

Asylum for the Shameless: Honor and Conciliatory Otherness in Plato's *Symposium*

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Abstract

This paper suggests that Plato's *Symposium* is in part concerned with a comprehensive critique of *shamelessness*—in particular, the shameless competition for honor practiced by the Athenian intelligentsia. Plato develops this concern by distinguishing two types of poets. One, a nurturing genius constrained by the modesty proper to the true lover; the other, a reckless panderer who speaks free from the influence of eros and instead seeks immortality through the pursuit of earthly fame. The lesser poets pursue such fame by developing a meretricious relationship with the “crowd.” For Plato, the crowd represents a unique misappropriation of desire that arises through a corruption of conscience. Crowds exist as *cultivated havens* used to assuage moral anguish by separating humans, at least temporarily, from their modesty. This type of crowd provides a conciliatory otherness to a morally confused self, providing

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dependable comfort and gratification for those who live within it and for those who appeal to it.

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I. The Crowd

To understand the role of the crowd in the *Symposium* is to understand the precise *type* of crowd contemplated in the text. Plato is not speaking about a necessarily reckless assemblage or irrational herd. I would instead contend that the distinguishing characteristic of a Platonic “crowd” is its corporate expression of shamelessness. One should notice, for example, that Plato depicts the crowd as neither a *thorubos* (an uproarious and riotous mob) nor a *homilos* (an association or affiliation). He instead speaks of an *ochlos*, which is a type of gathering distinguished, not necessarily by its demeanor or intent, but by the utter “commonness” of its behavior. In effect, *ochlos* refers to the herd of mediocre minds that are (1) motivated by mainstream taste and (2) united by an appetite for distraction. Thus, while the crowds depicted by Plato are not necessarily ill-mannered or untamed, they do act at “random.” (*Crito*, 44d) In other words, they act without philosophical discipline. They are consequently

mundane and often unalert, even if they are quite active in a purely physical manner. Sometimes docile and kind, the *ochlos* is, in Plato's mind, an intellectually bland collective that enjoys the simple certainty of its puerile socialization. The crowd does not embrace the restless pursuit of excellence; but neither does it practice the wanton denial of goodness; it instead exists in between these, searching for conciliatory support and pleasant preoccupation rather than rigorous education and justice. In other words, crowds seek not wisdom but acceptance, not virtue but validation, not discipline but forgiveness, not refutation but comfort. A crowd is more at home with flattery than dialectic and is consequently quite vulnerable to the former.

M. J. Burnyeat noted that Proclus thought that the "first words" in Platonic dialogues were important harbingers and that there may be "moral lessons to be learned from the way interlocutors conduct themselves in the opening scene. "(3) With such a thought in mind, I note that Socrates's "first words" in the *Symposium* express his aversion to "crowds." (174a) There is certainly foreshadowing here given that Agathon's party will be not once but twice disrupted by crowds. First, Alcibiades coasts in on the waves of a crowd (212c) when he makes an unexpected appearance as a participant in a *komos*.¹ Later still, in the final paragraphs of the dialogue, another large drunken group appears and "everyone [is] made to start drinking again in no particular order." (223b) Indeed, the impact of this second crowd is so disruptive to conversation that it brings about, as Alexander Nehamas reminds us, "the disintegration of the party." (Plato, 1989: xxii, n.7)

¹ The Greek word *komos* refers to a nocturnal band of usually inebriated revelers who, after a self-indulgent party, take to the streets and parade raucously in either faux or genuine Bacchanalian fashion.

In any society, there are superficial benefits to joining the *ochlos*. When one enters the crowd, one steps into a makeshift psychological haven that can assuage guilt and self-doubt by temporarily separating its members from their sense of modesty. In other words, the crowd can provide a conciliatory otherness for the morally perturbed citizen. A breeding ground for false self-confidence, the crowd can provide effortless access to comfort and gratification and an escape from the vexing voice of conscience.

There is not only a perceived benefit in participating in the crowd; there is also a seeming utility in performing *before* the crowd. When one postures before the crowd, one can find a superficial sense of self-worth. While genuine poets produce narratives inspired by divine eros, conciliatory poets are honored more widely because they know how to compete successfully for the affections of the crowd. These crowd-pleasers are, for Plato, not lovers but narcissistic panderers. They revel in cultures that evaluate art in terms of the “clapping of applauders” and on the basis of “catcalls and discordant outcries.” (Laws, 700, c, d) These lesser poets are thus among those people who, according to Aristotle, seek honor “in order to convince themselves of their own goodness.” (EN, 1095b)

In part because of their relationship with these lesser poets, crowds become breeding grounds for rumor. In the *Apology*, for example, we hear that “all of these rumors would not have arisen” against Socrates if he “had not been doing something out of the *ordinary*.” (*Apology*, 20c. Emphasis mine) The fraternization typical in the gross “ordinariness” of the crowd thus stands in contradistinction to authentic community. In Plato’s eyes, an evolved, meaningful, and civilized community is always a *spiritually* invigorated collective that hopes to ask

more than the merely expedient questions of survival; such a community achieves its pinnacle realization in the mature, shared, courageous love of wisdom.

In this sense, even though Socrates avoids the *ochlos*, he does not eschew companionship. Clearly, for a philosopher who walks the marketplace, philosophy is an interpersonal pursuit. Nevertheless, as Chris Emlyn-Jones points out, “the gatherings of the Platonic dialogues are aimed not at an *ochlos* but at a select audience; it is only with a limited number of people, those intellectually and emotionally willing, Plato claims, that cooperative attempts to discover philosophical truths are possible.” (2009: 390) A sophisticated and civilized community gathers to venerate and sometimes cultivate the ideals of moral culture, but not to tell tales or circulate gossip. This civil community comes together in celebration of conscience and justice and engages open-mindedly in investigation and debate.

In contrast, the seductive *ochlos*, a virtual asylum for the shameless, serves as an easy and ready means for sophists or tainted dramatists to build a significant reputation. Such fame is acquired, not through the channels of heavenly inspired eros, but through a clever exploitation of *earthly* desires. Plato explains that such panderers appeal boldly to the commonplace consciousness of those “seated together in assemblies or in courtrooms or camps or any other popular gathering of a crowd, and with loud uproar censure some of the things that are said and done and approve others, both in excess, with full-throated clamor and clapping of hands.” (*Republic*, 492b-c) In exchange for the superficial manipulation of such crowds, the audacious panderers roll in the mud instead of reaching for the

transcendent.² They leave their audiences pecking around in the grass rather than looking upward from embodied existence. Put simply, then, the capitulating poets collect honor by shamelessly satisfying the immature fancies of the easily satisfied crowd. The crowd, in turn, willingly tolerates such *shamelessness* when it provides them with a psychosocial utility or easily consumed pleasure.

Although the crowd is not shameless in everything it does, it regularly stretches the bounds of civil tolerance to accommodate episodic immodesty, giving special latitude to the shameless acts that provide gratification and escape. There is no appeal to a transcendent principle; the crowd feasts on the sheer particulars it is fed. The *ochlos* tries to defend what it does by internal standards; that is, for members of the crowd, one's activity is justified simply because the crowd does it. In such instances, one's behavior is deemed acceptable because everyone is participating enthusiastically in the identical behavior. The crowd tends to openly accept rather than admonish its constituents. The standard for success is perfected mediocrity. The markers of excellence, for the crowd, are found in the mainstream mechanics of sociability. In other words, excellence for the crowd is represented by the encapsulated propriety found in recognizable and expedient behaviors, behaviors reducible to the sophisticated model of excellence, which was, as Hugh Tredennick explains, simply excellence "in the sense of efficiency: to make people good speakers, good citizens, successful in public life." (2004: 290)

² R.G. Collingwood explains that "Plato lived in a time when the religious art of the earlier Greeks, such as the Olympian sculptures and Aeschylean drama, had decisively given way to the new amusement art of Hellenistic age. He saw in this not only the loss of a great artistic tradition and the coming of an artistic decadence, but also a danger to civilization." (Collingwood, 1938: 98)

Such sophisticatedly groomed crowds become problematic because they are intransigent in their banality, pursuing a half-conscious and instrumentally driven life. They lack civilized acuity. They identify happiness with passive comforts and are thus bewitched more by spectacle than beauty. In effect, the Platonic crowd seems to represent that sizable nexus of human beings which Aristotle described as “bovine” in their tastes. (*EN*: 1095b20) Although members of the crowd may well lead a double life—and consequently have their meditative moments—they generally feel significantly burdened by the intimidating call of virtue and seek frequent respite from the labor of conscience, hoping to escape to some degree the inevitable responsibilities of life.

II. Shamelessness

Before I look specifically at the role of shame in the *Symposium*, let me take a moment to explain the context in which I am representing this moral phenomenon. When understood in the Aristotelian sense as the raw material of modesty (*EN*, 1108a30), shame can be seen, not only in the ex post facto feeling of guilt, but more importantly as a *preemptive* moral resource, something that one wishes to carry with one because it *prevents* its possessor from acting in an impious or imprudent manner.³ Shame is inhibitory in a positive sense.

³ Etymologically, the word shame suggests the act of “covering up.” The impulse to cover oneself emanates from an overwhelming sense of being “watched”—watched, for example, by God, by the sage, or other keepers of moral truth. The shame-driven person thus shrinks in the presence of the penetrating stare. Recent etymological scholarship reiterates the often-expressed claim that shame is most profoundly linked to the specific covering of genitalia (Lieberman, 2008) In this respect, perhaps the most famous example of covering up is represented by the Garden of Eden fig leaves, where such “covering” constitutes the first moral consciousness of human culture. In contrast, shameless individuals parade naked before the world. These denuded creatures are honored only

It arises as a precautionous orientation. Unlike the merely punitive feeling of guilt, a mature sense of shame can hold one back from inappropriate, wasteful, or dishonorable action. This inhibitory function of shame is, for example, recognized by the well-known philosopher of moral psychology John Deigh who writes, “shame means that one is prepared to restrain oneself when one verges on the shameful . . . having shame can be understood here as self-control.” (1983: 242)

One might go so far as to say that shame is the paradigm of human-hearted restraint because, in its highest manifestation, it approximates a tutelary spirit; that is, it functions as a protective *genius* of conscience in the classical Latin sense, acting like a kind of intuitive moral bodyguard. Indeed, this type of shame may have received its quintessential expression in Socrates and his famous “prophetic guide” (*Apology*, 40a) or daemon of prudential action—the divine voice that served him as a *warning* device. A properly tempered sense of shame is thus invaluable because it operates much like a guardian angel and consequently establishes an earthly connection with the divine.

In this same sense, one can argue that shame assumes Diotima's description of the “messenger” eros (202e-203a) that occupies the space between the divine and the immanent, representing an amalgam of body and mind. Shame is associated with, and may be a necessary ingredient within, normative judgment. Indeed, Plato is certainly hinting at this when he has Phaedrus associate shame with a necessary “guidance” (178d) for “living life well.” (178c) Rightfully and proportionately exercised, shame can portend moral danger. In contrast, guilt appears *after* we have failed.

Certainly, shame itself can become a problem. It can be manipulated malevolently to oppress people; or it can be felt in excess and generate undue reticence. However, as Aristotle points out (*EN*,1107a15), complete shamelessness is *always* bad. Therefore, it should not be our goal to overcome shame because, as mentioned above, it is an invaluable cautionary disposition; and even though Aristotle claims that the moderation of shame is not in itself a virtue, he also says that such acts of modesty should be praised. (*EN*,1108a30) Those who feel absolutely no shame forfeit their basic humanity. To live apart from shame is to switch off a visceral radar that obtains directly from the imagery of first-order moral existence; abandoning shame is akin to pressing a type of ontological “mute” button.

Such shame seems to be part and parcel of human domestication. Yet shaming is also something more than mere taming. Although a certain openness to domestication is present within all herding animals, there is obviously a difference between a herd and a human community. Many types of herds gather for protection, for the expression of affection, or for purposes of caring for offspring; a certain “taming” of raw animal energy evolves through these instances of herding. However, unlike other animals, humans are *distinctively* domesticated through the more profound and civil phenomenon of shame. Shame stands at the basis of settled existence; when humans abandon their feral wandering, it is shame not utility that stops us in our tracks.

Quite early in the *Symposium*—indeed from the mouth of the first speaker—we are introduced to the putative connection between love and shame. Phaedrus asserts, “if a man in love is found doing something shameful, or accepting shameful treatment because he is a coward, then

nothing would give greater pain than being seen by the boy he loves.” (178d)
He continues:

We see the same thing in the boy he loves; that he is especially ashamed before his lover when he is caught in something shameful. If only there were a way to start a city or an army made up of lovers and the boys they love. Theirs would be the best possible of societies for they would hold back from all that is shameful. (178e)

These intriguing remarks of Phaedrus represent only the first of Plato's references to shame. Pausanias (184A-184B) seems to provide an empirical or *anthropological* account of shame, speaking of the customs through which love is socially situated. He concludes that if a lover makes a young man “wiser and better” than the love is “not shameful.” (184E) Aristophanes, too, addresses the question of shame. Indeed, the comedian's account of the “sliced” human beings itself narrates the shaming of creatures who had become too bold. In Aristophanes tale, love is born concomitantly with shame and pietistic humility, as Zeus reduces at once the power and arrogance of humans. He turned the human's necks around “so that each person would see he had been cut and keep better order.” (190E)

Much later in the dialogue, when speaking of his love for Socrates, Alcibiades also invokes the phenomenon of shame. He says in fact that Socrates is the “only man in the world who has made me feel shame.” (216b). He also admits that, within a world of wise companions, he would be “ashamed” not to take Socrates as a lover. (218d) The shame Alcibiades feels in the presence of Socrates is, as Ariel Helfer contends, “born of abandoning the

hard work of self-improvement and the development of virtue, a course Socrates persuasively insisted was necessary for Alcibiades to become as worthy of honor as he supposed himself to be, in favor of easy political victories and meaningless honor.” (2015: 158) Helfer explains that Alcibiades is troubled by the fact that he continues to pursue the political life “despite having become convinced that full-hearted democratic statesmanship, even that of Pericles, rests upon thoughtless assumptions about the good and noble.” (2015: 159) Alcibiades feels shame because he has, in Helfer’s estimation, received a Socratic “ultimatum” and must choose between receiving honors from “those whose ignorance and imprudence Socrates painfully exposes and the indefinite suspension of that pursuit for the sake of Socratic education.” (2015: 159) Alcibiades tells tales about his efforts in the gymnasium to seduce the naked Socrates, but the most important “nakedness” that one should note is that of Alcibiades, who feels helplessly exposed when it comes to dialectical wrestling.

However, what is even more interesting are the passages where Plato discusses the inherent relationship between crowds and shame. For example, when Alcibiades claims that Socrates alone makes him feel shame, he goes on to say, “yet, the moment I leave his side, I go back to my old ways. I cave into my desire to please the crowd.” (216b) As Antonio Cua explains, shame in ancient cultures “cannot be understood without appreciating the agent’s respect for the opinion of significant others . . .” (2003: 153) Such significant others might include, as David Konstan points out, “those whom we admire or admire us, those with whom we compete, and older or cultivated people, along with righteous folk not inclined to pardon or forgive.” (2007: 1046) In

this way, shame is part of, not only religious devotion, but also any secular encounter in which one enters the “sightlines” of some venerable icon.

This is why one finds no sense of shame present within the crowd; there are no venerable icons, no significant others, no supreme personalities, no stern-faced mentors populating the herd. One finds only the familiar energy produced by our *common* brethren. When covered by the camouflage of the crowd, one is free from the vigilance of significant others: one simply enjoys the disingenuous security provided by a “safe place” wherein no one is especially good but everyone is good enough. Nearly anyone can meet the unimaginative standard for acceptance. The *ochlos* observes at best a kindergarten utilitarianism. The only cause for expulsion from the conciliatory *ochlos* would be to act in a manner that threatens the prevailing ordinariness of the activity at hand.

In this respect, Socrates is the foremost significant other for Alcibiades. When not shackled by the penetrating stare of Socrates, Alcibiades finds himself drawn to the immoderate horseplay of the exuberant *komos*, wherein his good looks and quick wit grant him the instantaneous adoration of those assembled. He feels no shame in doing something shameless in front of mainstream consumers of pleasure. Playing to the crowd is, for the superficially clever person, a short-cut to tributes and awards.

Crowds and shamelessness are also linked earlier in the dialogue where Socrates speaks of Agathon's relative comfort with crowds, commenting on how “brave and dignified” Agathon always is when he steps onto a “theatre platform” and “looks straight out at the enormous audience.” (194b) Agathon quickly responds with the rhetorical question: “So you suppose I don't

realize that, if you're intelligent, you find a few sensible men much more frightening than a senseless crowd?" (194b) Socrates replies, "on the other hand, you wouldn't be ashamed to do something ugly in front of ordinary people." (194c) These statements underscore the fact that only when the countenance of a putatively wise individual is cast upon one does the question of shame truly enter the picture, because the wisest—who are, ultimately, the *lovers* of wisdom—engage enough with the transcendent that their judgement means something. From the concerned eye of Socrates comes the refracted glare of the gods.

Agathon, the *l'enfant célèbre* of the evening, is the consummate crowd-pleaser. He illustrates, for Plato, the typical indiscretions of youth. Although not terribly young, Agathon is still youthful in looks and personality. He is also youthful in his capacity for judgement. His general immaturity is apparent not only in his speech but is reflected symbolically in his ongoing role as the beloved of Pausanias. As Nehamas points out, young beloved boys, "once they reached adulthood . . . ceased being a beloved and became a friend: the affair is over. Long-standing relationships between adults, like that between Agathon and Pausanias were the exception rather than the rule." (xv) Instead of remaining beloved objects for life, properly grown men eventually become, as Aristophanes reminds us, "lovers of young men." (192b). *Emphasis added*). It seems, then, that by holding fast to his long-term status as the beloved, Agathon shows little interest in growing up. He wants to be Pausanias's boy forever; but this represents, for Plato, a childish and narcissistic approach to immortality, since only *lovers* and not the beloveds are pregnant with the urge for reproduction.

Nevertheless, Agathon delights in being, not the lover, but the precious *object* of affection, and the fact that Agathon's speech celebrates both youth and the supposed youthfulness of eros only underscores this point. Indeed, Agathon claims that love stays young forever. (195c) There is, for Plato, a naïve self-satisfaction among the youth. Alcibiades, for instance, claims that when he was young, he had "a lot of confidence in his looks" (217a). But Socrates later reminds him that "the mind's sight becomes sharp only when the body's eyes go past their prime." (219a) Young boys have a physical attractiveness that makes them suitable manifestations of a beloved but lack the intellectual modesty to be suitors of the Beautiful. Youth in general lacks the wisdom to love wisdom. It thus seems that Agathon, shackled by his forever-young fantasies, is not able to move on to a legitimate educator role—the role of leading someone closer to wisdom and virtue—possibly because, as John Anton claims, Agathon's art itself does not "lead to wisdom." (1996: 222)

Agathon instead basks in the adoration of the crowd. He pursues the puerile symbols of sophistic excellence but not excellence itself. He sets his sights on honors but not honorable life. He has not for this reason pleased the gods. He has attained only the pathetic, fleeting, and often dishonest consolation of earthly fame. In this respect, the award-winning Agathon, the evening's putative model of "success," is in fact the biggest failure. He is the antithesis of the true poet if we presume that the theatre is indeed the place of "ordinary crowds." (194c), Agathon thus represents shamelessness in two ways: (1) through the arrogance of youth and (2) in his insatiable appetite for honor. In

fact, the dialogue is so directly and indirectly concerned with the young poet that Plato might have alternatively named it the *Agathon*.

Agathon, unlike many of the others, does not mention shame in his speech. This is perhaps because he speaks quite shamelessly—especially when he musters the extraordinary audacity to apply uncritically each of the cardinal virtues to eros. His hyperbolic oration—parts of which even Agathon may intend as parody⁴—is essentially used as a set-up for Socrates’s speech. Beyond this, Agathon *reacts* shamelessly to Socrates’s ensuing critique. One must remember, as Emlyn-Jones points out, “not only does Agathon admit that his speech was wrong, but at no stage in his encounter with Socrates does this aspect seem to matter much to him; his willing concessions throughout (199d9-201c7) make him appear detached from the content—its effectiveness is what is important; its truth is neither here nor there.” (2009: 396) Indeed, Agathon even thinks of his post-speech interchange with Socrates as a type of competition between crafty interlocutors. This comes clear when Agathon says, “I cannot refute you Socrates,” and Socrates quickly adds, “it is the truth my beloved Agathon that you are unable to challenge. . . it is not hard at all to challenge Socrates.” (201c)⁵ The seducer of theatre crowds thus fails before the court of reason. Agathon is disinterested in the truth because, when it comes to matters of eros, he is more concerned with enhancing his

⁴ Nehamas suggests this when he claims that in much of his speech Agathon is “playing for laughs,” and “indulges in an unrestrained parody of Gorgianic style . . .” (xviii); however, Agathon’s caricature of eros only takes him further from the truth.

⁵ Certainly, it is not unimportant that Socrates uses the adjective “beloved” when referring to Agathon here. It is largely because of Agathon’s interest in becoming a beloved that the young poet cannot spar philosophically with the likes of Socrates. The young tragedian is focused on presenting himself as an object of adoration and thus comes down on the non-erotic side of the lover-beloved relationship.

status as an admired object than infusing his soul with the elevating spirit of philosophy. Thus, because he continually casts himself in the role of the beloved, Agathon—the celebrated prize-winner in one social sphere—is shown to be a failure in another, more human, endeavor; that is, he struggles with the enterprise of self-improvement.

None of this should be surprising because, as Andrea Wilson Nightingale reminds us, “one of the most prominent features of the encomia of the fifth and fourth centuries is the agonistic stance adopted by their authors.” (1993: 117) The speech making in the *Symposium* is for the majority of those present not an ardent praise of eros at all, but rather a stylized competition wherein winning over the audience is more important than speaking the truth. The basic premise of the *Symposium* itself links the phenomena of honor, contestant, and crowd; after all, the guests gather to bestow honor on a poet who has prevailed in a *contest* aimed at pleasing a *crowd*.

Plato is concerned to point out that people who seek honors through mechanical participation in contests can quickly lose track of truth and fall into inexcusable patterns of flattery. Indeed, Mary P. Nichols describes the speeches of Phaedrus, Pausanias, and Eryximachus as “overblown, pretentious, and even impious.” (2004: 188) I do not mean to suggest that every speech in the *Symposium* is empty. Many of the symposiasts seem to have something meaningful to say, whether on purpose or by accident. However, Plato is trying to show that, due to the relentlessly competitive nature of the evening's enterprise, the speakers became so set on oratorical victory that they could not stick close to the truthful direction in which many of them might have been occasionally heading. Only Socrates will provide a worthy encomium

because he speaks from the standpoint, not of a sweating competitor, but of a fully engaged lover of wisdom.

The quintessential contestant, for Plato, is someone looking to *be* loved, not a humble lover like Socrates who, due to a paucity of wisdom, longs for communion with the Beautiful and the Good. The self-interested competitors in the *Symposium* thus employ their panegyrics in a self-serving manner. They perform immodestly—indeed, they seem to be searching for a chance to take an extra bow. This common thirst for adoration from the crowd causes the competitors to exaggerate and misrepresent the various virtues attributed to the praiseworthy object. Such distortions please the naïve audience and thus can perhaps help one take honors, but they usually originate completely apart from any compulsion to connect with the transcendent. Only the lover, not the individual seeking to be loved, is able to understand eros. This is why Socrates claims that the “art of love” is the only thing he understands. (177d-177e) Meanwhile, for the others, competition is bringing out, not the best, but the worst in them.

Indeed, at one point, Socrates remarks, “it appears that . . . what it is to praise anything whatsoever . . . is to apply to the object the grandest and most beautiful qualities, whether he actually has them or not. And if they are false, that is no objection, for the proposal, apparently, was that everyone here make the rest of us think that he is praising love—and not that he actually praise him.” (198d-198e) Socrates goes on to say, “I want to avoid any comparison to your speeches, so as to not give you a reason to laugh at me.” (199b) He tells everyone that he will not give an encomium in the same manner as the previous speakers because he “would not be able to do it.” (199b) Of course,

when he says that he will not be able to do it, he is not saying that he lacks the technical speaking skill to produce such flattery but that his sense of shame prevents him from engaging in misrepresentation. As Nightingale explains, Socrates “is concerned with the ethical and pedagogical rather than the aesthetic quality of the compositions.” (1993:115) He holds these concerns for a good reason. If aesthetic qualities alone were the decisive factors, then what was from the standpoint of its substance arguably the worst speech of the evening would have to be declared the best. Indeed, as Anton reminds us, Agathon receives “the best applause.” (1996: 213) Yet one must add, as does Nichols, that Socrates provides “the superior understanding of not only love but of poetry itself.” (2004: 187)

In their competitive fever, all the speakers, except for Socrates, lose track of the truth. Their desire for victory pushes them, either carelessly or as a matter of intention, into the shameful practice of invoking pleasant falsehoods in their hyperbolic praise. For the competitive speaker, a speech of praise is more about the singer than the song. The truth is quite the opposite for Socrates where nearly everything is about the content of the speech. A speech fails, for Socrates, if it lacks substance or subverts the truth. It is only of minor importance how a speech is decorated or delivered. For example, the divine flute tunes of Socrates are so profound and inspirational in content that Alcibiades believes that it makes no difference whether they are “played by the master flautist or the meanest flute girl.” (215c) The off-putting exterior of Socrates becomes trivial in comparison to his “godlike” interior. (217a) For Plato, the inherent divinity of certain ideas shines through any flaws that might arise in the presentation of such ideas.

Helfer, for instance. speaks about a Socratic “gist” that can “be conveyed even by someone who mistakes the details.” (2017: 158) This is again grounded in the contention that the divine *eidos*, and not its packaging, is of utmost importance. One must not, therefore, be overly concerned with the external wrapping of arguments. Even the words of Socrates might seem on cursory review inane. As Alcibiades puts it,

If you were to listen to his arguments, at first, they’re clothed in words as coarse as the hides worn by the most vulgar satyrs. He’s always going on about pack-asses or blacksmiths, or cobblers, or tanners; he’s always making the same tired old points in the same tired old words. If you are foolish . . . you find it impossible not to laugh at his argument. But if you see them when they open up . . . you’ll realize that no other arguments make any sense. They’re truly worthy of a god, bursting with figures of virtue inside.⁶

True lovers seek immortality, then, by taking earnest flight toward *divine* otherness; narcissists bask in the public attention directed to their earthly selves. In his speech, Phaedrus made a good point in an awkward way; that is, one cannot be at once shameless and a genuine lover—except in the act of unenlightened self-love⁷ would be, for Plato, not only hubristic but a contradiction in terms.

⁶ The fact that superficial people tend to chortle at Socrates’s arguments falls in line perfectly with Laozi’s well-known statement: “The lowest hear the Tao and laugh outright. Their laughter testifies to the Tao.” (Ch. 41)

⁷ I place the adjective “unenlightened” in front of self-love most deliberately, because there is perhaps an ultimate sense of “selfishness” that might, for Plato, motivate the ideal erotic lover who wants to *possess the good and the beautiful forever*. Nevertheless, mere self-love is not eros

III. Honor

The ultimate difference between erotically driven poets and the larger confederacy of rhetorical “mechanics” (203a), lies in the fact that the latter create, not out of a love for the Good and Beautiful but from their personal interest in earthly honor. In fact, along with eros, the phenomenon of honor assumes a central place in the dialogue. After all, the symposiasts not only speak in honor of love but have gathered to celebrate an honor won by Agathon. Agathon is also being honored in the sense that many of the speakers are trying to compete by employing, with varying degrees of success, the rhetorical style of the prize-winner.

However, Plato wants to show how the combined behavior of capitulating poets and their admiring crowd leads to the misallocation of honor. If we should, for example, honor others for their genuine goodness and moderation, then the irony is evident. Agathon wins honor by using dishonorable tactics, while the deserving Socrates is overlooked by the crowd. And make no mistake about it. Plato wants his reader to see plainly how his teacher has been snubbed. Indeed, several times either the words or the actions of Alcibiades are used to describe, or even correct, injustice to Socrates. First, Alcibiades takes ribbons from the wreath he brought initially as a crown for Agathon (212e) and uses them to make a wreath for Socrates's

because it does not commune with the divine. It is instead anchored in a confused earthly self-absorption wherein one serves both as lover and beloved in an immature, pedestrian drama. For Plato, erotic love is not so much about acting with a narrow and instrumental self-interest, but about directing desire away from the immanence of self-indulgence toward the transcendence of self-awareness.

“magnificent head.” (213e). Next, he suggests that when Socrates is present one cannot praise anyone else. (214d) Finally, Alcibiades explains that he once received a medal that rightly belonged to Socrates. “But the generals, who seemed more concerned with my social position, insisted on giving the decoration to me.” (220d). These passages highlight in bold terms how Socrates has been profoundly misjudged by the *ochlos*.

Plato thus notes that there is considerable danger in taking too seriously the recognition one receives, especially when such recognition is purchased by shamelessly exploiting a shameless crowd. These exploitative poets become addicted to the pleasure of parading and displaying their ribbons and garlands and lose sight of what is important. Awards get in the way; they impede one’s sensibilities. Indeed, as Helfer points out, “It is just one more masterful Platonic touch that when Alcibiades enters the party, he is unable to see Socrates because his wreath obstructs his vision (213a5).” (2017: 159)

The shameless type of poet not only fits the profile of the consummate contestant but remains relatively indifferent to both love and truth. To appeal quickly and successfully to the desires of the commonplace, these poets sidestep the divine call to reproduce in the immortal presence of the Good because more immediate honor awaits those who tend to the earthly appetites for *expediency* and *pleasure*.⁸ However, unlike love of virtue, the love for utility and pleasure are “wingless” desires pursued by those with feet planted firmly on the ground; they are the *modus operandi* of those preoccupied by

⁸ In his *Nicomachean Ethics* (1155b; 1157a), Aristotle, too, contrasts genuine love with these lesser desires for pleasure and utility—explaining that these are love only by “analogy.” (1157a30) When we say, for example, “we love bratwurst and beer” or “we love our new cellphones,” we are expressing not eros but rather a love of pleasure in the first instance and of utility in the second. The pandering poets are skilled at appealing to these more immature types of “love.”

expediency, social status, and gratification. While one needs the pull of eros to lift one's eyes toward the genuinely good, significantly less imagination is required to develop a taste for pleasure or utility. Indeed, as Aristotle reminds us, even "bad men will be friends for the sake of pleasure or of utility." (*Ethics*: 1157b). These earthly desires are powerful motivators in the life of an embodied soul, but they direct our eyes downward into the inevitable futility of finitude. They attach us to mutable objects and thus provide not even a glimpse of the immortal. Wingless passion lurches randomly at scattered honors, conveniences, and pleasures. Such individuals, for Plato, can navigate the earth but have no capacity for divination, no sense of moral geography. Genuine connections with goodness blossom only through erotic desire. Earthbound desires carry no integral component of shame. Instrumental success and acclaim are the products of social engineering. However, shame is heaven-sent, a gift of the gods carried to us by the intermediary spirit of eros.

The narrative imagination—understood by the ancient Greeks as Memory or *Mnemosyne*—produces a museum of icons that inspire, not the practice of conciliatory flattery, but "enchantment, prophecy, and sorcery" (203a). One should also note that, even among the true poets, there is a hierarchy of ability. Some of these erotically driven poets—the ones guided by sensible reproduction of immortal ideas—are to a degree touched by iconic muses; yet they are not quite lovers of wisdom who glimpse virtue itself. (212a) As Martin Warner puts it, "spiritual immortality can consist merely in winning 'fame immortal,' as with Homeric heroes, poets and inventors leaving in the world offspring of their deeds and thoughts which bear the stamp of their personality, but it is

best that such progeny should be conceived in wisdom and virtue, as with the great lawgivers.” (1979: 333)

Three realms are thus contemplated in the *Symposium*: the infinite, the finite, and the spiritual. The first is thoroughly divine and populated by the gods; the second, is the domain of pleasure and utility; but the third is an *intermediate* realm and is the home of spirit-consciousness. The first of these realms is out of reach for humans; the second is the infernal destiny of those overcome by the power of their bodies and the correlative lust for earthly honor. Those who dwell in this second realm are by implication impious because they are concerned, not with the demands of the gods, but with the trivialities that mainstream earthlings enjoy. The third realm is the province of modesty and is populated by those who through the richest spirit of eros live in shame-preponderant devotion to the transcendent; that is, poets of this kind are humble lovers rather than anxious consumers of popular praise.

In articulating these realms, it sometimes seems that Plato has the speakers in the dialogue offer isolated insights that display far greater acumen than the speaker's overall speech represents.⁹ However, we learn the full lessons of love only from Diotima, from a diviner, from an oracle. As Lane Cooper once remarked, Diotima is to Plato what Beatrice was to Dante. (9) She is the divine guide of the *Symposium*. Indeed, at one point in their conversation, the young Socrates responds to the priestess's remarks by claiming that it would “take divination to figure out what you mean.” (206c)

⁹ For example, we find Plato's distinction between higher and lower eros adumbrated in Pausanias's distinction (181b-181d) between noble and ignoble forms of love. Eryximachus speaks about love and its relation to “divination.” And Diotima discusses (205e) Aristophanes' notion of the lover seeking its “matching half.” (191d) Indeed, some substantive element of truth may appear in each speech, possibly save that of Agathon.

Diotima explains that love is not a god but is instead a great “spirit,” a perplexing and evocative harbinger, through which “all divination passes, [including] the art of priests in sacrifice and ritual, in enchantment, prophecy, and sorcery.” (203a) Plato suggests here that true lovers of wisdom engage not merely in argumentation but in a type of divination; their unrelenting desire for beauty and goodness serves as an inspirational “workmate” (212b) that helps such lovers read the messages from the gods. Indeed, for Paul Friedlander, “Plato sees, in the center of being, a miracle that reason cannot explain, but that preserves the universe . . . Eros is the *metaxy* in Socrates’ speech as he is the *metaxy* in Plato’s world.” (1973: 180) The erotically motivated true poets are thus divinely inspired. They create in a heraldic manner, but they are not contestants. They indulge not simply the earthly desires but instead traverse an intermediate level situated somewhere between that of the gods and that of mortal creatures. For this reason, the emissary poets, and not the conventional prizewinners, receive the only meaningful and authentic award: they earn not the praise of the crowd but the “the love of the gods.” (212a-212b) This “belongs to anyone who has given birth to true virtue and nourished it, and if any human being could become immortal, it would be he.” (212a-212b)

Meanwhile, the lesser poets are not really nurturers at all; they continue to produce manipulative spectacles designed to flatter and amuse the crowd. These flatterers resemble what Diotima calls the mere “mechanic” or professional artisan, an earthly practitioner that she distinguishes from a “man of the spirit.” (203a). This is one of the most important passages in the text. These shameless poets accept the adoration of the crowd as if it were a serious validation of

their worth. Consequently, their creative reach is confined by the straitjacket of earthly desires. In contrast, the true poet chases *divine* ideas, thereby participating in the one reproduction activity that has a chance to continue forever. Such poets connect, however briefly, with ideas that have been, are now, and always will be. For Plato, no serious sense of immortality resides in the finite replication of particulars, no matter how much such activity pleases the crowd. Aristophanes's speech depicts the hapless earthbound view of eros. He speaks of male-on-male intercourse as a sensual satisfaction that allows them, to "return to their jobs, and look after their other needs in life." (191C-191D) Nichols summarizes this by saying that Aristophanes' "humans never look to heaven." (2004: 191)

Like all human beings, the capitulating poets seek remembrance. However, they trade away a genuine glimpse of the Good and Beautiful for the shallow phenomenon of earthly fame. They gain historical status and recognition, but they never approach the transcendent. They in effect compromise their character to secure their reputation. Reputation is judged by the immanent and prevailing opinion of the mainstream populace; character is judged by the divinely inspired mind. This is why, as May Sim explains, "Aristotle contrasts being honored by *spoudaioi* with being honored by the common people; the former brings pleasure whilst the latter is despised." (2012: 273) A true lover desires, then, not merely immortality, but also "the good." (207a) The lesser poets, like the crowds they seek to impress, wish to exist forever but lack the wherewithal to embrace immortal ideas. They simply provide a steady diet of easily intuited images that appease the crowd with comforting and familiar entertainment.

Nevertheless, as beloved entertainers, the lesser poets, like the puppeteers who cast shadows on the wall of the cave, like the “pastry-baking” rhetoricians in the *Gorgias* (462d), have a knack for reproducing faithfully the hedonistic distractions that over-feed the common appetite. Agathon’s own earthly desire is thus manifested as a desire to be desired; he is in love with the feeling of being loved. However, even if the lesser poets connect in a meagre way with eros in their regular lives, when they attempt the enterprise of writing, they return to replicating the earthly delights of the common crowd.

Since Plato does indeed speak of the *physical* expression of erotic desire (207b; 208c), he seems to believe that most humans feel a weak bodily-based vestige of eros; that is, they at least experience a shadowy semblance of the divine urge. For Plato, the experiences of these humans, and even of wild animals, reflect the “principle” (207d) of eros if not eros itself. However, the expression of such desire is unimaginative and extraordinarily particular. It is also perhaps unfortunate, since Plato asserts that the spiritual “children” of the great poets “are more beautiful and more immortal” (209c) than the physical offspring of the crowd and claims that “everyone would rather have such children than human ones.” (209c)

To conclude, then, the ultimate difference between Plato’s two types of poet is that the true poet lives to love while the lesser lives to seduce. The object of the true poet’s eros is the Beautiful; the target of the lesser poet’s flirtation is the crowd. The shameless pursuit of honor motivates the failed poets who try to find happiness in being loved rather than in being a lover. As mentioned above, the *Symposium* advises the opposite of this. Only by living as a lover can I commune with the universals that bring happiness, no matter

how beloved I may or may not be. The capitulating poet, an example of Diotima's mechanic, is a clever sort, an entertainer who is skilled at winning—whether it be winning the public's devotion, prevailing in a debate, or collecting prizes akin to those coveted by Agathon. But these prizes are trifles. They are superficial tokens bestowed uncritically by commonplace members of the crowd. As Anton remarks, “exciting the appetites and emotions is one thing; directing and taming them in light of the *logistikon*, quite another.” (1996: 234) Capitulating poets try to gain immortality indiscriminately by mindlessly massaging the commonplace pleasures of the ochlos. They delight the masses but ignore the Muses.

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