A Course on the Afterlife of Plato’s *Symposium*

Plato’s *Symposium* is one of the acknowledged classics of ancient Greek literature and philosophy. The dialogue’s main topic (the nature of *erôs*—‘love’ or ‘passionate desire’), its obvious literary qualities, and the highly original account of love presented in the speech of Socrates, all combined to make the *Symposium* one of the best known and most influential of Plato’s works. While tracing out all the lines of influence extending forward from the *Symposium* could easily become the work of a lifetime, it may still be useful to explore in a classroom setting the many later echoes of the *Symposium* in European art and ideas. Not only would such a course introduce students to a philosophical and literary masterpiece, it would also acquaint them with some of the milestones in modern European culture. In what follows I describe a set of possible discussion topics and assigned readings\(^1\) based on a recent offering at my own institution.\(^2\)

1. **Why might Plato want to write a dialogue about a ‘drinking party’?**

There is reason to believe that the ancient Greek *symposion* functioned not only as a source of entertainment for aristocratic Greek males but also as an occasion for fostering and cementing personal

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\(^1\) Not all the listed readings were assigned as required texts; some items were included for the use of the students assigned to give a class presentation on that topic. The course requirements were a mid-term exam (on questions relating to the *Symposium*), a class presentation on an agreed-upon topic, and a final exam (in which students were asked to comment on aspects of the afterlife of the *Symposium* as described in the class presentations by their fellow students).

\(^2\) A freshman honors seminar taught at the University of Maryland in the fall semester of 2000-01 (ARHU 298/HONR 299S: ‘The Afterlife of Plato’s *Symposium* in Western Art and Ideas’). There was one required text: Plato, *Symposium*, trans. C. Gill (Penguin Classics: London, 1999, $8.95), and a large body of Xeroxed secondary literature, organized by topic. The seminar met once a week for two and a half hours, with a celebratory dinner at the instructor’s house held on November 7th (the date traditionally associated with Plato’s birth and death, and the supposed setting for Ficino’s *De Amore*). During the 02-03 year the course was repeated as a special topics course at the junior-senior level, cross-listed by the Departments of Philosophy and English. Approximately two-dozen students enrolled in each course.
relationships, a means for imparting moral and civic values to the next generation, and as a venue for the forming of political alliances. Given Plato’s interest in achieving educational, moral, and political reforms (as evidenced by his Republic), it would be natural for him to want to explore the possible benefits and limitations of this important institution through the creation of a fictional symposion attended by some of the most notable personalities of 5th-century Athens.

Attic drinking-vessel, Munich 2646 (from the Perseus Project).
D. Konstan, Friendship in the Classical World (Cambridge, 1997), 44-47.

2. What were the various speeches intended to prove?

Differing interpretations have been given of each the seven speeches that make up the dialogue, but some general conclusions can be offered to students as food for thought. It seems clear (at least it did to my students) that the first three speeches are somewhat superficial approaches to the topic. Phaedrus, Pausanias, and Eryximachus all praise the god Erôs but from the perspective of their personal interest or expertise—in maintaining a bond of affection and loyalty, in defending the legitimacy of love on the ancient pederastic model (providing an education in moral and civic excellence in return for sexual favors), and in pursuing a scientific understanding of the cosmos. Although none of the first three speeches descends to the level of obvious self-parody, each clearly displays the personal interests and limitations of its author.
It is also clear that Aristophanes’ account of erôs as a yearning for reunion with one’s ‘missing other half’ represents a significant improvement over the preceding speeches. At least Aristophanes’ account speaks to the question of what erôs itself is, and--in acknowledging the sense of yearning and concern felt by one half for its missing partner--acknowledges the psychological or spiritual dimensions of erôs. Aristophanes’ account strikes a responsive chord in some students in so far as it anticipates the popular belief (as expressed in various teenage romance magazines) that for each person there is only one true match or ‘soul-mate’. Like each of its predecessors, Aristophanes’ speech seems to reflect its author’s particular area of expertise--the professional storyteller tells a charming story about erôs. Pace Dover, Plato would not have objected to the use of myth as such (indeed he employs mythical accounts in a number of other dialogues). But he probably did believe that no mythical account of erôs, however charming, could provide an adequate account of its nature. Agathon’s speech displays a similar parochialism--it is a beautiful poet’s view of erôs as a beautiful poet--and his ‘over-the-top’ praise of the god reveals the limitation of the encomium format as a means for discovering or expressing the truth.

Socrates’ speech, which he claims was taught to him by a priestess named Diotima, represents the highpoint of the dialogue from both a dramatic and philosophical perspective. Diotima’s famous account of an ascent from the lower forms of love (understood as so many different ways of pursuing immortality) up to a supreme form of love that has as its special object the divine ‘Beauty Itself’ is arguably the fullest expression of Plato’s own point of view. Not only does her speech make mention of a ‘Platonic Form’ of Beauty, it provides an implicit argument for the superiority of the philosophical life: only philosophical erôs operates with a clear view of its ultimate object, comprehends in its nature all the other forms of erôs, is oriented toward a truly eternal and unchanging good, and provides a reliable basis for imparting virtue to others.

Alcibiades’ drunken encomium to Socrates brings the discussion back down to the workings of erôs at the lower end of Diotima’s ladder, casting some light in the process on the defects in Alcibiades’ character, Socrates’ strength of mind and character, and on the tension that lies between the pursuit of a philosophical life, and the search for political power and honor.
As the dialogue draws to a close, Socrates is shown trying to convince (the tragic poet) Agathon and (the comic poet) Aristophanes that: ‘The same man should be capable of writing both comedy and tragedy, and [that] anyone who is an expert in writing tragedy must also be an expert in writing comedy. (223d) Prima facie, it seems likely that some significant connection among tragedy, comedy, and erôs is being suggested. But precisely what that connection is has proven difficult to say. Some scholars read the remark as a stipulation of the requirements for the poetic art, while others take it as a veiled reference to the dual tragic-comic character of the dialogue itself, and perhaps an implicit suggestion that poetic composition might be enhanced through the provision of a philosophical perspective.


T. Gould, *Platonic Love* (New York, 1963), Ch. 3.


*Symposium*, xxiv-xxvi and 21-32, xx-xxiii and 8-21, xxvii-xxxv and 32-50, xxxv-xxxix and 50-64.


3. Criticisms of the theory of love presented in the *Symposium*
Plato’s account of *erôs* rests in part on the assumption that there must be a single and unvarying quality of beauty present (to differing degrees) in all beautiful objects or persons. But the philosopher Wittgenstein has argued that it is an error to assume that words must possess meaning in so far as they designate a single, unvarying quality present in every instance. It is also quite likely that conceptions of beauty differ significantly across societies and cultures, or among persons of different races and genders. How then, in the face of these criticisms, can one defend the view that there must be a single essential nature of beauty, or a Beauty Itself? Moreover, Irving Singer has claimed that Plato gives us no compelling reason to regard the pursuit of wisdom as the most desirable and rewarding way of life; instead, he has simply focused on the particular pursuit he and other philosophers consider the most desirable and rewarding, and urged us all to do likewise. Gregory Vlastos argues that Plato’s account of love, although it usefully calls attention to one important enthusiasm—the passionate pursuit of wisdom—fails to do justice to what it means to love a person, i.e: (a) loving the whole person, rather than simply his or her admirable qualities, and (b) wishing that person well, *for that person’s sake*. Martha Nussbaum maintains that while Plato’s portrait of Alcibiades gives us precisely the kind of individual-oriented love Socrates’ theory failed to recognize, the dialogue as a whole offers a ‘harsh and alarming’ vision of the decision a person must make between pursuing philosophy and being fully human. The feminist critic Adriana Cavarero has argued that in Diotima’s speech Plato has adopted the female voice and the maternal language of pregnancy and birth as part of a subtle strategy to exclude women from any activity having a spiritual or intellectual dimension.


4. Echoes of the *Symposium* in late antiquity
Plato’s account of erôs and beauty in the *Symposium* was taken up by a number of early religious thinkers, either—as in the case of Plotinus—to fill out the dynamic aspects of a grand metaphysical scheme, or—as can be seen in the writings of many early Christian thinkers—to amplify and provide philosophical support for the Christian view that God created love and beauty in order for those who believe in him to ascend to a divine realm.


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5. ‘Socratic’ or ‘Platonic Love’ in the Renaissance

The publication in 1484 of Marsilio Ficino’s *Commentary on Plato’s Symposium on Love* introduced something faintly resembling a Platonic view of erôs to a large number of Renaissance thinkers, poets, and artists. Ficino’s Plotinian reformulation of Plato’s doctrines highlighted the contrast between ‘the two Aphrodites’, or common and celestial love, and the experience of interpersonal love as a preliminary stage to communion with the divine being who is its ultimate source. The further development of Ficino’s view by writers such as Pietro Bembo and Baldesar Castiglione spread the notion of a strictly spiritual or ‘Platonic love’ to the general reading public of 16th and 17th century Europe.


*Dante’s Paradise*, trans. M. Musa (Bloomington, Indiana, 1984), esp. Canto XXI, XXII.


W. Rebhorn, *Courtly Performances*, Ch. 5 (‘A Festive Symposium’), (Detroit, 1978), 151-76.

P. Shorey, *Platonism Ancient and Modern* (Berkeley, 1938), esp. 103-17, 118-45, 146-74.


### 6. Echoes of Plato’s Symposium in modern English poetry

During the 16th and 17th centuries many English poets sang the praises of a distinctly spiritual or ‘Platonick love’ while many others questioned the practicality of such a relationship. Two of the leading figures in the English Romantic movement, Keats and Shelley, adopted Plato’s view of the natural realm as the imperfect shadow of a far more real world, along with his view that in the experience of love we gain access to a higher realm and the power to express Beauty’s essential form in poetry and other arts.


7. *Echoes of Plato’s Symposium in contemporary thought*

In the 20th century ideas and themes from the *Symposium* influenced the thinking of a number of important thinkers, artists, and composers. Freud claimed (dubiously) to have borrowed from Plato the basic concept of the libido, and the association of love and beauty affirmed in the *Symposium* appears as a leitmotif in the writings of Thomas Mann, Virginia Woolf, and the American social reformer Jane Addams.

Jane Addams, ‘Youth in the City’ in *The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets* (New York, 1923), 3-21.


____________, To The Lighthouse (New York, 1927).


8. Plato’s Symposium and the visual arts

Over the centuries the Symposium has inspired the creation of many works of art. Among the earliest representations may be an ancient bronze relief found in Pompeii (now in the collection of the Museo Archeologico Nationale in Naples) which some have characterized as Socrates being instructed by Diotima, with an Erôs figure between the two. There is also a sketch of ‘Socrate et Diotime’ by Jacques-Louis David (part of a collection of sketches recently purchased by the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.), and a series of paintings of Socrates with Diotima done by the contemporary Swiss artist Hans Erni. Sir Kenneth Clark has linked Pausanias’s distinction between the two Aphrodites (later, the two Venuses) to a series of idealized representations of the female nude. Perhaps the best-known examples of ‘the two Aphrodites’ are the paired images of Venus in Botticelli’s ‘Primavera’ and ‘The Birth of Venus’. A number of paintings or drawings, beginning with a sketch by Rubens done around 1602, recreate scenes or incidents from the dialogue, with the most popular topic being Alcibiades’ dramatic entrance into the dining chamber at the conclusion of Socrates’ speech.


F. Broun, ‘The Louvre Concert Champêtre’ in Ficino and Renaissance Platonism (Ottawa, 1986).


Hans Erni, ‘Plato-Symposium I (‘The Essence of Sensual Love’) and III (‘Comparison to the Sileni’), in


Anselm Feuerbach, ‘Das Gastmahl des Platon’ (1869), now in the collection of the State Art Museum in Karlsruhe, Germany included in S. Benardete, On Plato’s Symposium (Munich, 1994). A second version of ‘Das Gastmahl’, painted in 1873, is housed in the collection of the National Gallery in Berlin.


9. Musical responses to Plato’s Symposium

There are musical recreations of scenes in Plato’s Symposium by Leonard Bernstein and Erik Satie, as well as a composition, by H. Kauder, written to accompany performances of the dialogue. (Bernstein’s ‘Serenade’ has also served as the basis for two ballets: Jerome Robbins’ ‘Serenade for Seven’, performed at the Spoleto Festival in July, 1959; and Christopher Wheeldon’s ‘Corybantic Ecstacies’, as described in Dance Magazine, Vol. 73, No. 6 (June, 1999), 78-79.) Most recently, John Cameron Mitchell’s rock musical ‘Hedwig and the Angry Inch’ borrows elements of the Symposium to tell the story of Hedwig’s search for love and happiness after suffering a botched sex-change operation. In her song ‘The Origin of Love’ (written
by Stephen Trask) Hedwig draws on Aristophanes’ story of the divided round people in order to express her sense of longing.

L. Bernstein, ‘Serenade after Plato’s Symposium’ (1954), Ensemble Stuttgart (Kulter Video, 1996); Hillary Hahn with the Baltimore Symphony conducted by David Zinman (SONY-ASK-60584).

L. Bernstein, ‘(Notes on) Serenade’ (Score published by J. Ruzicka, Inc).


F. Kobler and E. Mueller, trans., The Symposium, a Dramatized Version, with original music by H. Kauder (New York, 1966).

John Cameron Mitchell, ‘Hedwig and the Angry Inch’ (music and lyrics by Stephen Trask).


Erik Satie, ‘Socrate: Drame symphonique en trois parties avec voix, piano’ (1917-1918).

10. Plato’s Symposium in performance

The classicist Kenneth Reckford has argued that T.S Eliot’s The Cocktail Party draws on themes from the Symposium in its exploration of interpersonal and spiritual forms of love. In 1968 the BBC presented ‘The Drinking Party’ directed by Jonathan Miller and featuring Leo McKern in the role of Socrates. The program (distributed in the U.S. by Time Life Films but no longer available for purchase) presented Socrates as a headmaster being entertained by some of his former students. During the last two decades there have been at least five dramatic performances based either wholly or in part on Plato’s Symposium.


P. Schimdt, trans. and D. Schweizer, ‘Plato’s Symposium’ (performed at the Getty Museum in 1999).


J.H. Lesher

University of Maryland