

## "Physician, Heal Thyself": Diotima Teaches Socrates a Lesson in Love

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Socrates: Any speech ought to have its own organic shape, like a living being; it must not be without either head or feet; it must have a middle and extremities so composed as to fit one another and the work as a whole.

The same is true of the art of rhetoric as of the art of medicine...in both cases a nature needs to be analysed, in one the nature of the human body and in the other the nature of the soul.

*Phaedrus 264, 270*

Diotima: God does not deal directly with man; it is by means of spirits that all the intercourse and communication of gods with men, both in life and in sleeping, is carried on. A man who possesses skill in such matters is a spiritual man.... Spirits are many in number, and of many kinds, and one of them is Love.

*Symposium 203*

Plato's *Symposium* is a narrated dialogue in which dinner guests present a series of speeches in honor of Love at the home of Agathon, who has just been awarded the yearly dramatic prize. Phaedrus, Agathon, and Pausanias speak in the euphonic rhythmic cadences of the Sicilian school of rhetoric taught by Gorgias. Eryximachus, son of the physician Acumenus and a member of the medical guild, the Asclepiadae, speaks in a "medical college" manner: unrelenting seriousness, factual declarative statements that are teacherly and dogmatic; accolades directed at science. Aristophanes has won previous awards for comic drama; his exuberant exaggerated humor leaves no doubt why. Socrates delivers a speech that was spoken to him by his teacher, Diotima, a priestess from Mantinea who was called to Athens to avert a plague during his youth. She instructed him in the proper relationships among Love of several different kinds, wisdom, and language. Alcibiades' speech, the last, ridicules and ritually rebukes Socrates for being a "tease". Typically, Alcibiades is quite drunk by the time his turn comes; his entrance is ushered in by flute girls; and he does not remain awake for the last sections of the discussion. The concluding section of the dialogue finds Socrates, alone, still awake and wondering after putting all the others to sleep with his incessant questions. As the cock crows (Asclepius' cock?) he continues to ponder whether it would not be possible for the same man to have the knowledge required to write both tragedy and comedy--cannot the skilled tragedian be a great comic author as well? (245). Plato has achieved this mixed genre in writing the *Symposium*; to what end? As the speeches progress and the narrative gently comments, we see that the *Symposium* is not just a contest among speeches about Love, but also an illustration of the different kinds of Love that the speeches praise, illustrate, and define.

Just as there are different styles among the speeches presented, there are different levels of love among the participants: Alcibiades' bawdy language and unrequited lust for Socrates; Agathon's loftier sentiments; Eryximachus' cold restraint and analytic distance; Socrates' confession that he didn't bide by Diotima's teachings and has suffered as a result. Her teaching? That Love is "begetting a beautiful thing by means of both the body and the soul. All men are pregnant, Socrates, in both body and soul: on reaching a certain age, our nature yearns to beget. The conjunction of a man and woman is a begetting for both. It is a divine affair, this engendering and bringing to birth, an immortal element in the creature that is mortal; and it cannot occur in the discordant. The ugly is discordant with whatever is divine, whereas the beautiful is accordant" (206). Socrates' failure in love lies in his abstemiousness, his ascetic disdain for the physical in favor of the intangible, the invisible. He wants to live in the realm of the divine and this, Diotima teaches, is not possible for a mortal. The harmony that must be sought lies in teaching our physical and spiritual natures to work together. Diotima wants Socrates to go back and complete the "lesser" Mysteries: the ritual induction into erotic and physical love that he skipped over. Her message: you cannot get to the Greater Mysteries before you have endured the lesser. His preferences for intangible ideas that exist only in definition, and for ephemeral discussions of endless definition and redefinition and interrogation throw off balance the harmony between the physical and the mental; body and soul. In this she implies that Socrates' untiring dialectic is a form of spiritual surgery, cutting off one part of a body from another. Instead, Diotima teaches harmonic complementarity among opposites, and a loving relationship among interlocutors..

And where is Plato in all this? I think he often lurks nearby when Socrates speaks a speech that is not his own: here, in Diotima's speech; and when, in delivering the speech on love in the *Phaedrus* Socrates' dons the priestess' veil, indicating that it is not he but a god speaking. And there is a connection with midwives that links Socrates and Plato. In the *Theaetetus* Socrates declares himself proud to be the son of a brave and strong midwife, and that he learned much from her that he has applied to his own teaching: she was a midwife of physical offspring, he of new born ideas and truths. Plato's mother, Perictione, too, was a midwife, a healer; we are just beginning to unravel what that might mean for a revised understanding of the themes he depicts in the dialogues through the speeches of women: Diotima's teachings on love, certain kinds of learning and skill based on a balance between "higher" and "lower" versions of that knowledge, as with Diotima's teachings on love and language, and Aspasia's teaching of rhetoric in the *Menexenos*--in Socrates' rendition.. It is probably not just a joke or a mere fiction that brings these characters and teachings to Plato's dialogues. He isn't all that funny; and little in the dialogues, if anything, is pure fiction. This alone should alert us to teacherly and therapeutic purposes in Plato's narrated dialogues. I am not alone in suggesting that Plato borrowed and adapted from earlier Pythagorean teachings a number of terms that he adapted to his depictions of discourse as therapeutic. Not just the direct analogy to midwifery--*maieutics*--but the repeated references to "good" or "true" discourse as a well balanced body, invite us to explore Plato's invocation of earlier philosophical, religious and medical terminology. What is he talking about, and, how is he talking about it?

To address that question, and to illuminate substantial ties between love and discourse, desire and rhetoric, that are given scant attention in most readings of Plato, I turn to a comparison of Plato's words on love and discourse, with traces of Pythagorean teachings that are preserved among Presocratic fragments, particularly Empedocles' renderings of love and discourse as unifying principles of the psyche and of the universe. Like the Mantineans, the Pythagoreans were dispersed during and after the time of the Peloponnesian wars. Pythagorean communities throughout Magna Graeca were scattered; many of their teachers were forced into hiding (Waithe 11, 59-74). Alcibiades had a hand in this exile and dismemberment; Plato's mother Perictone was one of the teachers not forced into hiding, and, what does it mean that in the *Symposium* Diotima hails from Mantinea? At the center of Pythagorean teaching was the notion of Harmony (*harmonia*), a whole in nature, society and the psyche that could be brought about by teaching new principles of natural and social union. Many elements in Pythagorean teaching, and parallel themes in Empedocles, can be aligned without great difficulty with the notions of divine-human complementarity and of ever-changing qualities and elements that are developed in Diotima's teaching, and with the theme of the unity of discourse, lovers, and wisdom that is sustained throughout the *Symposium*, and elsewhere in Plato's dialogues (Waithe 69-71; Harrison, *Themis* 249n.4, 513-14).

The interlude that follows is provided to illustrate more directly than any exposition can the mingling of old and new terms that is drawn upon in the metaphorical chemistry, or alchemy, of the *Symposium*. Earlier Greek cosmologies, as well as the language in which they are expressed, are adapted in manifold ways in Plato's depictions of discourse, rhetoric, philosophy, and love.

She (*Aphrodite*) it is who is believed to be implanted in mortal limbs also; through her they think friendly thoughts and perform harmonious actions, calling her Joy and Aphrodite. No mortal man has perceived her as she moves in and out among them. But you must listen to the undeceitful progress of my argument. ...The elements alone exist, and running through one another they become different things at different times, and are ever continuously the same. This process is clearly to be seen through the mass or mortal limbs: sometimes through Love all the limbs which the body has as its lot come together into One, in the prime of flourishing life; at another time again, sundered by evil feuds, they wander severally by the breakers of the shore of life.

Empedocles, fragments 17, 20

When intimacy is established and the loved one has grown used to being near his friend and touching him in the gymnasium and elsewhere, the current of the stream which Zeus when he was in love with Ganymede called the "stream of longing" sets in full flood towards the lover. Part of it enters into him, but when his heart is full the rest brims over, and as a wind or an echo rebounds from a smooth and solid surface and is carried back to its point of origin, so the stream of beauty returns once more to its source in the beauty of the beloved.

*Phaedrus* 255

Agathon: "Here, Socrates, come sit by me, so that by contact with you I may have some benefit from that piece of wisdom that occurred to you there in the porch. Clearly you have made the discovery and got hold of it; for you would not have come away before."

Socrates: "How fine it would be, Agathon, ...if wisdom were a sort of thing that could flow out of the one of us who is fuller into him who is emptier, by

our mere contact with one another, as water will flow through wool from the fuller cup into the emptier."

*Symposium 175 c-d*

Socrates: Any speech ought to have its own organic shape, like a living being; it must not be without either head or feet; it must have a middle and extremities so composed as to fit one another and the work as a whole.

The same is true of the art of rhetoric as of the art of medicine. ...In both cases a nature needs to be analysed, in one the nature of the human body and in the other the nature of the soul.

*Phaedrus 264, 270*

For there do not start two branches from his back; (he has) no feet, no swift knees, no organs of reproduction; he was a Sphere, and in all directions equal to himself.

*Empedocles, fragment 29*

For man-woman was then a unity in form no less than a name, composed of both sexes and sharing equally in male and female. The form of each person was round all over, with back and sides encompassing it every way; two faces perfectly alike on a cylindrical neck. ...That which partook of both sexes was born of the moon, for the moon partakes of both. They were globular in their shape as in their progress, since they took after their parents.

*Symposium 190 a-b*

Dike [Justice] is the way of life of each natural thing, of each plant, each animal, each man, the regular course of that great animal the Universe, the way that is made manifest in the Seasons. Dike is manifest in the changes of the rising and setting of constellations, in the waxing and waning of the Moon and in the daily and yearly courses of the Sun. Dike seems sometimes to take on the semblance of the Moon, sometimes of the Sun.

*Themis 517*

Beaming Sun and Earth and Heaven and Sea--re connected in harmony with their own parts: all those (*parts*) which have been sundered from them and exist in mortal limbs. Similarly all those things which are more suitable for mixture are made like one another and united in affection by Aphrodite.

*Empedocles, fragment 22*

I will go back to the path of song which I formerly laid down, drawing one argument from another; that (*path which shows how*) when Hate has reached to bottommost abyss of the eddy, and when Love reaches the middle of the whirl, then in it, (*the whirl*) all these things come together so as to be one--not all at once, but voluntarily uniting, some from one quarter, others from another.

*Empedocles, fragment 35*

Anyone whom Love touches becomes a poet,  
"though a stranger to the Muse before."

*Symposium 196d*

(*The heart*), nourished in the seas of blood which courses in two opposite directions: this is the place where is found for the most part what men call Thought; for the blood round the heart is Thought in mankind.

*Empedocles, fragment 105*

Heat and cold, drought and moisture, when brought together by the orderly Love, and taking on a temperate harmony as they mingle, become bearers of ripe fertility and health to men and animals and plants, and are guilty of no wrong. But when the wanton-spirited Love gains the ascendant in the seasons of the year, great destruction and wrong does he wreak. ...So further all sacrifices and ceremonies controlled by divination, namely, all means of communion between gods and men, are only concerned with either the preservation or the cure of Love. ...Love conceived as a single whole, exerts a complete power; but that which is conummated for a good purpose, temperately and justly, both here on earth and in heaven above, weilds the mightiest power of all and provides us with a perfect bliss; so that we are able to consort with one another and have friendship also with the gods who are above us.

*Symposium* 188b-d

(A female divinity) clothing the soul in the unfamiliar tunic of flesh.  
Empedocles, fragment 125

It is not possible to bring God near within reach of our eyes, nor to grasp him with our hands, by which route the broadest road of Persuasion runs into the human mind.  
Empedocles, fragment 133

For he is not equipped with a human head on his body, nor from his back do two branches start; (*he has*) no feet, no weft knees, no hairy genital organs; but he is Mind, holy and ineffable, and only Mind, which darts through the whole universe with its swift thoughts.  
Empedocles, fragment 134

God does not deal directly with man; it is by means of spirits that al the intercourse and communication of gods with men, both in waking life and in sleep, is carried on. A man who possesses skill in such matters is a spiritual man, whereas a man whose skill is confined to some trade or handicraft is an earthly creature. Spirits are many in number and of many kinds, and one of them is Love.

*Symposium* 203 a

Central to the *Symposium* is the question of *which* god of love is to be honored: the higher or the lower, Aphrodite or Eros, Aphrodite the daughter of heaven or Aphrodite *pandemos*, the "common" Aphrodite (180). In counterpoint to these binaries stands Diotima's integrative view of love as "begetting on a beautiful thing by means of both the body and the soul" (206). Embodied in Diotima's name and developed in her teaching are the questions of the nature of Love, of the extent to which it is a divinity, and of how it is to be honored. Many of her points hearken back to pre-Olympian teachings concerning the *physis* or nature of the soul, of eros, and of logos as forever intertwined and entertwining, of discourse as love, and of lovers of discourse.

In more than one sense Love (*Philotes*, *Aphrodite*, *Eros*) was in a middle state of reconceptualization in Plato's era. The Olympian gods, whether taken seriously or not by the Athenians as divinities, were supplanting and diversifying qualities embodied in earlier divinities in Greek religion: Themis, Dike, Gaia, Demeter. Hera, reduced in the Olympian pantheon to a jealous wife, had

earlier been an aspect of Demeter, Earth, Erde (Harrison). The Goddess *Dike*--an as yet unblinded Justice--guards the gate leading to the underground path of insight Eleusinian initiates--and Parmenides--undertake; it is "the goddess," Themis, not Apollo, who teaches Parmenides. In refusing marriage and rejecting patriny the Danaids claim "our Great Mother" alone as progenitrix (Aeschylus, *Suppliants*). The teachings of harmony and balance, becoming part of the One, the All, what Parmenides calls "the still heart of well-rounded truth" are the goal of these religious-social philosophies. With the rise of the Olympian gods, discord and debate, opposites and oppositions, will increasingly be emphasized as values and norms. In Plato's work we see a wide range of depictions of discursive counterparts to these theological/philosophical developments. Dialogue and "true rhetoric" (*Phaedrus*), the love (*philotes*) of interlocutors for one another (*Letter VII*), are defined as goals and preconditions of the discovery of truth; truth itself is defined as communal, as non-existent without the participation of interlocutor-progenitors to bring it into being. At other points adversarial debates and relentless interrogations, including some conducted by Socrates, illustrate the new wars of words that marked the rise of Athenian rhetoric, the civic discourse that first emerged in the Periclean city-state. What we now call "care for the soul" was very much a part of Plato's dialectical discussion of "true rhetoric" in which the words of the speaker are written with love on the soul of the hearer; versus the adversarial rhetoric of the new empire and the new sciences, including the medical science he represents with Eryximachus.

The accusation that Alcibiades mocked the mysteries and defaced the herms--a running allusion throughout the *Symposium*, may be more than a story of ribald roughhousing widely used to defame not only Alcibiades but Socrates as well. They were old war buddies; and it was well known that both questioned the old gods in favor of the innovations of philosophy in the new city state. It may well be that Plato is "distancing himself" from Socrates in emphasizing his relationship to Alcibiades, now disgraced by his persuasions of the armies to join the unsuccessful Sicilian campaign. Or it may be that Plato is distancing himself from Socrates' reputed atheism, one of the charges brought against him at his trial. The stone pillars in front of dwellings, herms were the household patronymics of the newer democratic gods, the state cult of Olympian religion, but retained meanings from earlier cults in which they represented epiphanic births and resurrections of "the god," usually a son of the Mother depicted emerging from beneath the earth, escorted/midwived by Themis or Demeter, or both. Both Herakles and Dionysus first appear in this way (Harrison). Defacing the herms would be blasphemous as much to the newer patrilinear political order as to the older cthonic cults. But the graver affront is to the older order in which "the Goddess", the Mother, is honored as the source of life. In this context it is noteworthy that Socrates emphasizes that his mother was a midwife--and likens his teachings, and his role as a teacher, to the procedures followed by midwives.

All the more intriguing is that Plato's mother, Perictone, was also a philosopher-healer, very probably among the Pythagorean women healers and teachers of Solon's era and household (Waithe). Perictone's "On the Harmony of Women" (c. 420 BCE?) presents practical advice to women on their moral,

physical, and marital values and conduct. It begins with a long definition of harmony: "One must deem the harmonious woman to be full of wisdom and self-control; a soul must be just and courageous and wise, embellished with self-sufficiency and despising common opinions" (Waithe 32). The four cardinal virtues comprised in Periclytus's *harmonia* are defined in terms consonant with Plato's uses in Republic IV: *andreia* (courage), *sophrosune* (self-control), *dikaiosune* (justice), and *phronesis* (wisdom) (Waithe 69). Plato uses *sophia* interchangeably with *phronesis*; nonetheless, the parallels suggest at the very least familiarity with philosophical and moral terms widely taught to men and women by the Pythagorean teachers. *Phronesis* in particular, late came to be associated with pragmatic wisdom of the sort emphasized by Pythagorean teachings, alongside harmony

In explaining why we must get back behind the Olympians to understand the vestigial Greek religion drawn on in Plato's dialogues, Jane Ellen Harrison questions the vague notions of "a sense of the supernatural," or the "instinct for mystery, or the apprehension of a an "unknown infinite, beyond the visible world" (*Themis* 488). She asserts, "The mystery, the thing greater than man, is potent, not only or chiefly because it is unintelligible and calls for explanation, not because it stimulates a baffled understanding, but because it is *felt* [or is undertaken by contract, vow] as an obligation. The thing greater than man, the 'power not himself that makes righteousness', is, in the main, not the mystery of the universe to which as yet he is not awake, but the pressure of that unknown, ever incumbent force, herd instinct, the social conscience. The mysterious dominant feature is not *Physis*, but *Themis*" (490).

One of Harrison's emphases in recuperating the centrality of *Themis* to Greek religion is her function as a projection of collective social conscience. *Themis* represents custom and law as yet unwritten and as yet unarticulated as human creations; *ethea* --the root of our "ethics"--is the very air and environment of cultural surroundings, the collective atmosphere and "ways" (*Themis* 485, 492-93). "Themis is not religion, she is the stuff of which religious representations are made. That is why in the ordered sequence of gods at Delphi *Themis* has no place. She is the substratum of each and every god, she is in a sense above as well as below each and every god, but herself never quite a full fledged divinity" (485-86).

Questioning the late nineteenth notion of Dionysian and Bacchic women's rites as ecstatic abandon and even sanctioned violence, Harrison emphasizes the deliberation and control they exercised of over different modes of consciousness and discourse. "To consult an oracle, a veritable, almost physical, *rite de passage* is indispensable" (512). The oracle's head is veiled; men put on women's clothing in puberty and other initiation rites; Socrates' dons the veil to hide his head, and removes it after his first speech in the *Phaedrus* (243). Often demeaned in modern times as trivial jokes about effeminacy or transvestitism, such veiling had a nontrivial and well known function in antiquity. Harrison regards Plato's depiction of both education and philosophizing as a "rationalization of the primitive mysticism of initiation, and most of all of that profound and perennial mysticism of the central *rite de passage*, the death and the new birth, social, moral, intellectual." She notes that with no intent to conceal his borrowings, Plato slightly alters a number of terms familiar to all from the mysteries as then practiced;

Mnemosyne becomes anamnesis, *andreia* the "reborn," becomes *andros*, "manliness;" and so on for *catharsis*, *eklexis*, *anankalypsis*, *meletan apothneskein* (513).

When Plato "rationalized" "the primitive mysticism of initiation", including the rite de passage into new birth, new insight, understanding as cleansing, he did not leave as much behind as many modern readers have assumed. When Plato depicts Socrates as a flawed hyper-rationalist willing only to live outside the city and its communal laws, practicing his teaching at dinner parties, in homes or in the street, what is he advocating? Socrates appears in many different guises across the Dialogues, and many of them are unattractive. The contentious and aggressive interrogatives he uses do not reflect "care for the soul." Many of the poetic and mythic passages do: the myth of the Charioteer in the *Phaedrus*, the myth of the soul transported by Charon to the underworld in the *Gorgias*, and account of Diotima's teaching in the *Symposium*. And yet, Socrates elsewhere repudiates myth and narrative and poetry. Benign and maieutic irony can be teachers as well. Plato's distance from Socrates leaves us with much that is unspoken and unfinished. How much of Plato's understanding of dialectic, dialogue, and midwifery alike came much more from Perictone than we have before imagined?

And why did he not dare say so, except indirectly?

Questions for further consideration:

This all too brief synopsis encompasses several themes that are addressed in the *Symposium*, and across the themes and forms of Plato's dialogues as a whole. Like many Biblical and Homeric texts Plato's dialogues narrate interlocution. They are not straight narrative; nor are they straight dramatic scripts, intended solely to be performed orally. They are an innovative and transitional genre, blending oral and written conventions, older traditions such as ritual drama and myth with newer languages of philosophy and rhetoric, dialogue and debate. They were often read aloud in a reader's theatre setting, very probably in the kind of evening described in the *Symposium*. When today we wish to introduce new forms and uses of language, how do we do it? How do we teach or model or bring into being those new forms? In a classroom? By "performing" it so that others can learn? Plato chose to narrate dialogues in which persons spoke in unprecedented ways, mingling myth and poetry and philosophy and debate.

In our search for new understandings of narrative and therapeutic practices today of what possible value are Plato's Dialogues, and Diotima's teaching in the *Symposium*? The emphasis on *harmonia* and the One, the Whole, organic balance very probably reflects Pythagorean women's teachings. Diotima successfully averted a plague in Socrates' youth--how, we are not told. Her teachings, the Pythagoreans', and Empedocles again and again visualize discourse, language, and thought as physical entities and living bodies:

I will go back to the path of song which I formerly laid down, drawing one argument from another; that (*path which shows how*) when Hate has reached to bottommost abyss of the eddy, and when Love reaches the middle of the whirl, then in it, (*the whirl*) all these things come together so as to be

one--not all at once, but voluntarily uniting, some from one quarter, others from another.

Empedocles, fragment 35

To what extent do we "see" language in this way, whether in our own thoughts, in the language of others, or in the languages of groups? Where do we diagnose a dysfunctional discourse? What stories should not be told? What stories, and what forms of dialogue, heal?

Diotima "heals" Socrates by rebuking him. He needs to re-integrate the physical aspects of love and discourse lest he become arrogant and deluded. Does Plato's portrait suggest a Socrates who has been healed? Yes and no. And what are we to make of such a portrait--a portrait that must be completed by the reader or interlocutor to be "whole." In this, perhaps, we will find our own healing, if only through the diagnosis that comes through seeing how we want to tell the story.

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\*the middle section of this discussion was adapted from "A Lover's Discourse", cited above