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Plato's Validation of Heterosexuality in *Symposium*

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In Plato's *Symposium*, the subject of homoeroticism and the relationships between 'boyfriends' and 'lovers' are discussed in detail. In the speeches of Phaedrus, Pausanias, and Aristophanes, this type of relationship is seen not only as natural, but also superior to heterosexual relationships. However, one can say that Plato, by using the dialogue of Socrates and Diotima, undermines the institution of homosexuality and the validity of the 'boyfriend' and 'lover' relationship as having a purer and superior form of love than in heterosexual relationships while elevating the latter to an equal status.

Excluding Socrates, the other members of the symposium frequently use the example of a relationship between two men. Phaedrus shows the power of love using the example of an army comprised of lovers and boyfriends. However, in this example, the relationship is not strictly defined by the practice of pederasty, but rather by the strong emotions of a man for his elder.

It is in Pausanias' speech that the audience first becomes aware of the idea of two types of love: Common Aphrodite, born from Zeus and Dione; and Celestial Aphrodite, conceived from the male god Uranus. The rationale for the classification of each seems to stem from the idea that the conception of Aphrodite between a male and female presence is much more natural and terrestrial in occurrence than the birth of Aphrodite from the severed member of a male god. Therefore, this bolsters the idea of male-male sexuality as celestial since it is through a male alone that Celestial Aphrodite is conceived.

Aristophanes' humorous story of creation puts forward an idea of homosexuality as a natural and purer form of love, in comparison to heterosexuality. He explains it using the idea that every person was a half of a larger being made up of two humans. These creatures were male-male, female-female, or male-female and were split in half as punishment from Zeus. According to Aristophanes, every human wishes to return to his or her other half. The originally male-female creatures were attracted to any member of the opposite sex, and are usually adulterers; while the male-male and female-female beings were in search of their true same-sex other half. When they find their other half, they desire to be one with that person again in order to be whole. This is the definition that Aristophanes gives to love: "the pursuit of wholeness."¹

Here, it seems that Plato is again reinforcing the idea of homosexuality as purer than heterosexuality. However, in this claim, Plato also shows a weakness in Aristophanes' argument in that he does not defend it with any practical reason or rationale. He also does not explain why the quest for a homosexual person's "wholeness" is more divine than that of a heterosexual individual's. Therefore, though the presentation and content of the story is amusing, it does little to strengthen the logical validation of homosexuality, while still taking time to criticize heterosexual relationships.

The speeches of Eryximachus and Agathon deal less with the gender roles that love tends to follow and focus more on the idea of love as an objective concept. Eryximachus, a physician, approaches the issue in a way that explains how love interacts with the human body. Agathon, who is being honored at this party for his prize-winning plays, concentrates on the actual god Love, who is described in masculine terms and only affects males.

The members of the symposium oppose each other in different ways. Most try to defend the idea of homoeroticism by praising the concept of the 'lover' and 'boyfriend' relationship, but do not succeed in rendering their arguments irrefutable. Another manner in which they try to validate homosexuality is through their attempts to discredit heterosexual relationships by either referring to them as "common" (as is seen in Pausanias's speech) or crediting them with adultery (mentioned in Aristophanes' speech). The discussion is driven by the merits of the different types of love, rather than the idea of love that is later explained by

Diotima through Socrates. As a result of Socrates's speech, the speakers are shown to be unable to defend their definitions of love due to their lack of logical reasoning and the superficial thinking presented in their dialogues, which discredits the views and opinions held by those individuals.

Socrates' speech is considered the climax of the symposium and therefore the most anticipated. The fact that he immediately introduces the female aspect in the guise of Diotima, a factor that the other speakers ignored, seems to be intended to weaken the foundations of the previous speeches. Socrates vouches for her credibility by addressing her as being an "expert in love, as well as in a large number of other areas too."² With Diotima comes the introduction of a new concept of love. This definition follows the idea of different levels, starting with the love of one particular body (in this case a male body) and ascending to the highest level, that of the love of beauty in its purest form. It is this highest form, according to Diotima (and therefore Socrates) that all individuals should strive for, but only the enlightened will achieve.

Since it is Diotima who teaches Socrates about the purest type of love, it becomes clear that this type, the love of beauty in its purest form, can also be explained and experienced by a woman. However, Plato is subversive in the manner in which he uses Diotima's presence to refute the speeches of the others attending the party. He carefully has her speak in male terms referring to an individual experiencing celestial love as "he."³ However, he adds a specifically female aspect to the idea of love, one that makes for the strongest argument for Plato's validation: the idea of pregnancy.

By using the idea of pregnancy in her explanation, Diotima incorporates an exclusively female aspect to the concept of love. The lack of a male's ability to become pregnant in the scientific sense of the word requires a need to add a female presence in the definition of love. When this occurs, according to Gregory Vlastos, "Diotima undertakes to state the most general condition which the pursuit of Beauty has to meet to qualify as eros, her phrase, 'birth in beauty' is all to patently a generalization of the procreative - hence *necessarily* heterosexual - love."⁴ By doing this, Plato draws a parallel between "common" and "celestial" love. Both types of love are aimed toward the same goal of immortality and the desire to create or continue "beauty," yet the method of achieving these goals differ. This is best explained by Margalit Finkelberg when

she speaks of the idea of pregnancy in the *Symposium* saying, "Owing to this offspring, the spiritual parent partakes in immortality, just as the bodily parent does by bearing real children."⁵

Diotima's definition of physical pregnancy is exclusive to heterosexual relationships, yet in her definition of mental pregnancy she switches from using strictly male identifiers, such as "he" and "his," to more ambiguous ones such as "someone" or "a person." At one point she comments on the idea of mental offspring saying, "We'd all prefer to have children of this sort rather than the human kind."⁶ By using the ambiguous term "we'd," Diotima, and therefore Plato, is expressing that the desire of what Pausanias would call "celestial love" is felt by both men and women. In his studies, David Halperin has commented on the ambiguity of Diotima's language by stating that she has created "delineation of a peculiar type of eroticism (pregnancy) in which the distinction between sexual and reproductive functions has been totally abolished."⁷ As a result of this interesting use of language and intentional blurring of gender roles, it seems as if what is possible for men in the area of love is also possible for women and vice versa. Halperin goes on to say, "The two strands of sex and reproduction are so thoroughly interwoven in Diotima's discourse that they are virtually impossible to disentangle."⁸ Using this rationale, it could be said that if women are capable of feeling and desiring "celestial love" which, according to Diotima, is simply the love of beauty in its purest form, then the relationship between a man and woman can be considered equal in its purity to that of a lover and his boyfriend.

Also, when one compares Diotima's/Socrates's view of the purest form of love, it can be said that no other speaker in the *Symposium* has been able to transcend past its lower forms. That is, the speeches of the other speakers are more focused on the physical act rather than the transcendent concept. Through the mingling of heterosexual ideas and ambiguous terminology, Diotima is able to create a love in which both orientations have equal validity. This, in turn, questions the opinions held by the other speakers that the boyfriend/lover relationship is superior to a heterosexual relationship due to the fact that each is still steeped in the physical.

Another way that Plato can be seen as undermining the homoerotic ideal of the time would be the fact that he exempts

Socrates from having any physical relationships with men. The fact that Diotima is a woman rules out the possibility that he acquired his knowledge of the subject from a male lover. His interactions with Alcibiades and the account that Alcibiades gives of his encounters with Socrates, also allows one to infer that Socrates is not interested in the male body, but more so the transcendent idea of beauty.

Alcibiades states that several times he tries to seduce Socrates by getting them to be alone together, going to the gymnasium, or keeping him at his house. However, each time Socrates ignores his advances until Alcibiades is finally able to spend a night with him. Yet, even after all of his attempts he states that his night with Socrates was as if he had "been sleeping with [his] father or an elder brother."⁹ While Alcibiades is somewhat insulted by this encounter he also marvels at Socrates' character and self-control. It can be said that what Plato is trying to accomplish here is to show that even though Socrates admires and appreciates Alcibiades' physical beauty, he does not need to act on it by having a homosexual relationship; by doing so, he shows the purist and highest level of love.

When one compares the relationship between Diotima and Socrates with that of Socrates and Alcibiades, there arises another of Plato's attempts to discredit the idea of the paederastic relationship. The relationship between Diotima and Socrates can be viewed as the kind of "celestial" love that was described by Pausanias earlier in the *Symposium*. However, unlike Pausanias' definition, this type of love is occurring between a man and a woman, without any physical relation being consummated. The relationship of Socrates and Alcibiades, on the other hand can be seen as Alcibiades physically pursuing Socrates. This view can be supported by Alcibiades' constant attempts to get Socrates alone in order to have a sexual relationship with him. Therefore, according to Pausanias, this type of love would be considered "common love" and expected to occur between a man and woman. Accordingly, as expressed by Christine Allen, if this interaction is being used to express Plato's view of homosexuality, "then it becomes clear that his main concern is to elevate love above the sexual level rather than to compare male homosexuality with heterosexuality."¹⁰ As a result, Plato further defends the idea that heterosexual love is equal to that of homosexual love by holding each one to the same standard, regardless of individual

orientation.

It should not be said that Plato was necessarily trying to dissuade the entire practice of homosexuality when writing *Symposium*. However, it does seem that Plato was trying to give validity to heterosexual relationships and discredit the idea that homoerotic relations were superior. By making Socrates, who was considered the base of knowledge at the time, explain love as being an ambiguous idea that transcends the body, and therefore gender, he was able to achieve this point. This point was furthered by his interactions between Diotima, compared to Alcibiades.

By giving heterosexual characteristics to Socrates and emphasizing his lack of physical homoerotic desire (both of which are present in the other orators), Plato gives greater credit to the idea of a nonphysical love. Socrates, the oldest and wisest of the speakers, does not indulge in physical homosexual relationships, but is still able to appreciate an individual for his or her mind. Therefore, Plato shows how it is possible to love the mind of a man (or woman), without the necessity of loving the body.

ENDNOTES

1. Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Robin Waterfiel (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998) 193a.
2. Ibid, 201d.
3. Ibid, 209d.
4. Gregory Vlastos, *Platonic Studies* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1973) 40-41.
5. Margalit Finkelberg, "Plato's Language of Love and the Female," *The Harvard Theological Review* 90 (1997): 238.
6. Plato, 209d.
7. David M. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality: And Other Essays On Greek Love* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 139.
8. Ibid, 140.
9. Plato, 219d.
10. Christine G. Allen, "Plato on Women," *Feminist Studies* 2 (1975): 136.