

Why is the *Symposium* a symposium? On Plato, love and the sympotic tradition

The *Symposium* is one of Plato's most famous dialogues and one of the masterpieces of ancient literature. In this work, Plato displays his literary genius at best, as he impersonates and imitates the style of seven different characters (including Alcibiades at the end) as they give their eulogy of *Erōs*/Love. Alongside the literary quality of the work, it is precisely the subject matter of the dialogue, namely the nature and characteristics of Love, that has made it so relatable to audiences throughout centuries. But why did Plato choose a sympotic setting to talk about Love? And what does this reveal about the features and structure of the dialogue itself? In order to answer these questions, we should start by considering the characteristics of the ancient Greek symposium.

To paraphrase Walter Burkert, the symposium was an aristocratic all-male drinking party which had private, political and cultural dimensions. The party took place after a solemn occasion, such as a sacrifice, or a formal dinner, and was deeply embedded in ritual. Before drinking, the guest performed a series of ceremonial acts, including prayers and the singing of hymns to the gods, which had an apotropaic function, probably linked to the awareness of the dangers of intoxication. Wine consumption, albeit the reason for the gathering, was by no means the only form of entertainment at the party, which featured a series of games meant to test the guests' skilfulness and worth. Beside pure entertainment, games offered a means of sublimating – at least partly – the highly competitive atmosphere of the party. For the symposium not only provided the opportunity to strengthen political and social bonds among his members but was also the perfect occasion to test other people's intentions and thereby detect possible enemies and traitors. Typical sympotic games included the *kottabos* – guests should hit a target with shots of wine – and forms of sport drinking, such as consuming a whole cup of wine with both hands tied behind the back. Most prominently, guests were involved in agonistic poetic performances, in particular through capping, in which they had to improvise lines of poetry by taking over from what the previous guest had just said. Typically, the symposiarch ('toastmaster') would select a topic (e.g. politics, old age etc.) for the performances.

One of the most important functions of the symposium was its contribution to the education of the young members of the aristocracy. For the symposium provided an ideal setting in which the values of the community were exalted, preserved and handed down to the new generations. The educational relationship between adults and young boys took the form of pederastic bonds between the lover (*erastēs*) – the older man – and the beloved (*erōmenos*). Theognis of Megara eloquently expresses the key role of the symposium in these lines addressed to his beloved, Cyrnus: “Drink and dine with them [i.e. the noble], sit with them, and be pleasing to those whose power is great. For from the noble you will learn noble things, but if you mingle with the base, you will lose even the sense you have.” (ll. 33-36). The education of the young did not have a merely individual dimension, as their moral improvement was seen as beneficial for the city as a whole. For individual acts of arrogance/violence (*hybris*) in the private context of the symposium are foreboding of future disaster for the community. Noticeably, even arrogance in love matters is targeted as dangerous to the city: after all, as Theognis reminds us, hubristic love led to the destruction of Troy and the downfall of many Greek heroes (ll. 1231-4). Love’s double nature – beneficial but also potentially detrimental – is indeed one of the favourite subjects of sympotic poems, which range from the praise and exaltation of the beloved, his beauty and charm (e.g. Anacreon 357: “I love Cleobulus, I am mad about Cleobulus, I gaze at Cleobulus”) to the acknowledgment of the dangers and pain stemming from such an uncontrollable passion (e.g. Anacreon 428: “Once again I love and I do not love, I am mad and I am not mad” and 398: “The dice of Love are madness and uproar”).

The foregoing considerations help us situate Plato’s *Symposium* in its social and cultural context. As we have seen, the topic of Love/*Erōs* is inherently part of the sympotic tradition, given the erotic framework within which the participants interacted. Plato’s appropriation of this traditional theme, however, is only part of the story. For it is not only what the guests talk about, but also how they do it that Plato takes over from the symposium. The choice of the topic is made by Eryximachus, whom we can consider the symposiarch of the gathering, since he also decides how the drinking should be carried out. The guests are required to give a speech in praise of Love in turns proceeding

to the right (*epidexia*), a typical sympotic usage, which regulated the passing on of the drinking cup too (177d). Most significantly, the guests engage in a competitive display of their praising abilities: each of them takes the prompt from what the previous guest has just said and responds to it through the correction or critical evaluation of the speech content and/or methodology – for example, Pausanias corrects Phaedrus' account according to which there is only one type of Love, claiming that in fact there are two, one heavenly and one vulgar (180c-d). The various speeches culminate in Socrates' contribution, in which he reports his dialogues on Love with Diotima, the mysterious woman of Mantinea expert in erotic lore. In line with the agonistic nature of the dialogue, Socrates too amend the mistakes contained in previous speeches, but even more subtly his speech proves superior since it manages to explain the features of Love listed by the other guests by subsuming them under a coherent and sound philosophical account.

The most striking point of Socrates' speech is probably the denial of Love's divine nature. By contrast with the mythical-poetic tradition, Love is not a god but a *daimōn* ('spirit'), a being whose nature is between mortal and immortal – for Love can die and come back to life in a day, as Diotima says (203e). Love's demonic status can be seen as reflecting its double and ambiguous nature: as we have seen, Love can be either a source of joy or pain and even be dangerous if not controlled. Socrates tells us that, in fact, it is only through proper education, a philosophical one, that the erotic impulse can be properly directed to beneficial ends, such as morality, culture, civic order and, eventually, the grasping of the Beautiful in itself, the contemplation of which elevates the single individual to the eternal realm of the Forms. For Love, as Diotima explains, is nothing but a desire to possess the good eternally and to achieve these ends is the way to fulfil it.

The pedagogic role of philosophy is key to the dialogue's significance with respect to the traditional sympotic framework which Plato appropriates. For by adapting the pattern of poetic exchange typical of the symposium to a discussion in prose, Plato signals a shift towards a new form of education which sees in live dialogue the most effective means of human enquire. It is not by chance

that Socrates' speech is the farthest from the poetic tones of the first eulogy delivered by Phaedrus, who makes extensive use of poetic quotations and examples (178b-180b). Indeed, the adoption of prose represented a major innovation which led to the rise of a new literary genre, sympotic literature, which was destined to have a long history in antiquity and beyond. As Plato says, Love is the desire for immortality, and indeed it could not but be with a dialogue on Love that Plato created a work destined to live, fascinate and influence us forever.