accusation of rape, but it certainly puts the possibility out there. All of this revolves around a certain Socratic arrogance that Alcibiades uses to begin his speech; indeed, if Socrates can at all be said to be on the defensive, it is against this charge of hubris that lingers on after Aristophanes.

Alcibiades provides here an opportunity for Socrates to come to his own defense against the comparison to the Satyr, saying that “if you [Socrates] want to dispute the charges I’ll call my witnesses.”²⁹⁵ Socrates, however, remains silent. Alcibiades continues on by identifying one difference between the two: while Marsyas played an old reed pipe, Socrates’s instrument is the spoken word. “If anyone listens to Socrates speak,” he explains, “or hears even a third-hand report of what he says, you’re immediately spellbound by the man’s words. Is that not so?”²⁹⁶ Certainly, as enthusiastic readers of the *Symposium*, we very likely submit to the truth of this claim. After all, the entire dialogue is, itself, a sort of third-hand account: there is what was actually heard by Aristodemus, then what was told to Apollodorus, and then what is

being told now to the businessmen – itself a retelling of a conversation had with Glaucon.

Certainly, the effect of Socrates’s words on Alcibiades is indeed quite profound: “as soon as he starts in I feel like a wild man, a shivering, shaking corybant. My heart starts pounding and tears go streaming down my face.”²⁹⁷ We anticipated a drunken man’s honesty and a lover’s passion: so it is delivered. He goes on to describe the “chill at the base of [his] spine” that conversations with the old philosopher cause him to feel: an effect that even the oratory of a Pericles cannot compare to.

All of this comes together in a single word for Alcibiades. For “only Socrates has ever made me feel something which all of you thought me incapable of: shame.”²⁹⁸ Alcibiades describes the feeling of inadequacy that washes over him, knowing that he cannot defeat Socrates’s arguments and yet time and again falling into his “comfortable habits... [giving] into my craving to please the crowd.”²⁹⁹ ³⁰⁰ He tells the audience that he faces a terrible dilemma: on the one hand, he sometimes wishes that the man would just die; at the same time, he knows that Socrates’s death would likely pain him even more. For any man or woman who has genuinely experienced love unrequited, this sentiment should be more than understandable: while you want nothing more than to despise the object of your love and see it destroyed forever, the pain felt at its destruction would do an even greater damage.

²⁹⁷ *Symposium* 215d-e

²⁹⁸ *Symposium* 216a-b

²⁹⁹ *Symposium* 216b

³⁰⁰ *Dover*, p. 164. “It is important that it should be Alcibiades who pays tribute to the power of Socrates’s moral teaching, for Alcibiades... was regarded by many in Plato’s time... as a traitor guilty of inflicting great a deliberate harm on Athens, and Socrates was blamed for his ‘teaching’ of such a ‘pupil.’”

²⁹⁵ *Symposium* 215b

²⁹⁶ *Symposium* 215d

Indeed, few things suffer hatred as deeply as those we love.³⁰¹

Yet this mesmerizing effect is not the only trait Socrates shares with the Satyr. Alcibiades makes a bold guarantee to his audience that, after hearing his speech, “you’ll realize that not one of you has really understood him [Socrates] until now.”³⁰²

Alcibiades proceeds to identify two qualities that are widely attributed to Socrates. “I suppose you all know,” he begins, “that Socrates has a passion for handsome boys and is always following them around in a daze. You’ve probably also heard how he claims to be utterly ignorant, that he doesn’t know a thing.”³⁰³ Alcibiades, however, suggests that both claims are misleading: in fact, he “doesn’t give a damn” about the status of looks of young boys; what is more, he lives his entire life as “one endless game of irony [lit.: mock-modesty].” Indeed, Alcibiades doubts whether any of the men in attendance have ever seen the “real” Socrates. These things might strike us as quite surprising on several fronts. If it is true, for instance, that Socrates does not esteem beauty in youths, why is he known for pursuing handsome boys?³⁰⁴

³⁰¹ *Alcibiades I*, 118b-c. “Socrates: Alas, then, Alcibiades, what a condition you have come to be in! I hesitate to use the term, but as we two are alone, I shall say it all the same: it is stupidity [*amathia*—literally ‘lack of learning’], excellent fellow, in its most extreme form, that you are living in the midst of, as the argument accuses you as well as yourself. This is why you are rushing toward the political things before you have been educated. But you are not the only one in this condition—the many among those who practice the things of this city are also, except for a few at any rate, perhaps including your guardian Pericles.”

One can see how such treatment would, in time, become difficult, indeed painful, for one to bear.

³⁰² *Symposium* 216d

³⁰³ *Ibid*

³⁰⁴ *Charmides* 155d-e. To put this point more firmly into our minds, consider the reaction Socrates has when first meeting the young, handsome boy

Further, if his entire life is lived in mock-modesty, how far should we associate his speech on Diotimatic *eros* with Socrates’s own life? What does Socrates actually think – and does he have a final rebuke for Aristophanes?

Listeners are fortunate to be in the presence of Alcibiades, who assures everyone that he beheld the “Silenoi” beneath its disguise. He recalls a time when he “got a look under that outer covering at those little statues hidden inside, and they were golden and divine, radiant and beautiful and so amazing that I had no choice but to do whatever Socrates asked of me.”³⁰⁵ This theme of the statuettes is an important one: Alcibiades opens with it, finds it represented in the Socratic “labors” in the middle of his speech, and ends with it. If one were made to find *the* thing most responsible for Alcibiades’s love of Socrates, it would certainly be these figurines and whatever they represent.

217a-220a:

Alcibiades

Part 2 – Courting the Philosopher

Alcibiades begins by telling the symposium he was certain that Socrates had fallen in love with him. This proved most

Charmides. “... he gave me such a look with his eyes as passes description, and was just about to plunge into a question, and when all the people in the wrestling-school surged round about us on every side—then, ah then, my noble friend, I saw inside his cloak and caught fire, and could possess myself no longer; and I thought none was so wise in love-matters as Cydias, who in speaking of a beautiful boy recommends someone to ‘beware of coming as a fawn before the lion, and being seized as his portion of flesh.’” Socrates feels a physical attraction to beautiful youths like Alcibiades, Agathon, and Charmides. That he appears to both pursue them and yet avoid physicality is both impressive and interesting.

³⁰⁵ *Symposium* 216e-217a

advantageous to the prospective politician, for he thought Socrates to be quite knowledgeable and wanted to learn from him as a student. Being Alcibiades, however, and quite “confident” in his “good looks,” he sought to win over Socrates through physical advances. Yet after a normal date, several private wrestling sessions “in the buff,” and an evening dinner, nothing had come of the attraction. Discouraged, Alcibiades crafted another plan: he had Socrates over for another dinner and began a conversation with him that kept the pair “talking late into the night.”³⁰⁶ By claiming that it was far too late for Socrates to return home, Alcibiades was finally able to convince him to stay overnight at his house.³⁰⁷

Before continuing, however, Alcibiades pauses to deliver a word of caution. Normally, he tells the group, his story would have ended here. Yet considering the men who are present, not to mention the “truth in wine,” he feels a special obligation to go on. “The problem is, well, it’s like what they say about snakebite: you can only discuss it among people who have actually suffered it themselves.”³⁰⁸ It is interesting, especially for those who have not loved, to hear love compared to snakebite: there is an intense pain and suffering to it. With the sole exception of Aristophanes, no other speaker has truly spoken to the issue of pain inherent in love. It is an interesting parallel: Alcibiades sounds a great deal like an Aristophanean lover who has finally found their other half³⁰⁹ – only to be soundly rejected from

physical union. When Aristophanes talks about lovers scattering in every which way and trying to knit themselves back together – is not such a frenzy comparable to the philosophical frenzy Alcibiades will soon introduce?³¹⁰

Indeed, this is no mere snakebite – Alcibiades has not been simply bitten, but seduced. The great comedy of this situation is that Alcibiades, supposedly the youthful beauty, has spent most of the story chasing Socrates around as if he were the lover instead of the beloved. He explains,

“Yes, I’ve been pricked and stung by this man’s philosophy, and its fang-like grip on young and talented soul is much fiercer than any snake’s, causing us to do and say the most amazing things. All of you here: Phaedrus and Agathon, Eryximachus, Aristodemus, Pausanias and Aristophanes... Every one of you has shared in this madness, this Dionysiac frenzy of philosophy.”³¹¹

To those who have not felt such frenzy, Alcibiades commands that they close their ears and hear no more. We should note here that Alcibiades may have made a false assumption: while everyone else was charmed by the philosophy of Socrates – or, at the very least, they afforded his speech applause – Aristophanes was not. Indeed, from all that we have seen, the comedian has appeared the most immune to ever being carried away – except by hiccups. That he has a susceptibility to bodily immoderation should not shock us; after all, Aristophanes rarely shies away from using “slapstick” humor in his comedies. This body is what we have, and the funny or weird things it happens to do put us all on equal terms. Can

³⁰⁶ *Symposium* 217d

³⁰⁷ It is a great comedy that Alcibiades, trying so hard to win the extended company of Socrates, succeeds simply by pursuing a conversation with him. While the wisdom he supposedly seeks would seem to require simply conversation (education), Alcibiades uses it as a means to something else. This demonstrates a certain insincerity.

³⁰⁸ *Symposium* 217e-218a

³⁰⁹ Remember Plutarch’s “*anteros*” at note 278.

³¹⁰ *Symposium* 218b

³¹¹ *Symposium* 218a-b

one overstate the damage that something like “burping” does to Socratic philosophy? This might be a bit overdramatic, the point stands: the more men can confidently believe they hold “in common,” the less plausible anything like a “ladder of Love” seems to them.

Alcibiades continues his tale and discloses the intimate conversation he and Socrates had during their night together. He offers Socrates his money, his friends, and his body – if only Socrates will help him to “become the best that [he] possibly can.”³¹² Socrates, “with his typical mock-modesty,” tells the young lover that such an exchange seems quite unfair for him; after all, he would be “trading gold for bronze” if he were to give the young man wisdom and receive mere physical favors in return. Ultimately, even though Alcibiades believes to have “hit the target” with a final outburst, he tells us that the two spent the night lying together “as chaste as if I’d spent it with my own father or older brother.” This, again, draws a strong line between Socrates and someone like Pausanias on the relationship of a man and a boy. Alcibiades thought that Socrates was a man of normal desires, and that he, as the elder lover, would be predominantly interested in the physical favors a youth could provide. Instead, the most romantic moment between the two seems to come from an agreement that “in the future we will consider things jointly and do whatever seems best for you and me together.”³¹³ This, the mutual deliberation

and birthing of great ideas, is what we might as well call “Socratic intercourse.” Pausanias drew strong lines around the behavior of both lover and beloved: certain favors were expected of each, and peculiar propriety hung over their conduct. For Socrates, the expectations do not appear to be so exclusive: everything is expected of both the lover and his beloved.

Beyond simply critiquing Pausanias, this intimate exchange gives us some grounds to defend Socrates against the earlier charge of hubristic jealousy. The height of Socratic romance – differentiated from *eros* here – is the notion of mutual consideration for the sake of mutual benefit. It might not be as immediately sexy, but one can see how Diotima’s ladder requires this of any lover who has passed the first and second rungs: he is seeking a companion, a guide, or an inspiration – not a physical beloved. And, while it requires some presumption on our part, can one not see how Alcibiades may have come to his earlier assertion of Socratic jealousy? The philosopher must, at first, sound a great deal like a suspicious lover who questions his beloved in hopes of finding some trace of infidelity. Still, it seems a bit more serious than even that: he questions the *nature* of one’s praise. If Alcibiades were to send up his praises for a man like Achilles or Aristophanes, Socrates would probably set about inquiring as to whether such praise was justified. Consider also how handily Socrates dealt with Agathon’s proposed description of the god, *Eros* (199c-201c) – the tragedian’s mind was sent spinning and the argument was dropped. Alcibiades, in placing himself beside Pausanias or Aristophanes as expecting some physical union, appears to invoke the earlier allegory of wine jugs connected by a strip of wool: somehow, he expects to be “filled” with Socratic wisdom once he gratifies the older man physically.

³¹² *Symposium* 218d

³¹³ *Symposium* 219b; also, *Newell*, p. 71. “For, as I interpret it, Socrates ‘practices politics’ primarily by cultivating friendships... one can begin to cultivate friends in one’s actual city—friendships guided by the pattern of the good that one finds in the soul through philosophical investigations of politics and virtue of the kind that Socrates conducts with his partners.” This sounds a lot like the mutual benefit that Socrates appears to be seeking with Alcibiades as well as the sort of relationship he pursues with him in *Alcibiades I*.

Instead of taking Alcibiades at face value, then, and condemning the philosopher, it seems much more reasonable for us to say that his inquisitive nature was confused for a sort of knee-jerk jealousy at the mention of any other praise-worthy object. Alcibiades has not yet understood the nature of Socratic eroticism, and he misinterprets the philosopher's actions as a result.

The failure is a point of great humiliation for prideful Alcibiades. Yet like any good lover, his humiliation was accompanied by an admiration of the man's "courage and self-control."³¹⁴ Socrates was, in all likelihood, physically attracted to Alcibiades; yet he welcomed the youth's presence under a shared cloak and spent the night in chastity. This is an extension of his views on teaching and education: participation in the base seems to subvert attempts at something higher. Unfortunately, nothing about that does any good for Alcibiades, who ends up feeling "totally without hope, wandering around in the most abject misery which anyone has ever experienced."³¹⁵

220a-222b: Alcibiades

Part 3 – A Man of Great Labors

For the remainder of his speech, Alcibiades relates various exploits that occurred while the two served together in the Athenian military. "I noticed," he explains, "that no one in the army endured the hardships of the campaign better than Socrates, not even myself."³¹⁶ When the army was cut off from supplies, for instance, "no one stood up to hunger" as well as Socrates did; and yet he was also the only one among them who "really enjoyed" the

food when it was served. Beyond that, he never appeared to get drunk despite being forced into competitions with the other soldiers.

In addition to enduring hunger, he also possesses a superhuman ability to resist the cold. While the other soldiers wore layers of leather and sheepskin, Socrates would march quickly over the frozen ground in his bare feet. Once the weather warmed up, Alcibiades tells the group that Socrates committed another of his "great labors."³¹⁷ "One morning at dawn Socrates began to dwell on some question. He walked outside to the field to be alone and stood there trying to figure it out. When the answer didn't come he didn't give up but kept right on standing there in the very same spot."³¹⁸ Indeed, he stood there until dawn of the next morning: an entire day standing motionless and in contemplation. This "labor," by the way, bears a striking resemblance to the sort of *eros* espoused by Diotima.

Finally, Alcibiades delivers two accounts of Socrates's courage during battle. He mentions a battle fought during the expedition against Potidaea in 432 BC in which Socrates saved a wounded Alcibiades from "certain death." While Alcibiades was ultimately the one most decorated for his bravery, he explains to his audience that it was Socrates, not himself, who most deserved the honor. His second story came from the Battle of Delium almost a decade later, in 424 BC. Despite the army being set to flight, Socrates maintained himself and kept a "noble bearing" throughout. Alcibiades mentions that such men are much more rarely made a target of the enemy's

³¹⁴ *Symposium* 219d

³¹⁵ *Symposium* 219e

³¹⁶ *Ibid*

³¹⁷ The reference to Heracles here is somewhat obvious. Compare to the *Apology*: "Indeed, I must display my wandering to you as a performing of *certain labors* so that the divination would turn out to be refuted" (22a).

³¹⁸ *Symposium* 220c

advances: it is easier to strike down the men who retreat in a panicked frenzy.

So what does one say about all this? Certainly, Alcibiades has picked quite an array of “labors” – the allusion being to Heracles – to present, but their individual purposes seem difficult to figure out. Rather than try and go point by point, Alcibiades suggests we look at the whole: “although it’s true,” he explains, “that Socrates shares some characteristics with other men, as a whole he is utterly unique.”³¹⁹ We might grant, for instance, that an Achilles may have been able to perform great feats in battle, but would he have been able to remain stationary for a full day, lost in thought? Perhaps one might grant that Odysseus, greatest of all Greek heroes and known for his wisdom, could do so; yet did not Odysseus overstay himself in the presence of the witch-goddess Circe? Indeed, she coaxed from him to a full year in her company through the temptation of food, drink, please, and leisure – all while his wife and son suffered in Ithaca. Such was his pride. We might contrast this to Socrates, who does not seem to trouble himself over these things unless by necessity. This particular example, however, should not be drawn out too far; if Socrates can be justly compared to any poetic hero, it would very well be the Homeric Odysseus.

In all, Alcibiades suggests that, while one “might compare Nestor or Antenor or any other great orator from myth to our own Pericles and, proceeding in this way... find a clear model or precedent for each one of us,”³²⁰ Socrates himself is an entirely new sort of man. This is an important point to recognize in light of the dialogue as a whole: there have been tragedians and comedians, physicians and politicians – who has been the philosopher?

It is thus a most significant observation of Alcibiades that, back at 218b, he “left Socrates out” of those lost in the “Dionysiac frenzy” of philosophy. After all, is not the whole of Socratic living just such a frenzy? Rather than suffering, as a mere man, the fang-like grip of a philosophic life, Alcibiades sees Socrates as one whose very nature is a part of that life. When our politician feels a craving to please the crowd, he turns from the teachings given by Socrates; yet when confronted, he is ashamed for not having followed them. For Alcibiades, the philosophic life appears to be an unlivable one: thus he simultaneously loves and loathes it. The frenzy thus comes from realizing that one has not been living well, and it upsets the soul on the deepest level thinkable. Socrates does not seem to experience this, and so Alcibiades omitted him from the “bitten.” Indeed, as a result, he calls him a Satyr and Silenoi – he is not simply a man.

With this, the speech recoils and returns to where it began. “I should have mentioned this at the beginning,” Alcibiades says, “how even his speeches and conversations are like those hollow statues of Silenoi.”³²¹ Socratic conversation makes use of common, everyday things, and “he’s always using words as coarse as the skin of the most bestial Satyr.”³²² Indeed, the Socratic library is full of shoemakers, pilots, farmers, blacksmiths, tanners, and many other such “coarse” occupations and professions. Yet Alcibiades claims to have seen beyond this: underneath the apparent simplicity, he believes that there are tiny statuettes hidden away – “divine” and “rich” in their images of virtue. For a man who claims to desire the good life and hopes to make himself into a better man, these statuettes were captivating, and Alcibiades sees them present in all that Socrates says and does. His Satyric and Silenic nature is thus

³¹⁹ *Symposium* 221c

³²⁰ *Ibid*

³²¹ *Symposium* 221d

³²² *Symposium* 221d-e

arrogant in its pursuit, and yet itself possesses something worth pursuing; he is a seduction and a frustration, partaking both in the traditionally male and the female.

Such is the weird appeal of this old, ugly fellow to a promising beauty like Alcibiades, and in it we can see how our previous “Diotimatic dilemma” resolves itself. We hesitated about the end of Diotima’s ladder because it seemed lonely and inhuman; moreover, we did not see Socrates as the sort of fellow who sat around and gazed longingly into his own soul. Alcibiades, in his characterization of Socrates as both Silenoi and Satyr, attributes to the philosopher both a male and female disposition. The pregnancy that Diotima references so often in her teaching is shown by the Silenic statuettes Alcibiades claims to have seen beneath the Socratic surface, and his manly nature as an erotic pursuer of Beauty is seen in the Satyric side. Of course, once an individual realizes both of these things within himself, does not the possibility exist of a satisfying inward sexuality? When Aristophanes speaks of “becoming whole,” Diotima levels a critique that implies the possibility of human wholeness *within the individual*. While we have our doubts initially, Alcibiades’s testimony does appear to have given the assertion some legitimate weight.

What do we mean by inward wholeness? Diotima *seems* to dismiss individual wholeness in her rebuke of Aristophanes’s “other half” argument and the conversation directs itself towards the discovery of a larger “Beauty” that fits the criteria, a “good in itself.” Instead of using that phrase, it is more appropriate for us to make a slight modification and consider an alternative: the Socratic individual aims at “good *within* itself.” Even this is slightly imprecise,³²³ but

³²³ We do not mean “Good within...” as in completely possessing the height of Goodness and

it is a bit closer. The Satyric nature is easier: we see how the forward eroticism of a Satyr is embodied in the relentless Socratic pursuit of philosophical discovery, and we are right to marvel at the length to which Socrates is capable of pursuing such discussions. Can one imagine what a physical pursuit would look like if pursued with the same vigor which Socrates puts towards philosophy? It is an incredible thought, a pursuit that would border on belligerence.³²⁴ Regardless, we can at least recognize the masculinity – the fertility and desire for release – inherent in the comparison.

Our Silenic comparison is a bit harder. In Diotima’s teaching, the individual’s pregnancy is not determined by a physical station; one can be either male or female. This comes about as a result of humanity’s dual pregnancy, that of body and that of soul. As a male, the young Socrates reacted with confusion to Diotima’s idea of “soulful” birth since he did not understand pregnancy as a basic thing. This was, as we found earlier, a great motivator for Socrates to speak through a female mouthpiece. Women understand things like pregnancy and the attachment to children because nature forces them too. This, by the way, brings into focus a very significant observation: Phaedrus, Pausanias, and Eryximachus delivered plainly masculine speeches; Aristophanes delivered a sterile speech; and Agathon delivered a feminine speech. No one, sans Socrates, presents a speech combining the male and female element into one. When looking at it this way, it should not surprise us that Aristophanes and Socrates are principal rivals.

Beauty; we are referring to the *utmost extent of human preparation for receiving and giving birth to the Good and the Beautiful*.

³²⁴ *Plutarch*, p. 262. Socrates is described as having pursued Alcibiades “as if he had been a fugitive slave.”

So to explore this a bit more: the first three speakers are masculine because they seek their validation externally; their “fertilization” is external. Phaedrus's lover wishes to inspire the praise and admiration of his beloved; his great acts derive from a desire to not appear disgraceful (178e-179a). In this case, there is no inward birth, but a manifestation of something every man fears: shame. It is magnified in Phaedrus's case because the value is placed upon a single person, the lover or the beloved (178d). His greatest hero, Achilles, was rewarded by the gods because he had placed a great value upon his “lover” Patroclus and sought his company even in death. In all cases, then, Phaedrus's lover pursues an external accompaniment and affirmation from his lover/beloved. We can see something similar in Pausanias's speech in that he focuses heavily on law (181e-183c) and educational pederasty (183d-185c). The almost hyper-masculinity of Pausanias's speech comes across most seriously in his complete disrespect for the feminine (181b-c), but we can also see it in the homosexual relationship that he describes. The older lover, for instance, is not described as being at all inspired – never mind “impregnated” – by his young beloved. He is, instead, simply “gratified”; in other words, the man seeks “release,” but for pleasure and as a reward for his “Ouranian” understanding of *eros*.

Eryximachus strikes us as somewhat different, but he remains a highly masculine speaker. The exclusivity surrounding human *eros* is taken away (186a) and replaced with an omnipresent *eros* (188d) of all things, a move justified by Eryximachus's astute observations as a physician. The masculine quality in his speech is the obsessive, controlling, almost patriarchal position he places human beings in: inasmuch as Aphrodite can be called a “woman,” Eryximachus advocates “directing” her with “restraint and justice” towards the “good in itself.” While

we should certainly not ignore the Socratic elements of such a conclusion, we should also not take it too far: for Eryximachus, *eros* is the problem to be solved; for Socrates, *eros* is the solution to our problems. Where Diotima presupposes a single Harmony (Beauty, “endless and whole”³²⁵) Eryximachus presupposes discord. Should we harbor any doubts on this point, a moment's reflection on the *Symposium* itself should make the case quite clearly: Eryximachus *imposes* order, structure, and restraint for the majority of our narrative. He *cures* the discord of music and wine. What makes Eryximachus so masculine, then, is that he thinks the world is readily awaiting some governance: his lover will “scatter his seed,” to borrow from Aristophanes, upon the Earth and build up great, harmonic edifice. His entire speech, then, is the height of masculinity: the only “woman” is Mother Earth herself.

Aristophanes and his sterility will be elaborated further during the Final Scene, but the Silenic characterization of Socrates does cause us to put a little thought in here. The simple inference is taken from the phrase quote above: the Aristophanic “wholes” chose to simply scatter their seed upon the ground (191c). Now, in the entirely literal sense, man is certainly not sterile because he is able to give birth to children – both before and after Zeus's punishment. His sterility comes from the fact that his *eros* has *nothing to do with the offspring*. In fact, if one were to interpret Aristophanes literally, the child is actually quite a nuisance. *Eros*, in the comedian's mythos, guides us to a wholeness firmly rooted in this life (192d-e) – nothing lasting is created. Phaedrus had his “noble pursuits”; Pausanias passed down education and learning; Eryximachus produces various technical achievements in areas such as medicine, music, and astronomy. To all of this, Aristophanes simply

³²⁵ *Symposium* 211b

guarantees personal, “genuine happiness.” That is not, of course, to cut down the comedian’s speech; we must simply be aware that the comic vision is of a limited, temporal man who operates within his lifetime. This is, in almost every way, opposed to the entirety of the symposium’s speakers.

Agathon’s speech is, undeniably, effeminate. While the passive delicacy of this speech might suffice for evidence, we might also point to his being “swollen with song” previous to his closing poetry (197c). In addition, the entire notion of the god *Eros* “entering into” our souls in order for us to birth our various talents (196d-197b) casts both man and god as effeminate before the power of Love. For Agathon, man assumes the role of the woman: he beautifies himself, body and soul, with flowers and “sweet smells,” that he might coax the fertile god into him. As a result, gods and men produce great things: metallurgy, medicine, archery, and even poetry, to name a few. At the same time, his speech lowers man into a sort of “pretty vessel” – he awaits the merciful inspiration of Love and forsakes the world in which he lives. The manly determination of an Eryximachus, Aristophanes, or Socrates is completely lost on him; indeed, he explicitly rejects Phaedrus for his involving *Eros* with wars between the gods – surely, such a brutal activity could not possibly have taken place under Love’s supervision. If Socrates has anything to teach Agathon, it is primarily how to be a man.

Having taken all of this into consideration, we can more clearly understand why the Satyro-Silenic characterization is important. Somehow, Socrates has managed to partake in the Satyr’s masculine fertility in addition to the Silenic, feminine pregnancy. This can only be accomplished through the teaching of “soul children” that Diotima provides, and it is here that we can infer the meaning of the “divine statuettes”

perceived by Alcibiades. While the terminology is a bit weird, we might simply call them “spiritual embryos”; they are the fetal origins of man’s soul children. Socrates has managed to somehow identify them – tentatively we can suspect things like “temperance,” “justice,” “piety,” “love,” and so on – and hold them hidden away under the surface. He is not, like the first three speakers, a purely masculine fellow looking for external affirmations of his fertility; nor is he a passively feminine character who spends his time in artificial beatification; finally, he is not a sterile being, confined by the temporal necessity of life and chained to the knowledge of his own mortality. He is, to borrow from Alcibiades, something completely new and unprecedented.

Yet this says something about the Diotimatic ideal – it actually calls it strongly into question. For while it is true that putting male and female into one gets us closer to “wholeness,” it does not get us all the way there. Our proof is Socrates himself: he continues to seek external arousal and, if he seems to be lost in his own mind, Alcibiades suggests that it is generally in order to ponder some especially difficult question (220c-d). Indeed, despite whatever arrogance Alcibiades has found the philosopher guilty of, Socrates has yet to resign within himself. This presents us with two distinct possibilities: in the first place, Diotima may be wrong about the existence of her fifth rung; or, secondly, Socrates has thus far been unable to reach it.

**222b-223d:
Conclusion of Alcibiades and
Final Scene Preparation**

Alcibiades concludes his speech a final observation of Socratic love and a single caution to Agathon:

“He deceives us all [Alcibiades, Charmides, Euthydemus, and “many others”] by making us think he’s in love with us, when suddenly you realize that you’re the one in love with him. So Agathon, consider yourself warned. Learn from our mistakes and be careful with Socrates. Don’t wait too long and, like that fool in the proverb, learn your lesson only after you’ve suffered it.”³²⁶

In other words: be careful of falling in love with that charming philosopher – it may hurt. We should be sympathetic to this: Socrates seems to refuse any sort of physical intimacy outright, and yet he continues to play the charming sort of games we have seen throughout the *Symposium*. Unfortunately, the audience bursts out in a fit of laughter, and Socrates rises up to make an accusation of his own: that Alcibiades delivered his speech with the hope of separating Agathon and Socrates from one another so that he could have the young tragedian for himself. The suggestion wins Agathon over, but Alcibiades makes one last attempt. “Socrates,” he asks, “you might at least allow me to share the man with you. Let’s compromise: why not let Agathon lie here between the two of us.”³²⁷ This, however, is also met with rejection. After all, Socrates tells the politician that he was very much looking forward to speaking Agathon’s

praises, whereas Alcibiades’s arrangement would have Agathon giving praise to Socrates all over again.

Frustrated, Alcibiades gives up the attempt. Before any further speeches could be given, however, a “great sea of revelers poured in through the front door which a departing guest had left standing open” (223a). The drinking escalates and the entire symposium descends into chaotic chatter and noise. Phaedrus and Eryximachus leave with one another, and Alcibiades and Pausanias³²⁸ seem to make their exits as well. Meanwhile, our trusted narrator, Aristodemus, had fallen asleep for what Apollodorus tell us “must have been quite some time.”³²⁹

Upon waking, however, Aristodemus came upon quite an interesting scene: “Agathon, Aristophanes, and Socrates... were drinking from an oversize jug of wine which they were passing from right to left.”³³⁰ The groggy Aristodemus, while unable to remember the particulars of their conversation, provides us with the following account: Socrates was pushing the poets to admit that one man must be capable of writing both tragedy and comedy; more precisely, “that a good tragic poet must, of necessity, be a good comic poet as well.”³³¹ According to Aristodemus, the two men were slowly coming around to admit his point of view, but were unable to stay awake to continue the conversation. Aristophanes was the first to pass out, with Agathon following him around dawn of the next day.

Socrates, however, went straight to the Lyceum to clean himself, and continued on to spend the “entire day as he would any other, and went home in the evening to rest.”³³²

³²⁶ *Symposium* 222b

³²⁷ *Symposium* 222e

³²⁸ Pausanias and Alcibiades are not mentioned as having left.

³²⁹ *Symposium* 223b

³³⁰ *Symposium* 223c

³³¹ *Symposium* 223c-d

³³² *Symposium* 223d

The Final Scene in Three Parts: Agathon, Aristophanes, and Socrates

Our symposium, however, is still a ways from finished. We remember that the speech given by Socrates was a sort of “climax” for all of the preceding speeches – a fact evident by how inclusive his presentation really was. Phaedrus's immortality, Pausanias's pedagogy and bi-form division of *Eros*, Eryximachus's omnipresence of *eros*, Aristophanes's “good,” Agathon's “beauti-ful” – all things were taken in and somehow modified by the relation of Diotima's teach-ing. Still, we left Socrates's speech with many questions outstanding, and, beyond that, the dialogue continued with another complete speech from Alcibiades. It seems certain that more was left to be said. Indeed, if Socrates is the height of Agathon's sym-posium, then the Final Scene is the height of Plato's *Symposium*.

This draws a natural division in the *Symposium*, but the division has really been drawn for some time. Aristophanes, as we mentioned, was a sort of fulfillment of Pausanias in terms of an eradicable, physical bond between human beings; in the same way, he fulfilled Eryximachus's desire for harmony with a proposed “wholeness” that does away with our incomplete, “halved” nature. Not only that, but he did so with a mind towards human *eros*: the burden was left entirely upon men. Agathon takes up the argument in a similar vein – *eros* as the means for human happiness – but from an alternate angle: *Eros* (the god) does us a favor by freeing us from the necessity of life. Socrates, finally, sees *eros* as the means men use in order to meet with the singular form of the “Beautiful.” The final three speakers, then, see *Eros* as man's principal guide to happiness: it is his means for experiencing the best in life. The other three

speakers stand behind things like praise, shame, gratification, and technical mastery. Our division is thus drawn: the Final Scene is composed of those who find *eros* to be man's “finest guide and guard,” to borrow a phrase from the tragedian.

So how does this division amount to a climax for the *Symposium*? Consider the participants: beyond being especially partial to *eros*, they have also occupied the majority of our conversation. Socrates earns his own admission: he is the climax of Agathon's symposium, the subject of Alcibiades's speech, and has gone quite out of his way to seduce the young tragedian. Aristophanes earns his place by being a culmination of the first group of speakers as well as the sole objector to Socrates (212c). Agathon, finally, earns a position for being the object of Socratic seduction and for being almost entirely opposed to Aristophanes. All of the most important conflicts raised during the dialogue tend to swirl around these three central characters: the Final Scene will put these conflicts to rest.

It is an admittedly strange climax for a dialogue that seems to have love, *eros*, as its topic. One would think that Aristodemus would wake up to find the three men talking over the same thing that they gave speeches about. Aristophanes, after all, could hardly wait to counter the criticisms Socrates made of his view of love. Instead, the three are having a conversation about poetry, and Socrates is trying to convince his interlocutors that a good tragic poet must be able to write comedies as well. Since that is all that our dialogue's “climax” is composed of, we have some filling in to do.

Agathon, Aristophanes, and Socrates Part 1: Setting the Conflict

Men are inspired by love. Aristophanes, Agathon, and Socrates all hold to that idea in varying degrees. Similarly, poetry is the art that lays bare the fruits of such inspiration. All that Aristophanes writes is part of an inspired understanding that, as we have made clear, *eros* is a thoroughly “earthly” pursuit. His lover seeks wholeness within the world around him, and Aristophanes feels that the world is good enough to give it to him. Through the chaotic realities of life, indeed *amid* them, the comedian finds harmony. Agathon is no different. His song is delivered via an inspired thought that, maybe, Love can find a way to deliver us from life’s painful necessities and show us true happiness. The comedic hero thus attempts to triumph within life, while the tragic hero attempts to triumph above it. Their relative *eros*, their Muse, is thus the craftsman of their poetry; it is their erotic conversation with the world around them and the inspiration that they draw from it.³³³

So, if one is to talk love, why not talk poetry? After all, Socrates finds himself in the company of poets, and he has quite aggressively attacked each man’s Muse. We remember that Aristophanes was attacked for not having perceived a thing like a “good in itself,” and Agathon was attacked for having confused Love as being both in love with beauty and entirely beautiful. Socrates himself, while not thoroughly put to task by any particular speaker, he presented himself to some serious doubts as well: the charge of “Vortex” that Aristophanes levels in the

Clouds casts doubt on Diotima’s vision of a singular “Beauty.”³³⁴ To summarize our problems, it might be easiest to return to an earlier allegory: that of trees in a forest. Aristophanes sees a lot of trees that, by chance within chaos, happen to make a harmonious forest; Agathon considers a forest as something other than – above and better than – mere trees; and Socrates considers every tree as showing a significant aspect that tends toward the larger thing called a “forest.” Each view is the inspiration of the poet who holds it: Aristophanes produces comedy, Agathon produces tragedy, and Socrates, we might say, produces political philosophy.

One more aspect of the conversation remains to be explored. Before we get to sorting things out, it is important to note that Socrates is still speaking to *Agathon*³³⁵: he is trying to convince the poets why a tragedian ought to write both comedy and tragedy – not why a comedian ought to write both (223c-d). The simple fact, as pointed out earlier by Alcibiades (213c), is that Socrates appears to avoid comedians when he has the chance. It is not particularly hard to see why, either; for the essence of comedy is to wholly embrace the world as it is – something rather contrary to how Socrates would approach it. Again, where Alcibiades saw golden statuettes hidden in the philosopher’s belly, Aristophanes finds the man lonely and hollow.

Agathon, on the other hand, is going to be a bit more receptive. After all, the tragedian already has some vague concept of that “true” Beauty – he merely mistook it for *eros* itself. It is this sense of *eros* that so infatuates the poet: he attributes to it everything that Diotima attributes to the Beautiful. While our comedian has grounded himself firmly in the tangible world, Agathon has a sense that something more exists and

³³³ *Apology* 22b-c. For a somewhat biased interpretation of this, Socrates says in the *Apology* that, “concerning the poets, I soon recognized that they do not make what they make by wisdom, but by some sort of nature and while inspired, like diviners and those who deliver oracles.”

³³⁴ *Symposium* 211a-b

³³⁵ Remember: Agathon = “Good” or “Virtuous.”

is worth pursuing – there is an “above man.” This is a naturally submissive attitude because it allows for something superior to oneself, but it is also the thing that gives Socrates and Agathon their “feminine” quality. It is this philosophical femininity that draws Socrates to the tragedian: he sees within him the same yearning for pregnancy that Diotima spoke of to him as a boy. We should thus take Socrates pretty seriously when he claims to teach others what Diotima taught him (212b); for that is precisely what he appears to be attempting with Agathon.

So we have established the nature of our present conversation: the climax of the *Symposium* involving its most persuasive and important characters. Further, it takes on two important conflicts: firstly, Socrates is trying to teach Agathon why he ought to write both comedy and tragedy; secondly, Socrates is defending himself from the critiques of Aristophanes. The former involves the peculiar brand of Socratic pedagogy, while the latter involves a defense of the larger philosophical framework he proposes. In resolving these two conflicts, then, we are able to resolve the Final Scene and formulate a teaching for the dialogue as a whole: what does Plato want to tell us about *eros* and its place in human life?

Agathon, Aristophanes, and Socrates

Part 2: Teaching the Tragedian

Agathon, as we have established, is not the frivolous speaker that he appears to be after an initial reading. His larger enterprise, his purpose, is freedom from the tyrannical necessity of the world. He wants to overcome that which always seems to swallow up the tragic hero in the midst of his greatest ascent. If we would simply submit to the sovereign power of *Eros*, then

our terrible enslavement under the rule of Necessity would end, and we would devote ourselves to the pursuit of all things beautiful and good (197a-b).

As nice as this may sound, it is also completely effeminate. Agathon adorns himself, body and soul, in preparation for *Eros's* inspiration; he passively awaits impregnation. In doing so, he is able to avoid those things having to do with Necessity, and he is able to avoid confronting the world as it actually is. We can see how the pain endured by the Diotimatic god *Eros* is completely lost in an Agathonian understanding – what does the tragedian know of sleeping in roadside ditches? Would he have the tough, parched skin described by Diotima (203d)? Certainly not – the world, as experienced by Socrates, would kill him.

It is into that world, however, the Socrates seems intent to draw the young tragedian. After all, Socrates lives in the comedian's world - he simply refuses to submit to the comic philosophy. In our example of the trees and the forest, both Aristophanes and Socrates are off examining the individual trees; Agathon alone saves himself for the entire forest. It is not insignificant, then, that the first things Socrates goes on to discuss after leaving off his conversation with Agathon are “correct opinion”³³⁶ and the actual character of *Eros* as a god (202e-204a). He needs to pull Agathon's head out of the clouds, and he does so by showing him the “mean between extremes” that is correct opinion: a man need not be wise to avoid being ignorant. A god need not be entirely beautiful in order to avoid being ugly, and a tree need not be a forest in order to be worth looking at. That is not to say one forgets the importance of wisdom, beauty, or forests – that is for the comedians to do – but only to show how Diotima's *Eros* embodies human desire more appropriately.

³³⁶ *Symposium* 202a

Once man has been liberated from extremes, tragedy and comedy among them, he is more capable of knowing how to love well.

It is interesting, after all, that we refer to it a taking Agathon's head "out of the clouds." Even though the *Clouds* was written about Socrates, the charge of "Vortex" seems a much better fit for the tragedian. After all, who seems more likely to replace the gods with chaos: the reason-driven, deliberating political philosopher, or the passionate tragedian who is given to bursts of inspired poetics? Indeed, tragic heroes are, by definition, opposed to the necessities of the world around them – they are given to an improbable, divinely-inspired ascent that upsets all order. There is an instinctual aspect to Agathon's speech that is decidedly dangerous: see how quickly he was uprooted by Socratic questioning (199d-201c). We may not be under the reign of Necessity, but we remain under the reign of *Eros's* whimsical inspiration.

To avoid this chaos, Socrates must make a man out of the tragedian. By pulling him out of the clouds and confronting him with the comedic world – that is, convincing him that he must also write comedies – he forces Agathon into the streets to observe man as he is. One should note that the first three speeches, ones we considered manly, were given by un-poetic souls. Diotima recognizes this in Eryximachus when she indirectly accuses him of being "coarse and materialistic."³³⁷ These are the souls Socrates is calling Agathon to examine and live among; these are the inspiration for comedies. Indeed, were they not the inspiration for the speech given by Aristophanes?

Socrates is, himself, a model of what this may look like. Instead of awaiting the outward inspiration of *Eros*, he carries it within his own soul. What else could the divine statuettes seen by Alcibiades be (221e)? We called them "spiritual embryos,"

which is a fancy way of saying that Socrates carries his own fertility within him during his pursuit of the Beautiful. Put another way: Agathon's men and gods must await the wisdom of *Eros* to show them what they ought to do and say, but Socrates carries something of that wisdom within his person. He takes these statuettes with him into the city and he seeks out those with whom he may be able to give birth to great ideas. This returns to the Satyric/Silenic duality within the Socratic soul, a duality that we might classify as the larger "goal" of Socrates's education.

For the dialogue, then, *eros* is an expression of man's moderation. This sounds counter-intuitive at first, but let us consider the assertion. What the conversation has revealed is that the tragedian does not know the object of his *eros* until it is shown to him, and that the comedian does not choose an object even when it is presented to him – we may also add the physician here, Eryximachus, who recognizes *eros* and seeks to conquer it. All of these situations fall onto extreme ends of the spectrum: the tragedian speaks in an entirely effeminate way, the comedian comes off as sterile, and the physician is a bad case of the hyper-masculine. Socrates moderates all of these views and assumes them in some capacity: his Silenic quality relates to feminine pregnancy, his Satyric pursuit of Beauty in which to give birth is masculine, and the imperfection with which he does both is an acknowledgement of man's quasi-sterility, or mortality. This last point will be explored further in the next section, as it is the chief point of dispute between comedy and philosophy. Regardless, we can see here how the man who loves well is he who has pride in himself as a human being, but also acknowledges his own limitation. He does not sit content, awaiting his revelation, nor does he believe that the entire world might be bent under his own ability.

³³⁷ *Symposium* 203a

In Agathon's particular case, this is accomplished by writing both tragedy and comedy. He is a poet – Socrates does not think to take away the gift of poetry given to him³³⁸ – but that poetic gift is fulfilled by holding no special affiliation to either genre. By distancing himself from the extremity of each, he is able to consider them wholly as what they are and are not. Finally, in seeing each more clearly, the poet is naturally able to write better poetry.

As a final point, we should mention that this is quite a rare thing: poetic skill does not often translate into a proficiency in writing both tragedies and comedies. Poets tend to demonstrate a peculiar “knack” for one genre over the other. The reason for this is that poetry is a *disposition* of soul; philosophy is a *temperance* of soul. A poet has some yearning within his soul that calls him into a special relationship with *eros* – that is why one of our first “divisions” in the dialogue is between the drinkers and the non-drinkers: it is a demonstration of their disposition. For Socrates, however, we will remember that he was indifferent; that is to say, he has tempered his soul into philosophy. Combining these two things – a disposition towards poetry and a tempered soul for philosophy – is what allows for a poet to compose both the tragic and comedic with equal skill.

While it is a bit outside of the dialogue, we might even be able to think a bit about what such poetry would look like. One imagines that the comedy would contain within it elements of the tragic, and vice versa. For instance, we might direct our humor at those things which truly deserve to be laughed at; in doing so, the characters and listeners are able to elevate themselves

in a serious way. We could reference the *Euthydemus* dialogue of Plato's,³³⁹ which is one of his most comedic works. Socrates and his friend Ctesippus spend the majority of the dialogue being led around in thought circles by a pair of “philosophers,” Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, who are near-experts in wordplay. The entire tone of the dialogue makes fools out of the phony philosophers and yet manages to teach us something about what philosophy is not – all while circling around the question of “why pursue wisdom and the philosophic life?” The comedy is thus directed at those who make light of the heights of which man is capable. On the opposite side, we can imagine tragic plays in which the realities of the world are not scorned, but embraced.³⁴⁰ Perhaps the tragic hero must still be doomed to death, but his death should not simply leave us in awe: it should inspire us to put into effect the greatness we witness. Rather than simply show us that the world is too small for a great soul, teach us how a great soul may elevate the world around him. For the tragedian who understands comedy, the whole of mankind is not entirely beyond redemption.

All of this Socrates lies before the tragedian. His seduction culminates in what is likely a valuable lesson – one that has the potential to make quite a great man out of Agathon. Yet there remains, at least for us, a final obstacle in affirming this teaching: a stubborn comedian by the name of Aristophanes.

³³⁸ Recall both Diotima's own belief in a wide-ranging view of love (205b-d) as well as our own project of creating a “ideal mate” in accordance with her Ladder.

³³⁹ This Euthydemus is not the same person referenced by Alcibiades at the conclusion of his speech.

Agathon, Aristophanes, and Socrates Part 3: The Comic End

Comedy, Aristophanes might say, is not a thing to be toyed with: one does not simply insert it into a philosophical framework, picking a choosing which aspects to highlight. If we accept any of the veracity in comedy, it must be accepted in total. What this means in practice is that the comedic soul asserts man's sterility: he denies the Socratic assertion that man's happiness lies somewhere in the cosmos or the eternal. Instead, man finds his happiness within his own life by finding a lover who grants him "wholeness." This idea of immortality and godhead was the reason we were first cleft in two – who would hazard a second attempt?

Indeed, if there is any sort of god or divinity beyond man, then that interaction is a one-way street: the divine lowers itself to us at its leisure (192d). For man to seek it out – for man to assume he even knows how – is arrogance and hubris. Socrates integrates comedy by admitting himself to be a man, and we can find examples of this in the description of *Eros* that Diotima gives as a "great spirit," or a "messenger and translator" between men and the gods.³⁴¹ Her understanding of a philosopher as a man who is always "in between, like Love himself"³⁴² is also an apt description of the Satyric/Silenic man that Alcibiades spoke about. Against this, Aristophanes simply says that this thing, this "vision" Socrates claims to pursue with his *eros* is a fantasy: one which does more harm than good for those to whom he teaches it. Rather than humbling or tempering man, it makes him into an arrogant, Satyric, and Silenic man who believes he has little golden statues hiding in his belly.

³⁴¹ *Symposium* 202e

³⁴² *Symposium* 204b

Aristophanes is taken here to be the most serious objection to Socrates because he lays claim to a fundamental truth: men have no business, indeed no ability, to investigate those things which are divine in nature. Being a moderate human being for Aristophanes means searching for your other half and restoring the state of happiness enjoyed previously. When you die, you head off to Hades together and that is all there is to the story. Perhaps, then, it is time to put Aristophanes to test, and we can see if Socrates is capable of claiming a final victory over the comedian.

To begin, we ought to ask why Aristophanes refuses to include any mention of Beauty in his speech. One might argue that the other half is, simply, a good thing because it is your other half – beauty need not apply here. That is not good enough, however, and here is why: *the mythical "wholeness" is beautiful.*³⁴³ Who could read Aristophanes's description of a reunited pair and not sense its beauty (192b-c)? He calls it an "amazing thing to witness," for the pair is caught up entirely with "affection," "intimacy," and "joy." We seek our partner because they happen to be good, but we do so because wholeness itself is a beautiful ideal to strive for. Now, one might simply say, as Aristophanes does from 192a-193a, that man is ignorant of his true desire until the god, Hephaestus, shows it to him. This is well and good, but it seems mightily inconsistent with the former sentiment he expresses at 191a: the split halves are seen "casting their arms around each other, knitting themselves

³⁴³ Stendhal does not necessarily protect Aristophanes here, for he never drew a conception of something like Aristophanes's spherical man. The closest thing, Stendhal "passionate love," still does not consider the pair as a single unit. Crystallization, as a process, focuses on the subject of your Love: in the comedian's case, the other half (see note 205). Aristophanes, however, has a sense of what a "whole" human being looks like; he is, in this case, standing on his own.

together and trying to bond and become one again.” It seems even more inconsistent with the fact that Aristophanes himself explains to the symposium that it is because of the split that “we are all perpetually in search of our perfect fit, the love of our life, our missing half” (191d). Even if man’s mind is so clouded by “affection” and “intimacy” when in the presence of his other half, he still had the good sense at one point to ponder the beauty of a “whole” existence. Why would he pursue it otherwise? That vision of wholeness, the Beauty of that single state, how could one resist?

If we admit this to be true, however, we come to quite a problem for the comedian. Does he truly believe that man seeks no answers about this alleged “wholeness?” Plato is relatively silent here, but that does not mean we ought to lose the argument. Let us consider: the main Socratic critique of Agathon’s position is that he wants to leave the world behind – he wants to be free of necessity. This is done through an allegiance to *Eros*, who will give us the gift of his wisdom and make us into the happiest of men. What Socrates exposes in this position is the premature declaration of *Eros* as perfect, a declaration Agathon makes because of his thorough disdain for the world as it is. Indeed, if Love is able to so completely liberate us from reality, why could it not make us perfect?

This, as we settled in the previous section, is an inhuman sentiment. If we agree to that, however, is not the opposing extreme inhuman as well? As much as Agathon wanted to leave the world behind, Aristophanes finds nothing beyond it. Yet the comedian, perhaps ironically, must face reality: there is no Hephaestus. The gods will never weld us together into a whole. There is no such thing as two human beings wrought together into a state of completeness. We are separated by accident, death, and the plain fact of being distinct bodies:

Aristophanean “wholeness” is a fantasy. The world “as it is” offers some vague notion of happiness, but it always leaves us with something missing. As much as a comedian may laugh, one wonders if his Muse is not sometimes the cause of a crushing depression.³⁴⁴

So our comedian is left at an impasse: he feels that there is something called “wholeness” that man is compelled to seek, and yet he knows that man can never quite grab it. Now this is where things are difficult: the comedian may simply shrug and say that the world is what it is – that is a legitimate and powerful argument in its own right³⁴⁵ – or he can consider whether or not it is worth pursuing wholeness in some other way. The former argument is, by the way, a perfectly acceptable starting point for many other philosophies; we cannot simply write it off and assume that human beings are thus born for this Diotimatic happiness.

At the same time, maybe we are. Socrates may not talk in the same way that Aristophanes does, but both men are caught up in this idea of wholeness. So is Agathon, for that matter – so is Eryximachus. *Eros*, as the child of Diotima’s Want and Where-withal, is our ongoing struggle with the truth that we are neither whole nor Beautiful, and it sometimes seems as though we might not be made for either one. Now, Aristophanes is perfectly capable of ignoring the speech of Socrates and the account rendered by Alcibiades – perhaps he attributes it to some sort of “philosopher’s arrogance” – but it

³⁴⁴ Aristophanes made a claim about the inherent “lacking” in man; Stendhal makes no such claim. To put it another way: Aristophanean “wholeness” is something that the lover is a *part* of, while Stendhal’s “passionate love” is something you *possess* or, at best, *participate in*. The difference is important: the Aristophanean lover may find his other half and possess her in the passionate way that Stendhal describes, but he will still not be a *part* of her.

³⁴⁵ See conclusion for the move to Nietzsche.

may not be wise for readers of the *Symposium* to do the same.

Ultimately, Socrates does not attempt a conversation with Aristophanes because nothing can be said. The final vision of Beauty is a vague conjecture, one that we are not immediately prepared to accept; and yet we are confronted by the sight of Socrates as a happy, hardy, Satyric/Silenic human being who seems occasionally capable of self-sufficiency in the highest way. He is an ugly man, and yet he can seduce the hearts of an Alcibiades, a Charmides, or an Agathon. Indeed, throughout the *Symposium*, we see Socrates as the beloved of Aristodemus, Apollodorus, Alcibiades, and (temporarily) Agathon – who has Aristophanes charmed? It might be philosophically “dissatisfying” to end the argument here, but it seems as though Socrates must simply *be* what he is and hope that the comedian will someday be persuaded. All the philosopher can do is show others what it means to live out the truth of his own *eros* – if done well, no human soul cannot possibly resist you forever.

Conclusion

“Let us not be ungrateful to it, although it must certainly be conceded that the worst, most durable, and most dangerous of all errors so far was a dogmatist’s error—namely, Plato’s invention of the pure spirit and the good as such. But now that it is overcome, now that Europe is breathing freely again after this nightmare and at least can enjoy a healthier—sleep, we, whose task is *wakefulness itself* [sic], are the heirs of all that strength which has been fostered by the fight against this error. To be sure, it meant standing truth on her head and

denying *perspective* [sic], the basic condition of all life, when one spoke of spirit and the good as Plato did.”³⁴⁶ -- Friedrich Nietzsche

When I reflect upon Anselm Feuerbach’s painting ‘Das Gastmahl des Platon,’³⁴⁷ one particular thing stands out above all of the rest. The right side of the work, complete with subdued colors and arithmetic precision, is presided over by a picture of the marriage between Bacchus and Ariadne; all of the reason, the *logos*, is settled below the image of the god of wine and intoxication. It is both a mockery and a statement of humility inserted by Feuerbach, and it makes us question the extent to which we can be convinced by Socrates – the man Nietzsche accuses of driving “rationality at any price; life, bright, cold, cautious, conscious, without instinct, in opposition to the instincts... a mere disease.”³⁴⁸ To what extent can Socrates push his reason and still call his pursuit *eros*? Indeed, who made the definitive claim that “wisdom” is something that must withstand the investigation of defective, limited human beings? Both Nietzsche and Aristophanes suggest that one cannot be “erotic” in the application of *logos* – it is counter to the definition of both.

And indeed, people are not always easy to win over. Leo Strauss wrote that “Aristophanes’s political posture seems to foreshadow Nietzsche’s political posture,”³⁴⁹ and one can imagine the reasons why. When

³⁴⁶ Preface to Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil*.

³⁴⁷ ‘Das Gastmahl des Platon’ is an 1869 painting that Anselm Feuerbach figured would act as his *magnum opus*. It is an interpretation of Alcibiades’s entrance into Agathon’s symposium, interrupting the objection of Aristophanes (212c). It is featured on the cover of my thesis.

³⁴⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*; from *The Portable Nietzsche* (hereafter ‘Kaufmann’), p. 479.

³⁴⁹ *Aristophanes and Socrates* (hereafter ‘Strauss’), p. 8.

Nietzsche talks about the denial of something called a “perspective,” we cannot help but remember this fully Aristophanean sentiment: that Socrates has his head lost in the clouds. One might recall how the philosopher is shown in the comedian’s play: his praises the “heavenly Clouds, great goddesses for idle men, / who provide us with notions and dialectic and mind,”³⁵⁰ but also speaks to their ability to “become all things as they wish.”³⁵¹ Nietzsche thus follows the precedent set by Aristophanes: the philosopher has allied himself with the formless, the unknowable, and, ultimately, the relative³⁵²; his perspective is skewed. Initiation into the “Diotimatic Mysteries”³⁵³ may have seduced the Socratic soul, but perhaps others find their charms in something else.

In so many ways, then, Nietzsche carries the Aristophanic soul into a world that is progressing beyond Plato. When Socrates turns Aristophanes’s piety in its head, he leaves mankind nothing but the mysterious vision of Beauty to replace it; thus, the philosopher makes an immoderate³⁵⁴ man who pulls down all things that do not fit into this distant vision. This is

particularly appealing to young people³⁵⁵; and, in the case of Aristophanes, the result was a son who turns Athenian law and tradition on its head by beating his father: the city has lost its authority. Instead of some high thing called “True Virtue” or “Beauty,” Socratic *eros* results in pure hubris.

So where does Nietzsche take all of this? “As a dialectician,” he writes, “one holds a merciless tool in one’s hand; one can become a tyrant by means of it; one compromises those one conquers.”³⁵⁶ Once a people – again, their youth in particular – has been touched by the power of reasonable inquiry, it is hard to undo the damage. Socrates, in this sense, has brought people to a dead end; an end encapsulated in Nietzsche’s sentiment that “God is dead!”³⁵⁷ They have been made to live as dialecticians in a world that seems decidedly Aristophanean – the result being nihilism. Nietzsche takes this fact and, determining that “no people could live without first esteeming,”³⁵⁸ tries to give mankind the gift of “overman” as a means to express one’s *eros* – the “chaos” in man. In this way, he tries to redeem the Socratic attempt at aiming beyond the mere trees, but he also refrains from laying a tyrannical *logos* over mankind.

There we stand: Aristophanes, Socrates, and Nietzsche between. It is tempting to say that men such as Agathon, in so much as he was a great soul who stood for the “Good,”³⁵⁹ are all fated to become Niet-

³⁵⁰ *Clouds*, lines 316-317

³⁵¹ *Clouds*, line 348. Consider the implication: the Socratic “vision” of the Clouds could be anything at all according to the whims of the viewer.

³⁵² Kaufmann, p. 179. For an example: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, ‘On the Thousand and One Goals.’ “A thousand goals have there been so far,” Nietzsche writes, “for there have been a thousand peoples.” Socrates is guilty of taking his goal and calling it the ‘only’ goal.

³⁵³ See notes 9, 259, and 262.

³⁵⁴ *Clouds*, lines 890-1102. A conversation between two hypothetical characters – “Just” and “Unjust” speech – is meant as a form of instruction to Strepsiades’s son, Pheidippides. Unjust speech (in some ways referencing Socratic dialectic and philosophy) advises him to “go back to the tongue, which *he* [Just Speech] / says the young should not practice, while *I* say they should. / Again, he also says they should be moderate. These are two of the greatest evils.”

³⁵⁵ When Strepsiades is unable to understand the teaching of Socrates in the Thinkery, the Clouds advise him, “if you have a grown up son, / to send him to learn instead of yourself” (*Clouds*, line 794-795). The Clouds know of Pheidippides’s susceptibility to the power of sophistic philosophy (as Aristophanes sees it).

³⁵⁶ Kaufmann, p. 476. *Twilight of the Idols*

³⁵⁷ Kaufmann, p. 124. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

³⁵⁸ Kaufmann, p. 170. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

³⁵⁹ In the literal sense of his name.

zscheans in their own way. Without a convincing end to the Socratic *eros* – that is, the great unification between *logos* and *eros* we get from Diotimatic Beauty or maybe the Christian God – one ends up a lot like Zarathustra, “the cup that wants to overflow.”

Yet one more consideration remains for us. While the *Symposium* is kind to the presentation given by Socrates, there is an undeniable “sense” to the whole thing. The Diotimatic presentation is impressive not because of its final “vision,” but for the *comprehensive philosophy* Socrates presents. We are impressed in that some essential of every speech made its way into the final teaching given by Socrates. Consider:

- Phaedrus and his idea of immortality is kept, but the motive behind his presentation is corrected. Instead of honor and shame in sight of one's beloved, Socrates suggests that man has a greater devotion to his own glory and immortality. This gives him the independence associated with pursuing philosophy.
- Pausanias's theme of pederasty is kept, but it becomes more of a paternal friendship than a lover's affair. Further, devotion to a single boy (physically and spiritually) is not deemed to be a virtue – instead, virtue is doing what one can for a greater number of beloveds, and refusing the simple, unproductive gratification of physicality.
- Eryximachus made the argument for *techné* as a way to utilize Love. The problem with this is that it made for a rather un-erotic

man; a fact that Diotima points out by (indirectly) calling him “coarse and materialistic.” Socrates adopts this by turning the omnipresence argument around: it is not necessarily the case that Love is omnipresent in *nature*, but in *man*. That man's *application* of his *eros* has many potential outlets is a sign of man's incredible fertility.

- Aristophanes is difficult, but one at least gets the concept of incompleteness in man. You might even say that Socrates moves the “other half” from a physical body to philosophic beauty. He embraces the world, unlike Agathon, and attempts to reconcile with some of the comedic sensibilities.
- Agathon presents us the image of perfect *Eros*. The problem is that he sees *eros* as a way for one to transport themselves out of the world and into some sort of perfection. Socrates agrees that *eros* is the inspiration, but it does not inspire us to leave the world behind and lose what it means to be a physical human being. Instead of leaving the forest behind, the Diotimatic *Eros* is a great spirit that *communicates* between the human and the divine – it does not make the human into the divine. Socrates attempts to make Agathon more fully appreciate the human experience.

As we can see, Socrates spares little. Can the same be said for Aristophanes? The comedian does not redeem the Socratic *eros*, never mind that of Eryximachus, Phaedrus,

or Agathon – he mocks them all. As for Nietzsche, his Zarathustra strikes the audience silly and makes them laugh³⁶⁰ - not exactly the desired effect. Socrates alone saves himself from appearing foolish while simultaneously courting mankind as a whole.

A man must avoid three things: pettiness, belligerence, and despair. He must not live among the worldly as do animals, nor must he believe that the world is a thing to be endured – a broken thing tainted by the chaos of accident and free choice. He cannot believe that the world abhors him and his magnitude, and that great things must be yoked upon weaker necks. He must be, as Man before the World, complete, common, and unusual³⁶¹ – a great soul. To this end, we can counsel nothing but how to love well, and this is the only worthy end of what we call a liberal education.

³⁶⁰ Kaufmann, p.126. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. After being taught the overman for the first time:
“When Zarathustra had spoken thus, one of the people cried: ‘Now we have heard enough about the tightrope walker; now let us see him too!’ And all the people laughed at Zarathustra.”

³⁶¹ Raymond Chandler, *The Simple Art of Murder*.

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