Love, Laughter, and the Harmony of Opposites in Plato’s Symposium

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The interpretations of Plato’s *Symposium* are as varied and contradictory as the very encomia they address. The disparate parts of the text may be viewed as sophisticated philosophy, laughable pedantry, tragi-comedy or beautiful sophistry. As a whole, it can be equally opaque and intimidating. This essay does not presume to suggest some transcendental means of interpreting the work; indeed, to suppose that such a method exists is to ignore its complex, multi-faceted nature. Rather, the specific and recurring theme of the harmony of opposites throughout Plato’s *Symposium* will be elucidated with reference to the use of humor and dialogue.

From the very beginning, Plato’s *Symposium* contains complicated trends and permutations within the dialogue. The first difficulty a reader faces is apparent within the opening lines: the speaker, Apollodorus, is responding to a question which is not contained within the text. Moreover, the questioners are composed of unnamed persons\(^1\) who remain anonymous throughout the entirety of the dialogue. The first difficulty is easily overcome as Apollodorus recalls a recent incident in which he answered the exact same question (172a4-b8); this development, while elucidating the original question, introduces a second level of narration.\(^2\) The use of multiple narrative levels is not limited to the beginning of the work; indeed, it is a prevalent and important theme throughout. In this instance, the second narrative level is
employed only briefly, but serves a threefold purpose.

Firstly, the dialogue within this narrative sets a humorous tone: Apollodorus recounts being hailed by Glaucon in a teasing manner (καὶ παίζον ἄμα τῇ κλήσει [and jesting as he called]; 172a4). Here, the first distinctive thread of γέλως [laughter] is established and remains a theme which runs throughout the entirety of the work. Secondly, the nature of the question is (as stated above) clarified: both Glaucon and (presumably) the unnamed audience within the primary narrative level are interested in οἱ ἐρωτικοὶ λόγοι [the speeches of love] of Agathon, Socrates and Alcibiades (as well as those of ‘the others who were there’) (172b1-b4). Thirdly and finally, it clearly indicates that the symposium at which these λόγοι occurred has subsequently entered the realm of legend: Glaucon mentions that he has heard the story before; “ἄλλος γὰρ τίς μοι διηγείτο ἀκρωώς Φοίνικος τοῦ Φιλίππου [for some other described it to me, having heard it from Phoinikos, son of Philippos]” (172b4-b5). Furthermore, he is confused about the date at which this symposium took place, mistakenly believing that it was a fairly recent occurrence. Glaucon is startled to hear that it occurred a long time ago – Apollodorus himself only knows details because he heard the story from Aristodemus (who was present at the symposium) (172c1-173a7). The symposium is still clearly generating a great deal of interest, despite the temporal gap. Thus, the tale is portrayed as a legend; in a sense, it has escaped the bonds of time.

With the termination of this second narrative level, a brief dialogue between Apollodorus and his questioner[s] commences (173c1-174a1). Notably, the theme of gentle jibing and general humor already established by the exchange between Apollodorus and Glaucon appears yet again in lines 173d6-d10; the trope is crossing narrative levels. When the tale finally begins (174a2), it occurs within a third narrative level: Within the primary level, Apollodorus is telling a story to the unnamed questioners; within the second narrative level, Aristodemus tells the tale of the symposium. Thus, all the action occurs within this third narrative level, passed to the extradiegetic audience through multiple narrative levels. The reader is repeatedly reminded of this fact throughout the remainder of the work via the near-constant use of indirect speech. Unlike the start of the work, the account does not begin mid-way through a conversation: indeed, the story begins outside and preliminary to the realm of the symposium. Lines
174a2-a4 depict Socrates as unusually well-dressed and clean, to Aristodemus’ subsequent surprise: he asks where Socrates is going “καλὸς γεγενημένος [having made himself beautiful]”. Socrates explains that he is headed towards Agathon’s δεῖπνον [feast]; he adds that he ἐκαλλωπίσαμην [embellished himself] in order to be as beautiful as Agathon (174a2-a8). There is most certainly a comedic note within this exchange, for Socrates is notoriously ugly, just as Agathon is notoriously beautiful. Moreover, the idea that Socrates would consider himself ‘beautified’ by such superficial means is absolutely ridiculous: the Socratic notion of ‘beauty’ is antithetical to this suggestion.

Thus far, one must wonder why this λόγος as (purportedly) earned such interest; it seems as though it will be nothing but a comedic account of a gathering of drinking companions. The first signal that these expectations are erroneous appears simultaneously with the entrance into the symposium: as Aristodemus is hailed by Agathon, both Aristodemus and the reader become aware that Socrates has, at some point, wandered off. Socrates is discovered standing, oblivious to the world around him, on the neighbors’ porch (174d5-175a9). This, of course, continues the theme of comedy: Aristodemus himself admits that he is experiencing something amusing (if slightly awkward): καὶ τι ἔφη αὐτόθι γελοῖον παθεῖν [and he said that he then suffered something comic]. However, it is nonetheless incongruous: Socrates’ earlier description emphasized his desire to appear well before Agathon; now he stands, seemingly absorbed entirely within himself, without a care for what others might think. Agathon’s response to a description of his guest’s behavior is, naturally, one of surprise: “ἄτοπον γ’ ἔφη [‘very strange,’ he said]” (175a10). Socrates’ behavior is both ἄτοπος [strange, unusual] with respect to Agathon’s view and, in addition, to the sympotic tradition. One of the primary purposes of the traditional symposium is to fashion a world which binds together the participants, removing social boundaries and subduing consciousness of the outside world. By standing outside, refusing to communicate, Socrates is acting in a way antithetical to the traditions of the sympotic culture— or perhaps, as though he is enjoying his own, entirely internal ‘symposium.’

Though this event is without a doubt comedic, it incorporates an odd contrast. It startles the host, Agathon, who is only pacified by Aristodemus’ assurances that the behavior is
'normal.' Agathon’s discomfort with the situation is clearly indicated by his continuing attempts to send for Socrates; only by the intervention of Aristodemus does Socrates’ ‘vigil’ remain undisturbed. By remaining outside, Socrates has created a situation which is both γελοίος [humorous] and ἀτοπος [unusual]. This combination of incongruous concepts is a trend that will play an important theme throughout the remainder of the symposium: contrasts abound throughout the entirety of the text. Even as Socrates first reclines beside Agathon, a brief jesting dialogue ensues, drawing a contrast between their individual forms of σοφία [wisdom] (175d1-e10). In fact, it is apparent that this particular symposium itself is incongruous: although a ‘symposium’ is literally a ‘drinking together,’ the participants of this symposium decide that they will in fact moderate their drinking.

The proposition is delivered by Eryximachus, a doctor who is portrayed in a strongly pedantic manner, after he hears several complaints concerning the heavy drinking of the night before (at a certain point Aristophanes states that he was ‘baptized’ in wine) (176b3-b5). After giving a bombastic medical warning against an excess of alcohol, Eryximachus brings about a democratic agreement to have a more leisurely symposium. This is unusual not only in reference to the etymological connotations of the word ‘symposium’: the ritual presented the opportunity, for those participants who had a more philosophic goal in mind than mere drunken παιδιά [play], to experience the ‘euphoria-dysphoria opposition,’ which Pellizer defines as “the half-way between sobriety and drunkenness, so that all could enjoy liberty and ease of speech, gaiety and release from cares, without falling into the unregulated, violent excesses practiced by barbarians, but also without the sterile gravity of the sober and non-drinkers” (Pellizer 1990, 179). In other words, this specific sympotic tradition could be described as the interweaving, with reference to humor, of σοφοῦδη [seriousness] and γέλως [laughter]. It seems as though this symposium will not fall into the euphoria-dysphoria framework; σωφροσύνη [moderation] will be the keyword of this gathering.

Eryximachus’ next proposition, however, has the full support of traditional sympotic behavior. He proposes that each participant, in turn, deliver a eulogy in praise of Ἐρως. The practice of dialogue being passed along by the members of a
symposium is a well-established ritual. Moreover, the subject of ἕρως is an extremely popular among the established sympotic topics (Pellizer 1990, 180). The first encomium is given by Phaedrus (as Eryximachus indicates that he originally conceived the idea). Phaedrus’ encomium is perfectly suited for a symposium, if lacking slightly in independent thought. He quotes the archaic poets and draws upon several mythological stories; recitations of this type are common within symposia. He presents Ἐρως as the oldest of gods, a force leading mortals away from αἰσχύνη [dishonor] and towards ἀρετή [virtue], for “no-one likes to appear cowardly before his beloved.”12 He unfortunately makes no attempt to define what belongs within the realm of ἀρετή/ [virtue], nor within the realm of αἰσχύνη [dishonor]. His rhetoric seems to operate on the assumption that there exists an unspoken but perfectly definitive means to distinguish between these concepts (Hunter 2004, 42). As any reader familiar with Socrates’ method of interrogation knows, these are rhetorically suicidal errors. Although Phaedrus’ encomium is one of the least notable (he is significantly not included within Glaucon’s list of those present), it is now clear why this symposium has acquired its mythic status; the members of the symposium are persons of note—some with famed poetic or rhetorical abilities—each about to deliver a speech on a pervasively intriguing topic.

Aristodemus’ account continues, bypassing “ἄλλοι τινὲς [some others]” who are, apparently, worthy of remembrance with reference to neither their names nor their ἐρωτικοὶ λόγοι [erotic speeches]. He then proceeds to narrate Pausanias’ speech. Pausanias opens with the rhetorical trope of finding some fault within the previous speech: he claims that it is incorrect to speak of Ἐρως as one being a single deity, for “δὴ δύο ἔστον [in fact, there are two]” (180d5). Pausanias elucidates that, just as there is a Common (Πάνθεος) Aphrodite and a Heavenly (Ὀὐρανία) Aph!dite, so also is there a Common and a Heavenly Ἐρως. He further incorporates concepts of gender within his encomium: unlike Common Aphrodite, Heavenly Aphrodite is ἀμήτωρ [motherless], as she is born from the sea foaming about the dismembered ‘parts’ of Ὀυρανός. This contrast plays an important role within Pausanias’ speech, which is given over mainly to praise of the pederastic relationship between an ἐραστής [lover] and his ἐρωμένος [beloved] (181c4-185c4). This topic again is appropriate within the symposium, for many of the sympotic
poems are composed on the subject of pederastic relationships. Furthermore, Pausanias’ clearly elitist distinction between Common Aphrodite and Heavenly Aphrodite indicates a hierarchical mindset: another potential facet of the symposium was a means for the elite to distinguish themselves from the lower classes.

Although the dialogue is progressing in a clearly sympotic manner, the humor of the situation seems to have vanished entirely as the various jests and Socrates’ comic behavior have given way to epic recitations on the nature of Ἐφως. After Pausanias, however, comes a brief interaction between Eryximachus and Aristophanes. The comic poet has suddenly succumbed to a fit of hiccoughs, giving the doctor both a chance to grant his medical advice and deliver his encomium ahead of schedule. Aristophanes’ ailment is the first discordant note since the start of the encomia. He destabilizes the pattern, causing a brief dialogue and re-arranging the natural order of speeches. This event signals a change in tone as Eryximachus, in full medical glory, begins his eulogy. Rather than using stories of heroes or gods to advance his argument, Eryximachus employs his own medical knowledge. His encomium expands the domain of Ἐφως to include ‘everything which exists.’ Although such a discourse may not seem as appropriate for the sympotic tradition as the encomia of Pausanias or Phaedrus, Eryximachus nonetheless manages to include an extremely relevant trope: he speaks on the harmony of opposites, arguing against an imbalance toward any extreme. His speech is overly technical and, in the end, as much an encomium of medicine as of Ἐφως (Hunter 2004, 56). Nonetheless, it is startling to note how his eulogy embodies a specific sympotic theme, to a greater extent than either of the previous encomia: just as Phaedrus is concerned with the concepts of αἰσχύνη [dishonor] and ἀρετή [virtue], and Pausanias with the two contrasting types of Ἐφως, Eryximachus also speaks of polar opposites. However, unlike either of his predecessors, Eryximachus is concerned with establishing a balance between any two extremes (186b4-188e3). This perfectly echoes the sympotic concern of finding the perfect harmony between drunkenness and sobriety, violent excess and sober gravity, and, significantly, γέλως [laughter] and σπουδή [seriousness]. The suggestion that Eryximachus is an embodiment of the sympotic trope is, of course, absolutely absurd. His character is portrayed clearly as
excessively pedantic and sober. It may be said, perhaps, that
Eryximachus obeys the Delphic precept of μηδὲν ἀγαν [nothing to
excess] to an excessive extent: he employs σωφροσύνη
[moderation] extravagantly. Nevertheless, he acts as a catalyst for
symptotic themes: his pedantic nature is unwittingly amusing and
brought about the correct atmosphere for the ἐρωτικοὶ λόγοι to
occur.

Eryximachus is followed by Aristophanes, who has
managed to both cure his hiccoughs and make a jest: he announces
his recovery while simultaneously mocking Eryximachus’ speech.
His humorous tone is not surprising; he is a comic poet, a fact
which no doubt influences Eryximachus to warn him, in response,
not to indulge in humor within the upcoming encomium.
Aristophanes corrects him, indicating that what must be avoided is
not humour (as laughter is his specialty), but rather he must avoid
saying καταγέλαστα [ridiculous things]. Implicit within this
statement is again the idea of avoidance of extremes; furthermore,
there is a possible undertone that Eryximachus did not avoid this
excess: Eryximachus rightly spoke from his area of expertise, but
was in deliverance and tone immoderate. Aristophanes, as one
would expect from a comic poet, does not end his jests here: in
fact, his entire encomium may be perceived as a joke at
Eryximachus’ expense. He describes the original form of
ἀνθρωπός [humanity] as two humans conjoined, with three
potential genders (male-male, male-female, female-female). Due
to the excess of power inherent in this form, the gods found it
necessary to weaken the race: Zeus split everyone down the
middle, resulting in the current human form, with the threat that
he will do it again if they continue to behave outrageously.
Aristophanes attributes the birth of Ἕλης to this act: each half
yearned to be re-united with its other half (189d7-193d6). This
speech clearly has comedic aspects. It mocks Eryximachus in that
it asserts a biological truth; a truth which is, of course, patently
fatuous. It does not require any specialized knowledge to interpret
– one method of reading Aristophanes’ speech is as characteristic
‘of unsophisticated, subliterate folklore’ (Dover 1966, 45).
Moreover, it contains a multitude of logical flaws. The story itself
is remarkably different from any extant Aristophanic text;16 its
comedic traits are balanced by a tragic subtext. Robert Wardy
sums up the contrast neatly with his statement: “What is so very
poignant in this fiction is the collocation of defective human flesh
with divine machinery…. Human nature, without the intervention of divine artifice, is doomed to perpetual erotic frustration: comedy or tragedy?” (Wardy 2002, 21) Ultimately, Aristophanes’ encomium contains the same message inherent in Eryximachus’ eulogy. Both advise embracing σωφρόσυνη [moderation]: Eryximachus, due to ‘scientific’ reasons; Aristophanes, due to the threat that we may again be split and doomed to wander forever on one leg. Thus, Aristophanes’ encomium may be viewed as a humorous, yet tragic mirror—a σπουδαιογέλαιον [seriocomic] inversion—of Eryximachus’ speech.

It is worth noting that, at some point, Aristodemus himself was passed over. He shares a couch with Eryximachus and Aristophanes, yet the order of speeches oversteps him without any objection. It should not be assumed that this is some rhetorical trope to make the reader feel present within the symposium; the persistent use of indirect speech is a consistent reminder that everything is delivered via a narrator. Instead, it serves to place Aristodemus outside the symposium: he is granted a bird’s-eye view of the scenario, an untainted image that is now passed on to the reader. One might expect, perceiving the sympotic trend developing thus far, that the subsequent eulogy (delivered by Agathon) will offer further and even more complex tropes. Surprisingly, despite the fact that he is the tragedian following the comic poet, he concerns himself not at all with the harmony of contrasts. Instead, he gives a beautifully rendered, but nonetheless empty, speech in praise of Ἐως — in Hunter’s words, “a beautiful sound signifying nothing” (Hunter 2004, 73).

In essence, Agathon’s speech functions as a springboard for the following speech of Socrates. There is again a dialogue between the end of Agathon’s speech and the start of Socrates’ (198a1-201c9): Eventually, Socrates leads Agathon to admit that every assertion within his encomium was utterly mistaken. Socrates then gives his eulogy in the form of a story, repeating a conversation between himself and his (purported) former teacher, Diotima. This exchange creates yet another narrative level atop the already exorbitant construction. Within this narrative level, the dialogue echoes what just took place between Agathon and Socrates; however, in this instance, it is Socrates who is being cross-examined. More importantly, his interrogator is woman. Socrates has gained rhetorical dominance in the midst of a patriarchal ritual, only to attribute that dominance to the wisdom
he gained from a female. Thus, the contradictions inherent within the premises of Socrates’ encomium fit the sympotic theme; as before, however, Socrates’ actions are ἄτοπος [unusual]. His encomium is nonetheless amusing, as he portrays himself as a naïve student, blindly falling for Diotima’s every rhetorical trick.  

Within Diotima’s speech, Ἐρώς is established as the child of Πενία [Lack] and Πόρος [Way, Resource]. He is neither beautiful nor bad, neither beautiful nor ugly, neither wise nor ignorant—but rather somewhere between these extremes. Furthermore, he is not a god, but a “δαιμὸν μέγας… μεταξὺ ἐστὶ θεοῦ τε καὶ θνητοῦ [a great power… (which) is between god and mortal]” (202d13-e1), acting as a mediator between mortals and gods. It seems that Diotima is portraying Ἐρώς as the embodiment of the sympotic middle. From this point, however, the narrative breaks the recurring trend: Diotima’s description of the path towards beauty builds slowly toward an ideal, culminating when suddenly (ἐξαιρήθη), one catches sight of “τῷ θείῳ καλόν… μὴ ἀνάπλεων σαρκῶν τε ἀνθρωπίνων καὶ χρωμάτων καὶ ἅλλης πολλῆς φλυσίας θνητῆς [the sacred beauty… not full of human flesh and skin and much other mortal nonsense]” (211e1-212). The sheer number of narrators at this point creates a dizzying effect for the reader: the words of Diotima come echoing out of an abyss, blurring the lines between narrative levels. The extradiegetic audience blends with the diegetic, with Apollodorus, and even Aristodemus; just as a symposiast sees himself reflected in a sympotic mixing-bowl, so too is the modern reader reflected through this mise en abîme. Plato’s Symposium is, in a way, a literary mixing-bowl, its sides decorated with beautiful renditions of sympotic themes while Diotima’s words echo up from the Gorgon-headed centre. And, just as the Gorgon-head reminds the symposiasts of the outside world, so too do Diotima’s words break the sympotic circle.

All the audiences are drawn back in, however, as suddenly (ἐξαιρήθη) the famed drunken Alcibiades staggers in, his κῶμος [band of revelers] invading the symposium. Alcibiades’ entrance is extremely comic, functioning to break the ‘spell’ of Socrates’ words. His subsequent encomium of Socrates draws the audiences full back into the realm of the symposium—a symposium which now no longer may be categorized by its σωφροσύνη [moderation]. Moreover, his eulogy makes full use of the sympotic middle; it is thoroughly σπουδαιογέλιον
[seriocomic], insulting and praising Socrates in one. Ultimately, his speech portrays the philosopher in a manner equivalent to Diotima’s previous depiction of Ἐος, suggesting that Socrates strives to exemplify the pathway to ideal beauty. The symposium is denigrated to drunken revel, ending the next morning with Socrates explaining to Agathon and Aristophanes that a tragedian is also a comic poet, and vice-versa (212c4-223d7).

In the article “Plato on the Psychology of Humor,” Shelley asserts that “Plato viewed humor as the recognition by the intellect of what modern scholars would call incongruity—the special juxtaposition of incoherent concepts” (353). Shelley goes on to state that, in an ideal world, humor would not exist; however, given the present state of affairs, humor is a useful tool to balance “excessive seriousness,” (361): “Plato implies that laughter is good at least insofar as it restores the soul to a healthy condition by balancing out the ill feeling of malice” (354). Although Shelley’s article does not address the Symposium directly, its assertions are nonetheless clearly applicable. The work portrays a sympotic setting, revealing the efficacy of the unification of opposites. Thus, accepting Shelley’s interpretation of the Platonic view of humor, the symposium and its ideals on moderation may be seen as placed, hierarchically, immediately below the Socratic ideal; as the Socratic ideal has not yet been attained, the symposiasts content themselves with the lesser superlative of the sympotic ideal. However, in this instance, the trinity of Ἐος, the philosophical sympotic setting, and Socrates work in harmony to build the symposium to a transcendental vision: a flagrant contrast from moderation into idealized excess startles the audiences, functioning to elevate them from the sympotic into the Socratic. Thus Plato, acting behind the narrative levels as an authorative sympotic δαιμόν, utilizes the attributes of the symposium to create a realm in which, for a brief moment, the spectators may perceive “τὸ θεῖον καλὸν [the sacred beauty].”

ENDNOTES

2. The dialogue between Apollodorus and the unnamed persons comprises the primary narrative level, with Plato as the narrator. Plato
exists outside the text: in narratological terminology, Plato narrates from
the ‘extradiegetic level’; cf. Gerald Prince, A Dictionary of Narratology
3. The exact nature of Glaucion’s joke is not understood; cf. Rowe, 128 n.
172a3-4.
4. The logical question of authenticity is answered by 173b5-b6.
5. There are many instances where direct speech is used; they occur,
however, within a narrative that is nearly always indirect.
7. Richard Hunter, Plato’s Symposium (New York: Oxford University
8. Rowe summarizes this with the slightly whimsical phrase “what
[Socrates] is doing is not what people like Agathon go in for” (132 n. a10).
10. Stephen Halliwell, “The Uses of Laughter in Greek Culture,” The
within Greek culture which possess such a framework of convention are
paradigmatically those of conviviality and festivity…. These contexts
have in common a distance or detachment from normal, everyday affairs,
and, in certain areas, a suspension of usual standards of behaviour.”
in: Oswyn Murray, Sympotica (Oxford : Clarendon, 1990), 179: “…in the
symposion are developed the rules of an elaborate system of
communication…” i.e. the ‘logos sympotikos.’
12. “τὴν ἐπὶ μὲν τοὺς αἴσχρος αἰσχύνην, ἐπὶ δὲ τοὺς καλοῖς φιλοτιμίαν
[the shame for shameful things, and ambition for beautiful things]”
(178d2-d3).
14. Lesley Kurke, Coins Bodies, and Gold: The Politics of Meaning in Archaic
15. For an argument against the perception of Eryximachus as a pedant,
see Ludwig Edelstein, “The Role of Eryximachus in Plato’s Symposium,”
76, (1945), 85-103.
17. Cf. Harry Neumann, ‘On the Comedy of Plato’s Aristophanes’ in The
18. Cf. Hunter, 82; Rowe, 173 n. 201d1-204c8.
19. Alexander Nehamas, “Only in the Contemplation of Beauty is Human
Life Worth Living: Plato, Symposium 211d” in European Journal of
Philosophy, 15,(2007), 3: “The Form of Beauty, then, may be more beautiful
than everything else and the intensity of the true philosopher’s love may
dwarf our everyday feelings…. This functions as one of the few
extremes found within the Symposium which is not accompanied by its
polar opposite.
21. Hunter, 101: “Socrates is... a Marsyas... whose music is used in ritual initiations for its qualities of manic possession.”
22. Sheffield, 194: “Many scholars have argued that the speech is designed to show Socrates as the embodiment of the erotic theory outlined in his own speech....”

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