

PLATO'S DIDACTIC EXEMPLUM:  
EROS, THE DIALOGUE, AND PHILOSOPHY IN THE *SYMPOSIUM*

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A THESIS PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2006

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I first and foremost thank my parents, sister, and step-sisters, who have given me unwavering support and love, especially during some difficult years. I can never sufficiently express my gratitude to my grandmother, Gwen Faulkner, for teaching me to love reading, reasoning, and religion. I would like to thank Timothy Johnson, Jim Marks, David Young, and Robert Wagman for their patient guidance, encouragement, and invaluable conversations about this field. Finally, Marla DeVicente, Daniel Copeland, and Randall Childree have provided me with the friendship, grounding, correction, and role models that have made these past couple of years successful.

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Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School  
of the University of Florida in Partial Fulfillment of the  
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August 2006

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Major Department: Classics

In the following chapters I will examine the way in which the plot development and narratological features of Plato's *Symposium* provide the reader with an interactive exemplum of how to properly practice philosophy as *erōs* (love). My purpose will be to show how Plato's use of multiple narrative frames, a series of speakers who consecutively improve upon one another's *logoi* (speeches), and Diotima's ascent of the ladder mirror each other and reflect what may be our best look into Plato's definition of Socratic philosophy.

This investigation proceeds from the more general to the more specific attributes of the *Symposium* and elucidates how these portray Plato's philosophical agenda. Following a brief introduction, Chapter 2 contains a discussion of Plato's choice of the dialogue format and how that choice produces the question of a Platonic "mouthpiece." In Chapter 3, I discuss Plato's employment of narrative frames in this dialogue, and their effect on it. Chapter 4 establishes the similarities between the progress of the speeches

given and Diotima's explanation of *erōs* as a procession toward *to kalon* (The Beautiful). Chapter 5 examines Alcibiades' relationship with Socrates and how Plato uses them as examples of successful and unsuccessful erotic maturation. A short conclusion discusses how Plato combines all of these factors into a didactic experience for the reader that works to guide him to understand philosophy as *erōs*.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

The *Symposium* is ostensibly an account of a banquet held in honor of the tragedian Agathon for his victory at the City Dionysia in 416 BC. The tale is told by Apollodorus, a flamboyant follower of Socrates, who did not attend the event, but heard about it from Aristodemus, one of Socrates' intimate friends, who was present as the philosopher's guest. The reason for this account is that some unnamed companions of Apollodorus have heard about the speeches which the famous guests of this celebration delivered. They want clarification of and more information on the *erōtikoi logoi* (speeches about love) which the members of Agathon's symposium presented.

Occupying the central argument of the *Symposium* are the encomia for *erōs*<sup>1</sup> offered by Phaedrus, Pausanias, Eryximachus, Aristophanes, and Agathon. Within each of the *logoi*, the speakers explore different understandings and theories concerning the origin, nature, attributes, and functions of *erōs*. All of these lead up to Socrates' own speech and his presentation of the conversations which he had with a Mantinean prophetess named Diotima. It was from her that Socrates received his education on correct erotic living. Diotima describes *erōs* as a spiritual being which exists between mortal and immortal beings. According to her, *erōs* leads the person who properly

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<sup>1</sup> The central topic of the *Symposium* is love (*erōs*). However, in the Greek language and tradition *erōs* designates love as an internal human passion, as well as, the sexual drive, the act of sexual intercourse, and a deity who personifies these. As will be seen, the various characters in this dialogue use the word *erōs* to mean all of these and more. I have, therefore, decided that throughout this paper the word *erōs* will always appear in lower case letters. Unlike many commentators and editors, I will not capitalize it to *Erōs* when it appears that the deity is intended by the speaker's use.

follows a lover initiated in the erotic mysteries on an ascent in beauty until he arrives at the very form of The Beautiful (*to kalon*).

The *Symposium* ends after the Athenian general and aristocrat Alcibiades crashes the party in a drunken stupor. He comes for the purpose of crowning Agathon with a wreath for his victory. However, when he sees that Socrates is in attendance, Alcibiades places the wreath on Socrates' head and regales the symposiasts with words of praise for him and the power of his speeches. While doing so, Alcibiades describes the troubled relationship he had with Socrates. At the end of his speech, a new crowd of revelers bursts into Agathon's house, and many of the guests depart. The *Symposium* comes to a close when Socrates leaves the next morning, having remained awake all night in discussion with Agathon and Aristophanes.

The scope of the *Symposium* is wide-ranging and complex, resulting in an abundance of interpretations. Strauss read this Platonic dialogue as a contest between poetry and philosophy, in which philosophy triumphs. He also found it applicable to political and social theory. Many have considered it one of Plato's most clear explanations for his theory of forms, but Anderson's interpretation directly rejects this notion. Bury argues that the connective thread which holds together the interwoven features of this work is a desire to portray the ideal Socrates and Socrates as the ideal. Dover believes that Plato writes as an advocate of the right way for one to live. He also finds the *Symposium* a great resource for discussions about Greek homosexuality. Rosen contends that Plato was both criticizing and praising Socrates for his particular form of hubris.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Strauss (2001) 6-11; Anderson (1993) 7; Bury (1964) lxiv-lxv; Dover (1980) viii, 3-5; Rosen (1987) lxii-lxvi.

Given the multitude of topics which Plato treats in the *Symposium* and the manifold ways in which this dialogue can be understood, I do not attempt to render a complete reading of the dialogue. However, in this paper I offer the argument that Plato chose for the *Symposium* particular literary structures, primarily narrative frames and indirect discourse, in order to create a sense of progress which is reflected in the plot development, namely the ascending order of speeches. This progression is mirrored in Diotima's description of the procedure for correctly practicing *erōs*, known as 'Diotima's ladder.' Plato wrote the *Symposium* in this way for the purpose of creating an interactive experience for the reader. The reader is required to navigate through the dialogue in much the same way as a lover must climb Diotima's ladder. Through this work, Plato aims to instruct his reader in the philosophical life and, if the reader is diligent, bring him to a vision of The Beautiful itself.

The following chapters contain my examination of the didactic process which Plato constructed in the *Symposium*. In Chapter 2, I begin with a preliminary discussion of methodology. I explain that the interpretive method employed in this paper is based upon the so-called "Dialogical" approach to Platonic interpretation. Chapter 3 begins the analysis of the *Symposium*, starting with the use of narrative framing and its effect on the reader. Chapter 4 turns to the speeches given at Agathon's banquet. I explicate the way in which various features of the individual speeches are responded to by other speakers, the way in which they are then reflected in Diotima's speeches, and how this scheme creates a sense of development for the reader. Chapter 5 contains my examination of Alcibiades' role as the negative example of erotic development and how this contrasts with Socrates' role as the perfectly erotic man. My conclusions are presented briefly in Chapter 6.

## CHAPTER 2 TRADITIONAL ASSUMPTIONS AND NEWER METHODS

In Platonic studies, as is more necessary in philosophy than in many pursuits, it is crucial to argue for the presuppositions brought to each analysis. Coming to a conclusion about what the dialogue format is, how it functions, and if Plato's dialogues are dramatic or dogmatic in nature is primary. Whether or not one believes that Plato was attempting to transmit doctrines, methodologies, or some combination of the two will affect the manner in which the dialogues will be interpreted. Throughout the centuries of Platonic scholarship, many popular interpretations have relied upon assumptions, some erroneous, that had never been established through logical argumentation. In this chapter, I will outline the assumptions which have guided my interpretation of the *Symposium* and provide arguments for each, in particular that the dialogues are dramatic literature, non-dogmatic, and that Plato does not speak directly through any of his characters.

### **Dialogue Format and Dialogism**

“Every dialogue, if it is taken as a coherent whole, seems to be more than a vehicle for doctrine; and the performative effect of the drama appears to be an inseparable part of what Plato does want to convey.”<sup>1</sup> It has long been an assumption used in Plato interpretation that the great philosopher was attempting to transmit doctrines. For “doctrines,” I maintain the definition used by Press: “fixed, settled teachings which are taken to be transcendent, universal, and rational, and which could be expressed as

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<sup>1</sup> Scott and Welton (2000) 149.

univocal propositions and stored in memory or books.”<sup>2</sup> For example, Aristotle frequently opens his treatises with an assertion of one of his transcendent “truths,” as in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. τὰγαθὸν οὐδὲ πάντ’ ἐφίεται, “The Good is the thing at which all things aim,” serves to announce Aristotle’s timeless proposition about the nature of every *technē* and its *telos*.<sup>3</sup> Plato’s dialogues, in contrast, contain no such statements from their author. The assumption that Plato’s dialogues transmit “doctrines” *seems* reasonable. However, whether Plato’s dialogues “teach,” for example, methodology, doctrines, or deductive propositions, is not self-evident. Therefore, one cannot simply ascribe to Plato a systematic set of dogmatic statements in his dialogues as his own belief structure.

The greatest problem with this way of thinking about Plato’s dialogues is that scholars begin to neglect the literary form from which they extract these “doctrines.” The dogmatic or doctrinal approach, as this method of Platonic interpretation is often called, has been dominant since ancient times.<sup>4</sup> This interpretive method hangs on the assumptions that Plato’s philosophy consisted of a series of doctrines, and that he wrote them into his works. The dialogues then become little more than artifice for a group of statements that the reader must hunt for, collect, and then compile into a system of philosophy. As Tejera states, “One of the mainstays of the doctrinal approach is . . . the unstated working assumption . . . that aesthetics has *no bearing* at all on the dialogues.”<sup>5</sup> This interpretive method diminishes Plato’s use of advanced dramatic and literary

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<sup>2</sup> Press (1993) 5.

<sup>3</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics* 1094a1. Translation by H. Rackham (1933).

<sup>4</sup> For a study of the history of Platonic interpretations, see Tigerstedt (1974).

<sup>5</sup> Tejera (1997) 249, emphasis in original.

structures; it denies that these structures contain meaning or should guide interpretation of philosophical content.

A basic question that the doctrinal approach can never satisfactorily answer is why Plato wrote dialogues. Given that other forms of literature had long been the traditional mode of educational discourse, namely epic, drama, oratory, and lyric, Plato could have maintained Athenian pedagogical customs. He did not; he wrote dialogues that throughout the course of history have generally been considered “*sui generis*.”<sup>6</sup> They represent a basic shift from the transmission of philosophy via verse, as was the case with Xenophanes and Parmenides, to a prose tradition. This genre of literature (named *Sōkratikoī logoi* by Aristotle<sup>7</sup>) had begun previous to Plato’s writing,<sup>8</sup> nonetheless, the Platonic dialogues diverge from the other extant *Sōkratikoī logoi* both in form and content. Nightingale summarizes this departure in the following way: “But it is...reasonable to suppose that Plato took a simple genre characterized by recorded or dramatized conversations and transformed it into a multi-generic hybrid.”<sup>9</sup> Plato combined many literary and dramatic techniques in order to produce these philosophical works. If the doctrinal approach were the best (dare I say intended) method of interpretation, there would be little or no need for scholars to recognize such innovations, let alone ask questions about them.

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<sup>6</sup> Press (1997) 7.

<sup>7</sup> *Poetics* 1447b11.

<sup>8</sup> Kahn (1996) situates Plato’s dialogues within the framework of writings completed by some of his contemporaries, such as Xenophon, Antisthenes, Aeschines, Phaedo, and Euclides.

<sup>9</sup> Nightingale (1995) 5.

At this point, it is necessary to turn towards a positive solution to the problems of interpretation placed upon Plato scholarship by the dogmatic approach to his dialogues. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century a movement in Plato interpretation that espouses a holistic approach to the dialogues has grown in influence.<sup>10</sup> This dialogical approach, as it is commonly referred to by its proponents, views the dialogues inside of their literary, linguistical, and historical contexts in order to find their meanings. Scholars of the dialogical approach minimize the idea of extracting doctrines or finding Plato's beliefs in the statements of characters within the dialogues.<sup>11</sup> Because scholars holding to dialogical reading of Plato are not searching for doctrinal statements and devaluing the literary nature of Plato's dialogues, the dialogical interpretation is able to offer explanations for Plato's use of historical features and dramatic structures.

It is important to place distance between the dialogical approach to history and the traditional dogmatic attitude. As a primary example of the latter, Vlastos holds that the *Apology* is a historical portrayal both of Socrates and his trial.<sup>12</sup> The evidence he provides for this position is twofold. First, he states that the only alternative to Plato's Socrates depicting the historical Socrates is Xenophon's Socrates. After dismissing other contemporaries of Plato as viable sources for information about the historical Socrates,

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<sup>10</sup> For a brief history of the development and major contributors of the dialogical movement over the last two centuries, see Press (1997) 12-18.

<sup>11</sup> Press (1997) 3. Although not a dialogical scholar, but a unitarian, Kahn expresses a major dialogical tendency in his approach to Plato with statements such as, "His principal aim, above all in the earlier works, is not to assert true propositions but to alter the minds and hearts of his readers. Plato's conception of philosophical education is not to replace false doctrines with true ones but to change radically the moral and intellectual orientation of the learner, who, like the prisoners in the cave, must be converted – turned around – in order to see the light." Kahn (1996) xv.

<sup>12</sup> "That this figure [Socrates] is a faithful and imaginative recreation of the historical Socrates...is the conclusion I would be prepared to defend myself." Vlastos (1971) 1. Vlastos states that this view of Socrates is primarily from the early dialogues, but still maintains that the Socrates written by Plato is intended to be read as the historical Socrates.

Vlastos asks “If Plato and Xenophon cannot both be right, why must Plato be right?”<sup>13</sup> Why must either of them be right? A significant unspoken assumption lies at the bottom of Vlastos’ argument: someone intended to write a biographically accurate work about or containing Socrates and accomplished that intention. Even if this were true, and we will never know if it is, Vlastos decides that the philosopher Plato has done so, and not the historian Xenophon. Second, just because Plato accurately represented some aspects of Socrates’ life and personality, it does not follow that all of the attributes and actions of the Platonic Socrates depict the historical Socrates. Speaking of the *Apology*, Vlastos answers, “[Plato] knew that hundreds of those who might read the speech . . . had heard the historic original.”<sup>14</sup> Once again, the seductive and powerful influence of the traditional interpretive method has led Vlastos to assume that Plato was attempting to correct errors in facts. In this case, he states unequivocally, “his purpose in writing it [the *Apology*] was to clear his master’s name and indict his judges . . .”<sup>15</sup> However, Plato’s “purpose” in writing the *Apology* or any of the dialogues has not been securely determined and, therefore, remains a point of contention. Not only this, but Vlastos has also assumed a wide readership of Plato in antiquity which more recent scholarship denies. Thesleff concludes that “Plato must have thought of his friends around him, and their friends abroad, as his primary audience” and “that Plato, for all we know, never wrote for an impersonal, general public.”<sup>16</sup> Vlastos’ adherence to the traditional approach

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<sup>13</sup> Vlastos (1971) 2.

<sup>14</sup> Vlastos (1971) 3.

<sup>15</sup> Vlastos (1971) 3.

<sup>16</sup> Thesleff (1993) 38-9.

to Plato has trapped his interpretations within a framework of increasingly larger and less-substantiated claims.<sup>17</sup>

The use of the historical elements in Plato's dialogues, as understood by dialogical readers, is not for the purpose of biography nor does it simply make them more accessible to the reader.<sup>18</sup> Certainly, historical features assist in relating Plato's themes by constructing for them personalities or characters that are grounded in something which appears to be reality. Still, to stop at that point would be identical to the doctrinal view of Plato's use of history because these *personae* could be interchanged with any other character. In contrast, the dialogical approach contends that:

As in any literary text, who and what the characters are is crucial for interpretation. But many of Plato's characters, like Socrates, pose a special problem; for they are both fictional and historical, by which I mean that they are named after and in some identifiable ways modeled on real life figures of the recent Athenian past, but they are also changed to suit Plato's purposes and, of course, all of the words they speak are Plato's. This complicates and deepens the dialogues and needs to be fully explicated in each case.<sup>19</sup>

In the next section, I will treat more thoroughly the question of the role of Plato's Socrates in the dialogues, but the key issue concerning historical characters from a dialogical standpoint is that they are Plato's constructions. The dialogical approach requires that we understand the dramatic and rhetorical effects that are created with the appearance of these characters named and modeled after historical persons, and scholars must consider how these shape the Platonic philosophical agenda.

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<sup>17</sup> Speaking of modern scholars such as Vlastos, Kahn writes “. . . since they treat Plato's literary creations as if these were historical documents, the result is a pseudo-historical account of the philosophy of Socrates.” Kahn (1996) 3.

<sup>18</sup> Robb makes the clear, but generally overlooked point that “biography is a Hellenistic invention, and was unknown in Plato's day.” Robb (1997) 34.

<sup>19</sup> Press (1993) 119-20.

### Is Plato Speaking?

Arguably, the most potent and entrenched concept that the doctrinal method of interpretation has produced is the notion that the character of Socrates faithfully represents Plato's philosophical beliefs within the dialogues. Because there is no Plato character in any of the dialogues, before the time of Aristophanes of Byzantium<sup>20</sup> the dialogues prompted the question, "Which of Plato's characters expresses his own position?" In recent scholarly debate, this question has been answered by the so-called "mouthpiece theory." This is so intertwined with the arguments concerning the dialogue format and interpretive methods that many of the dialogical responses to mouthpiece theories will overlap already stated dialogical responses to doctrinal methodology. Nevertheless, since Socrates is ostensibly the central figure in *Sōkratikoī logoi* and the legacy of the historical Socrates sparks such heated antagonism among scholars, it is important to outline the differences between traditional expectations placed upon Plato's Socrates and those expectations placed upon him by dialogical interpreters.

In order to extricate from the dialogues a definitive "Platonism," philosophers and philologists have attempted to assign to a character inside of his writings the privileged role of Plato's spokesman. If, as the idea goes, any particular person stands in a work as a conduit of Plato's authoritative perception, then the great philosopher's doctrines and beliefs become accessible to the discerning reader capable of determining which character fills this role. Of course, this too relies on the assumption about Plato and Platonic philosophy that, in order to find any Platonic doctrine in the dialogues, there first

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<sup>20</sup> *Oxyrhynchus* 3219; Tarrant (2000) 71. In fact, H. Cherniss shows in *Aristotle's Criticism of Plato and the Academy* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1944) that Aristotle had already asked and answered repeatedly whether Socrates and other main characters express Plato's ideas.

must have been Platonic doctrines and then Plato must have written them into these dialogues. At no point in any of the dialogues, however, is it possible to isolate a statement and definitively claim that Plato believed it as true. The dialogues are dramatic prose and not treatises, and as such, the characters' statements may at any point fail to convey the author's doctrines, provided he had any, while still serving his purpose.

That the character Socrates provides the best vantage from which to look out over the Platonic philosophical landscape has long been the consensus opinion. This traditional view holds the position that whenever Socrates appears in a dialogue of Plato the reader must consider his speeches to be the articulation of Plato's system of philosophy. However, since Socrates does not appear in some dialogues, in others does not occupy the protagonist role, and occasionally contradicts himself between dialogues, scholars have been forced to contrive intricate explanations for how these reflect upon the "continuity" of Platonic philosophy. As a result, two major schools of thought have come forth within the doctrinal scholars, the unitarians and the developmentalists.

The unitarian response to the mouthpiece debate, although differences of degree exist among scholars of this view, maintains that Plato had a fully formed philosophical system from his initial authorship of the earliest dialogues.<sup>21</sup> To be accurate, the unitarian position does not hold that at all points Socrates, or any speaker, directly speaks for Plato; nevertheless, unitarians affirm that Socrates, quite frequently Plato's representative, becomes the central figure in a series of literary works through which Plato espouses his

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<sup>21</sup> The unitarian scholars attribute the genesis of this interpretation to Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Introduction to the Dialogues of Plato*, tr. W. Dobson (New York: Graland, 1973), whom the dialogical movement equally maintains as instrumental for the inception of its methodology. Influential recent unitarian proponents include Paul Friedländer, Charles Kahn, and the "Tübingen School" of Kurt Gaiser and Hans-Joachim Krämer.

own philosophical theories. Early dialogues provide only clues and “proleptic” introductions to theories that Plato makes explicit in later dialogues, although he had those theories already fully developed in his mind. The main concern of unitarian scholars, as opposed to developmentalists, is that “Plato’s thought processes in the course of composition are inaccessible to us. What we have is his authorial design, inscribed in the text of the dialogues.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, the unitarian approach to the mouthpiece issue requires a protagonist, usually Socrates, who offers the examples of Plato’s continuation of Socratic philosophy in a progressively revelatory manner, while maintaining Plato’s anonymity.

The developmentalist school teaches that, as Plato wrote and matured, he altered his philosophical system and this is reflected in his dialogues. First expressed by K. F. Hermann in 1839, developmentalism has gained a large adherence since the advent of stylometric analysis in 1867.<sup>23</sup> Cornford used stylometric analysis to establish an outline of the order in which Plato wrote the dialogues and divided them into three primary groupings.<sup>24</sup> From there, developmentalists think that it is possible to track how Plato uses different characters over the course of his life to express his philosophical doctrines. The conclusion of the developmentalist perspective is that Plato uses Socrates as his spokesman throughout the early dialogues. As time goes on and he establishes his own

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<sup>22</sup> Kahn (1996) 63.

<sup>23</sup> Guthrie (1975) 49. By far, the most influential members of developmentalism of the twentieth century have been Gregory Vlastos and his students.

<sup>24</sup> Guthrie (1975) 50. While there are variations of this arrangement and still debate over individual dialogues, Cornford’s categories of early, middle, and late dialogues generally hold today. Early: *Apology*, *Crito*, *Laches*, *Lysis*, *Charmides*, *Euthyphro*, *Hippias Minor* and *Major*, *Protagoras*, *Gorgias*, *Ion*. Middle: *Meno*, *Phaedo*, *Republic*, *Symposium*, *Phaedrus*, *Euthydemus*, *Menexenus*, *Cratylus*. Late: *Parmenides*, *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, *Politicus*, *Timaeus*, *Critias*, *Philebus*, *Laws*.

mature philosophy, Plato allows other characters to express his thoughts and distances himself from Socrates, especially the historical Socrates. Vlastos describes this process in the following way:

As Plato changes, the philosophical persona of his Socrates is made to change, absorbing the writer's new convictions, arguing for them with the same zest with which the Socrates of the previous dialogues had argued for the views the writer had shared with the original of that figure earlier on.<sup>25</sup>

Developmentalists use this idea of maturation to explain the apparent contradictions between dialogues and the shift in themes from the early dialogues to the later dialogues.

Both the unitarian and developmental approaches to the mouthpiece question are incompatible with the dialogical approach to Plato interpretation. Indeed, many so-called “anti-mouthpiece” or “non-mouthpiece” scholars are members of the dialogical school.<sup>26</sup> The reason for this is that dialogism does not presume the existence of Platonic doctrines within the dialogues, whereas the unitary and developmental approaches both attempt to cull propositional statements from the dialogues. These collected doctrines must be forced to cohere in a logical, systematic way. Disregarding these presupposed teachings, the dialogical reader will not find the need for a spokesman.

So then, the dialogical response to the question of who speaks for Plato is that “the dialogues do, irreducibly.”<sup>27</sup> It is impossible to separate any portion of a dialogue from the larger context of that work and label it Plato's theory or doctrine. “The dialogues are dramatic examples of such [philosophical] speech and thinking that their audience can

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<sup>25</sup> Vlastos (1991) 53.

<sup>26</sup> Scholars prominently known for their participation in both dialogical and anti-mouthpiece scholarship include Debra Nails, Holger Thesleff, Harold Tarrant, and Gerald Press.

<sup>27</sup> Nails (2000) 16.

take in and in which they can, at least vicariously, participate.”<sup>28</sup> Without the dialogue form, the philosophical reasoning that takes place within the dialogues could not exist. The dialogues as independent wholes transmit Plato’s philosophy.

The unique nature of the dialogues has led to great speculation and more than two millennia of interpretations based less upon what we know and more upon what has been unquestioningly accepted. Through dialogism, it is possible to strip away many unfounded presumptions that have governed Plato scholarship and to take a new look at the features of the dialogues that have made them the unparalleled body of philosophical literature. These principles will guide this investigation of the *Symposium* and show how Plato masterfully constructed within this dialogue a reflexive relationship between literary form, dramatic structure, and philosophic content which work synergistically to educate the reader.

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<sup>28</sup> Waugh (2000) 49.

## CHAPTER 3 FRAMING THE DIALOGUE

Plato devised an complex narrative frame for the *Symposium*, and the effects of its intricacies have not gone without great attention. This frame is constructed with an opening scene in which the reader meets the narrator of the *Symposium*, Apollodorus. Plato continues throughout the work to use the frame as Apollodorus occasionally interjects with “He said that he said.” The purpose of creating such a dramatic structure to contain the speeches about *erōs* remains one of the primary questions concerning the *Symposium*. Three other dialogues among the Platonic corpus, *Theaetetus*, *Phaedo*, and *Parmenides*, begin with similar framing structures, and their relevance to the practice of philosophy continues to deserve analysis.<sup>1</sup> As discussed in the previous chapter, an investigation of this sort is at the heart of the dialogical interpretative method of Platonic dialogues. In order to understand what philosophy the *Symposium* expresses, particularly through its use of frames, one must take a careful look at the emotional and psychological oscillations effected by Plato’s construction of this narrative frame.

### **Who Tells This Story?**

The *Symposium* opens on a scene between a Socrates enthusiast, Apollodorus, and a group of unnamed listeners. Apollodorus goes to great lengths in order to assure his audience that he can faithfully recount the speeches about *erōs* which were given at

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter owes a great amount to the insightful works of Halperin (1992), Johnson (1998), and Strauss (2001). These three scholars produced some of the analyses most centered literary and historical features of the *Symposium*’s narrative frame and the general structure of the work in recent history. Although all arrive at different conclusions, their contributions in this topic have been central in my investigation.

Agathon's victory party. He immediately begins to narrate an encounter with Glaucon from a couple of days before, during which the two of them walked up to the city as Apollodorus told the whole story from the beginning. Whoever it was who had heard about the banquet from Phoenix had not accurately retold the *logoi* to Glaucon, and so Apollodorus had been caught and coerced into narration. But during this embedded narrative, Apollodorus reveals a piece of information that could undercut his claim to reliability: he tells Glaucon that he was not present at the gathering at Agathon's house, and, in fact, that the whole affair had taken place long ago during their childhood years. He states that he learned the "truth" of the matter from Aristodemus, a close follower of Socrates, who had attended that evening and that he verified some (*enia*) details with Socrates.<sup>2</sup> Concluding his explanation of his preparedness to share the *logoi erōtikoi*, Apollodorus is playfully chastised for his eccentric ways by one of his interlocutors. Following this, he concedes to share what he knows and begins narrating Aristodemus' story of Agathon's party.

The introductory sentence deserves special consideration. δοκῶ μοι περὶ ὧν πυνθάνεσθε οὐκ ἀμελέτητος εἶναι, "I think that I, concerning the things you're inquiring of, am not unpractised." Plato introduces a theme of reflection in two words and then begins to move the reader along his dialogical path. The first two words of the *Symposium*, δοκῶ μοι, ("I think that I . . .")<sup>3</sup> draw the reader into the narrator's dramatic present and perspective. When read, the phrase forces one to think reflexively, as though looking into a mirror and speaking to himself: "I am telling myself that I think that I . . ."

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<sup>2</sup> *Symposium* 173b5.

<sup>3</sup> Dover (1980) 77.

In this way, Plato inaugurates a series of reflections that will continue throughout the *Symposium*. He sets out from the person who always responds to a text, the reader's "I", and causes him to behold himself as narrator for just one second. But in that second, the effect is complete, and the speaker and the reader become united at the dramatic level, while still conversing with one another. Nevertheless, it becomes apparent through the second person plural verb *πυνθάνεσθε* that this narrator is speaking to a group, and that the reader is among this group of listeners. This sets in place a new mirror effect: the reader, who is still feeling united with the voice of the first-person narrator is now being spoken to by that same narrator. Now the reflection is between the narrator/reader in first person and the addressees/reader in second person. Plato's text tempers this unusual position and does not permit the reader to linger by moving away to the first embedded narrative about Apollodorus' meeting with Glaucon.

Before leaving the dialogue's initial sentence, it is necessary to point out that another major theme of the *Symposium* is presented here. The narrator states that he is "not unpracticed," introducing *μελέτη*, practice or care. As explained by Diotima, it is by *meletē* that all knowledge maintains a presence within humans through the regeneration of what was known and the replacement of old memories with new replicas of that information. She calls this *μελετᾶν*, to practice.<sup>4</sup> For, when one begins to forget something, through *meletē* that knowledge is reinserted into the mind and appears to the individual as the same, although it is the recreation of a previous instance of knowledge. Diotima tells Socrates that this is true of our bodies as well. The human physical nature is one of constant deterioration and coming into being. Although a person is thought of as

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<sup>4</sup> *Symposium* 208a3-4.

the same from birth until death, he continually loses and produces things like hair, skin, and blood.<sup>5</sup> To look at this on a larger scale, Diotima explains that this constant need for regeneration is what makes all animals so “erotically disposed.”<sup>6</sup> This is because all mortals desire to become immortal. This drive for immortality that generates procreation, which in turn requires *meletē*, is the very nature of *erōs*.<sup>7</sup> Based on Diotima’s principle of *meletē*, we see that Apollodorus recognizes that the story he is going to repeat for his listeners is the product of *meletē* and an example of the nature of *erōs*. He has rehearsed the story he will deliver, and thereby turns his recitation of the *logoi erōtikoi* into a manifestation of the work of *erōs* brought about through *meletē*.

With the conclusion of the first sentence, the reader has moved positions twice, and Plato’s text makes it clear that the unity with the narrator has dissolved. Now a member of the narrator’s dramatic audience, the reader realizes that Plato has placed him *in medias res*; he (addressee/reader) has asked this narrator to tell him about this famed occasion, at which Socrates and other notable Athenians presented speeches on the erotic (τῶν ἐρωτικῶν λόγων, 172b2). The text, however, does not reveal this fact directly, but through an embedded narrative. This is only noticed when the narrator, soon to be identified as Apollodorus, informs his listeners that “just the other day I happened to be headed up to town from my home in Phalerum.” Because the reader neither traveled from Phalerum the other day nor owns a house there, the distinction from the original voice of

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<sup>5</sup> *Symposium* 207d6-e1.

<sup>6</sup> *Symposium* 207b7-c1.

<sup>7</sup> *Symposium* 207c8-d2.

δοκῶ μοι has been cemented. Plato has made the reader a member of the group wanting to know more about what Socrates said during Agathon's banquet.

Next, a member of the group speaks to Apollodorus and engages him in some polite, humorous name-calling (173d4). The reader gains full autonomy from any of the characters within both the dramatic and narrative portions of the text, although he remains present for the dramatic moment. The impetus to know what Aristodemus shared with Apollodorus still drives the conversation forward. Plato has left his reader eager to hear more and has engendered a desire to learn about *ta erōtika*.

The deft way in which Plato has performed his literary *legerdemain* allows one to progress through this dramatic scene, with its tensions and introductions of important themes, without recognizing the individual steps. The reader does not consciously consider the technique used to place him in this dialogue's world, a world of reflections and diligent care (*meletē*). Nonetheless, as he moves into Apollodorus' telling of Aristodemus' narrative of the speeches given at Agathon's house, the *Symposium*'s reader feels comfortable to interact with the characters and ideas expressed by those present. Plato has completed his artistry, and the reader is none the more aware of the artifice, although manipulated by it.

### **Plato's Purpose in Framing**

After considering the emotional and psychological effects of the initial dramatic sequence, it is necessary to provide possible reasons why Plato uses narrative frames in the *Symposium*. Surely this skillful display of literary prowess was not solely for the purpose of creating "suspension of disbelief." In order to achieve this, Plato did not need to embed multiple narrations, some of which are second and third-hand to the narrator.

When the structure of these embedded narratives is represented in a “step-down” outline it looks like the following:

- Apollodorus narrates to his companions.
- Aristodemus tells the story to Apollodorus.
- Socrates presents his narrative to those at the banquet.
- Diotima explains *erōs* to Socrates.

By the time the reader arrives at the climax of the *Symposium* with Diotima, any statement providing the order of transmission would require saying, “Apollodorus said that Aristodemus said that Socrates said that Diotima said this.” This level of complexity and “convolution” denotes purpose. This purpose must find its expression through the structure itself.<sup>8</sup>

My position on this issue, stated plainly, is that Plato achieves two very important results by framing the *Symposium* in this way. First, he fashions an ascending order of reflections that begins with the previously discussed movement of perspectives. This concept of reflection is mirrored by embedding narratives within narratives, which then interact with one another. I will explicate this point in the next chapter. But for now, it has been shown that Apollodorus’ first statement introduces *μελέτη* into the text, which Diotima will refer to near the end of Socrates’ narration of their conversation, both of which are within Aristodemus’ account as told by Apollodorus. In this way, the most embedded narrative, Socrates’ telling of Diotima’s conversations, is reflected at the original level of narration, that is, Apollodorus conversation with his interlocutors. Second, Plato acknowledges the difficult position that he has made for himself by inscribing the practice of dialogical philosophy, that is, the practice of philosophy through two or more persons in dialectic as portrayed by Socrates in the dialogues, into a

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<sup>8</sup> Johnson (1998) 588-9.

literary, text-based format. Through his dialogue format and dramatic frames for narratives in his dialogues, Plato aids his Athenian contemporaries to see philosophy as an interactive process that demands varying levels of negotiation from those who would participate in philosophizing.<sup>9</sup>

Arguably, the circumstance which most differentiates modern readers from the late-5<sup>th</sup> and early-4<sup>th</sup> century Athenian culture is literacy or, more precisely, our lesser dependence on oral transmission of knowledge versus the ancients' heavy reliance upon it.<sup>10</sup> The conditions of transmission of information have forever changed among Western societies, and it is impossible to recreate a situation by which moderns might fully appreciate the ancient expectations of orality and aurality. Greek society had been passing down legends of their heroes, stories of their origins, and myths of their gods in spoken form for centuries before Plato. An Athenian of this time could expect to know how to live a meaningful and virtuous life by following the examples he committed to memory, having heard and seen them from public orators, epic bards, and dramatic presentations.

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<sup>9</sup> One must also bear in mind that Plato was not only negotiating between his society's trend of oral transmission and this newer movement towards written literature, but also between Socrates' practice of dialectic and written philosophy. The textual and historical traditions agree that Socrates never committed any of his philosophy to writing. Plato portrays Socrates disavowing the value of writing for philosophical purposes in the famous passage of his *Phaedrus*. At 275d, Socrates tells Phaedrus that writing is like a painting: whenever anyone asks it something, it continues to signify the same thing. He continues to say that writing has no power of its own to convince or argue, but always requires a "father" to help them along. Later, at 276e, Socrates unequivocally states that discourse about the just, good, and beautiful is far more noble when engaging another person in dialectic. Whether the historical Socrates actually made such statements can not be known. Nevertheless, we are sure that no writing of his remains and Plato wrote his Socrates as an "oralist." The decision to use the philosophical dialogue and dramatic framing should, therefore, be considered as part of Plato's own negotiation to maintain Socrates' dialectical approach to philosophy while moving to the written medium.

<sup>10</sup> For studies of orality in Plato, see Robb (1997) and Tarrant (1995).

Plato explores how he bridges the gap between the oral tradition, with its emphasis on dramatic representation and recitation, and the newer literary means of engaging philosophy in the *Theaetetus*. The dramatic scene which introduces the narrative in this dialogue provides an example of how 4<sup>th</sup> century Athenians could use written accounts of dialogues in order to pursue philosophical ends. The scene opens on Eucleides and Terpsion coming across each other as Eucleides is returning home from Erineum and a visit with the ailing war hero Theaetetus. Eucleides informs Terpsion that during his return from seeing Theaetetus, he recalled that Socrates had told him about a conversation between Theaetetus, Theodorus, and himself. Eucleides says that he is not able to narrate the event from memory, but he had written down the substance of that conversation as best as he could remember and subsequently verified the contents with Socrates on his visits to Athens. Terpsion wishes to hear this dialogue, so Theaetetus invites him to rest at his house while a slave reads the book of this conversation to both of them. Before Eucleides commands his slave to begin, he informs Terpsion that he has written this dialogue as a drama and not as a narrative; specifically, he has presented the dialogue between Socrates and his interlocutors as it took place and not as Socrates told him. Therefore, the book does not contain transitional phrases, such as “And then he said...” between each speaker’s turn. Eucleides then orders the slave to read and the embedded dialogue begins.

In the dialogue format, Plato merged the instilled ancient sense of orality with the rapidly increasing appreciation for written literature. One can see in the frame of the *Theaetetus* Plato’s cognizance of his society’s transition from oral to literary transmission methods. The union of these two divergent sensibilities required Plato, just as his

character Eucleides, to be aware of the differences in audience response when moving from a literature which is heard to a literature which is read. Eucleides followed the instinct to dramatize, and through conscientious application of dramatic technique he places his audience, in this case himself and Terpsion, directly into the action with Socrates. He removes the mediating language that might create difficulty of comprehension in someone who has spent a lifetime listening to the plays of Euripides or the recitations of Homer. Likewise, Plato removes the distance between his readers and the *erga* of his dialogues through dramatization and dramatic frames.

Important conclusions about Plato's purpose in framing the *Symposium* can be drawn from observations made about the frame of the *Theaetetus*. The frame of the *Symposium* was an intentional device that Plato employed to create a particular response from his readers. That is, including such a structure was part of his well-considered manipulation of emotional interactions with the text, and it serves to establish the theme of μελέτη. Since we observe from the *Theaetetus* that Plato knew ways to express related speech without using Greek's accusative/infinitive indirect speech construction, to employ this construction constitutes intention, not simple adherence to syntax. The reason is found in the *Theaetetus* when Eucleides explains his exclusion of "I said" and "he said," the rationale he gives is μή παρέχοιεν πράγματα,<sup>11</sup> so that there will not be difficulties in understanding. If the absence of these narrative markers and the accusative/infinitive construction they require means fewer difficulties for the reader of a text, then the inclusion of these same elements must indicate greater complexity for the same reader. From the fact that he utilized the more problematic syntactical and narrative

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<sup>11</sup> Theaetetus 143c1.

features, we understand that Plato intended that the *Symposium* require more of its readers. He determines that even basic linguistic comprehension will be a struggle and that if one is to attain to a full understanding of this dialogue's import, that person must strive after it. Just as if in longing for an object of desire, the reader practices great care through the embedded narratives to arrive at Agathon's banquet and to hear Diotima's description of *erōs*.<sup>12</sup>

I wish to clarify at this point that I am not claiming that Plato wrote the *Theaetetus* and the *Symposium* with the notion of intertextuality as understood by many analytic interpreters of Plato's works. Familiarity with the *Theaetetus* and its discussion of the tension between orality and literacy would not have been a prerequisite for Plato's contemporaries to sense the "difficulty" in the *Symposium* that I have discussed. The late-5<sup>th</sup> and early-4<sup>th</sup> century Athenian instinct for oral/aural literature caused a reader of that time to sense the struggle of the *Symposium* by nature. This is what makes the frame of the *Theaetetus* so remarkable in its portrayal of Athenians dealing with dramatic writing versus narrative writing. Plato has committed to text an example of how the tendency towards orality, an experience which modern readers do not share, works out when someone of that culture shifts to written communication. The modern reader benefits from correlating concepts discussed in the *Theaetetus* to the *Symposium*, but this was not at all a condition for comprehension among Plato's generation.

### **Other Effects of Framing**

Two frequently discussed effects of Plato's use of a complex narrative frame in the *Symposium* include: 1) Plato creates a sense temporal "distance" between his readers and

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Halperin (1992) 97-106 and Rosen (1987) 10, with their "initiation" into the mysteries contained within the narrative.

the events of the narrative; 2) Plato undermines the “authenticity” of the accounts given and the narrator’s (or Plato’s own) “reliability” to relate the contents of the narrative accurately. Although both of these interpretations of Platonic framing have helped scholars to achieve great improvements in understanding the function of frames in the philosophical dialogue, the interpretive model that I have employed renders these unsatisfactory or inapplicable. For the remainder of this chapter I will show how the notion of “distance” indicates an anachronistic perspective and that any question of “authenticity” is a consequence of the assumption that Plato intended to present a historically accurate report in the *Symposium*.

When scholars such as Bacon and Rosen speak of “distance” within the *Symposium*, they refer to a feeling of separation between the initial dramatic time, when Apollodorus begins the text with  $\delta\omicron\kappa\hat{\omega}\ \mu\omicron\iota$ , and the time decades earlier when Diotima and Socrates held their conversation.<sup>13</sup> According to them, the reader is often reminded of the fact that he, like Apollodorus and his unnamed companions, did not attend the gathering at Agathon’s house, nor were they present for Diotima’s explication on the nature and workings of *erōs*. Plato imposes upon the reader, as this interpretation goes, a feeling of “distance” through his use of the extended accusative/infinitive indirect speech construction during the *logoi*, and whenever Apollodorus interrupts with phrases like, “He said that Agathon said that . . .”

Quite to the contrary, in my reading, the frame of the *Symposium* and the use of indirect statement provide a dramatic entry that makes a legendary occasion come to life once again, while forcing the reader to struggle with the structure and meaning of the

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<sup>13</sup> Bacon (1959) 419-21; Rosen (1987) 7-9.

text. Although it is true that many years separate the dramatic present of the frame and the time of the embedded narratives, Plato traverses this temporal gap and places his reader in the room with Agathon's company. The events and speeches of the narrative appear realistic. They grant a glimpse into the world of the Athenian elite at the height of the classical period, as scholars who use the "distance" interpretation agree. Halperin comes close with his concept of the "erotics of narrativity" where it focuses on the interaction between a reader's desire to experience the past is fulfilled and the fact that narration itself means that the reader can never be in that past.<sup>14</sup> Still, the idea of separation is overstated in this. If Plato was intending to make his reader feel detached, then he failed miserably.

A better explanation, and one supported with evidence provided by Plato, is that "difficulty" was at the heart of the frame and its consequent syntax, not "distance." As discussed, Plato displays his awareness of the difficulties that indirect discourse creates in extended narrative. Euclides' stylistic choices in the *Theaetetus* provide a *comparandum* for the ancient Greek response to this issue. A narrative of this type requires greater effort to follow and to understand, even for native speakers of ancient Greek, but this does not necessitate feeling that the events narrated are farther away. According to my interpretation, the sensation of "distance" appears to be anachronistic response based upon the modern reader's own "distance" from the culture of Plato's day. These modern readers have projected "distance" onto Plato and his contemporaries.

Comments about the "reliability" of the narrator or the "authenticity" of the narrative in the *Symposium* abound so greatly within the scholarship on the dialogue that

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<sup>14</sup> Halperin (1992) 98 and 106.

it is hardly overstatement to call them ubiquitous.<sup>15</sup> The issue is based primarily on the relative chronology of events within the *Symposium* and the indirect manner in which Apollodorus learned the narrative. The brief summary of the argument goes as follows: If Agathon won his victory as a dramatist in 416 BC and Apollodorus is attempting to relate the events of the next day's celebration banquet approximately fifteen years later, having heard the story himself second-hand, then the accuracy of his narration is questionable.<sup>16</sup> Because Plato authored the *Symposium* as many as twenty years later and makes use of an "unreliable" narrator, he appears to undermine his own authority to present this *Sōkratikos logos* as an "authentic" record.

At a dramatic level, one cannot help but recognize the effort Apollodorus exerts to confirm his version of the story. He informs his listeners that Aristodemus slept through part of the affair and could not remember entire speeches given during the party. Admissions of this type help to lend greater credibility to the one confessing. Moreover, what portions Aristodemus recalled, Apollodorus verified their veracity with Socrates. Far from thinking of him as unreliable, the characters within the dialogue's dramatic instance are moved to trust Apollodorus' telling as authentic and well-rehearsed. Beyond internal observations, the *Symposium* is a work of dramatic and narrative literature. The lifelike construction of the literary world which Plato creates in his dialogues, however, does not constitute an attempt at biography or historiography. I argued in the last chapter that the assumption of factuality or transcription of historical events and people continues to be untenable. It appears in this instance that the desire for historicity among many

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<sup>15</sup> E.g., Bury (1964) xv-xviii; Rosen (1987) 9; Halperin (1992) 107-11; Hunter (2004) 26-9.

<sup>16</sup> For the dates of the *Symposium*'s dramatic events and Plato's authorship, see Bury (1964) lxvi-iii.

scholars has led them to devalue or forget the fundamental nature of fictive writing in Plato's dialogues.

To summarize, an analysis of the frame of the *Symposium* demonstrates some of the ways in which Plato wrote the dialogue and its constituent parts with a conscientious eye toward expressing his philosophical agenda through the union of both form and content. At the very beginning of the *Symposium* the themes of reflection and diligent care, μελέτη, find expression in Apollodorus' first sentence. The reader is made to participate in the pursuit of *erōs* by struggling through the negotiation of varying perspectives and the difficulties which indirect discourse creates. The embedded narratives also serve to fashion a progression of ascent into the dramatic past.

## CHAPTER 4 DESPERATELY SEEKING ERŌS

In the last chapter I argued that the frame of the *Symposium* performs several important tasks: it engenders in the reader a sense of eagerness to find out more about the speeches given during Agathon's celebration, it creates a dramatic feeling of immediacy that allows a reader to believe he is participating, and it establishes that interaction with the narrative will be difficult and require careful attention. In order to continue to explicate how Plato guides his reader to experience the didactic effect of the *Symposium*, in this chapter I will discuss the progressive nature of the speeches. More specifically, it is my intention to illustrate how each successive speech is an "improvement" in the way the symposiasts praise *erōs* and its function. These improvements serve to create the notion of progression toward an ultimate understanding of *erōs*. When, at last, Socrates speaks, he completes this "upward" trend by correcting the method of praise and sharing his conversations with Diotima which initiated him into the mysteries of *erōs*. This theme and sense of development within the plot mirrors the steps of ascension to a vision of The Beautiful (*to kalon*) as described Diotima.

### **Diotima's Ladder**

For purposes of comparison, it is necessary to outline the segment of the *Symposium* in which Diotima provides her stages of erotic progress. *Symposium* 209e5-212a7 contains the entirety of Diotima's revelation of the procedure by which a young man ascends to a vision of The Beautiful. In fact, she lists the steps of this ascent twice in this passage of the text: at 210a4-210e5 and 211b7-211d1.

This is the right procedure or way of being led by another in erotic matters, beginning from the earlier beauties for the sake of this one, he must always ascend, as on the steps of a stair, from one to two, and from two to all beautiful bodies; and from beautiful bodies to beautiful customs, from beautiful customs to beautiful knowledge, and from knowledge he will terminate in this knowledge, which is no other than knowledge of this beauty itself; and so initiated, he knows what beauty is itself.<sup>1</sup>

Moravcsik, reading both sections together, produces a fourteen step organization of Diotima's ascent of the erotic man.<sup>2</sup> He divides these fourteen stages into an "upper" and a "lower" ascent, which contains two subdivisions. The first subdivision of the "lower" ascent contains the first five stages. These predominantly concern the appreciation of beauty evident in bodies, moving from the love of beauty in a particular body to the recognition that what is beautiful in all bodies is the same beauty. At the last stage of this subdivision the erotic beginner has learned to hold in contempt the notion of loving only one body, and he becomes a lover of all beautiful bodies. In the second subdivision of the "lower" ascent, which contains the next five stages, the lover makes the cognitive advancement to understand that souls contain a beauty which is superior to the beauty of bodies. He learns the value of guiding a young man along the ascent and sees the beauty of intangibles, such as customs and laws. Having discovered that all beauty is related, whether in bodies or in intangible practices, he assigns little value to physical beauty since it is inferior. Moravcsik calls the final four stages of Diotima's ladder the "upper" ascent. At this point, the lover is turned to contemplate the beauty contained in sciences and other branches of knowledge. After beholding the beauty that is manifested in so many ways, the lover finds liberation from any single form of beauty and gazes on the

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<sup>1</sup> Translation from Rosen (1987) 272-3.

<sup>2</sup> Moravcsik (1972) 286.

vast ocean of beauty that exists. He pours forth beautiful speeches in boundless philosophy until, strengthened by these experiences, he suddenly catches sight of the transcendent form of The Beautiful.

This progression of the stages of ascent for erotic development displays several important preliminary trends in Diotima's organization which relate to the speeches of Agathon's guests. First, in order to scale the "ladder," the one who toils for improvement must be guided by another. According to this model, the aspiring initiate is ὁ ἡγούμενος,<sup>3</sup> the one being lead. At regular intervals along the way the new lover is guided by another and interacts with that guide's example. The erotic life can not be achieved in solitude either in theory or in practice; it requires discourse and the improvement of others as a source of beauty. The lover attempts to produce speeches that can make a young man better, ποιήσουσι βελτίους τοὺς νέους.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, the symposiasts also rely on one another's speeches in order to produce better encomia for *erōs*. The guests each adapt concepts from the preceding *logos* and improve upon some aspect of their discourse to beautify the praise.

Another attribute of Diotima's ladder that corresponds to the various speeches given at Agathon's banquet is that of responding to beauty with *logoi*. At each of the major divisions detailed in Moravcsik's schema, the lover responds to his new appreciation of beauty with speeches. Once he begins the ascent at the beauty of a particular body, according to Diotima he waxes vocal and produces λόγους καλοῦς.<sup>5</sup> At

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<sup>3</sup> *Symposium* 210a7.

<sup>4</sup> *Symposium* 210c2-3.

<sup>5</sup> *Symposium* 210a10.

the second subdivision of the “lower” ascent, the lover turns to the beauty in souls, and he also responds to this new beauty by “giv[ing] birth to and seek[ing] words that make the young better.”<sup>6</sup> Once the lover has ascended to the stage of contemplation of the sciences, his reaction to the sea of beauty which he is able to experience and appreciate is to bring forth *logoi*. In particular, just before he is able to glimpse The Beautiful itself, the erotic initiate gives birth to πολλοὺς καὶ καλοὺς λόγους καὶ μεγαλοπρεπεῖς, many beautiful and magnificent speeches.<sup>7</sup> As the erotic pilgrim progresses in his journey toward a vision of The Beautiful, at each major shift in his appreciation of beauty, he responds with speeches, until he finally moves to philosophically based *logoi*, which strengthen and increase (ῥωσθεῖς καὶ ἀύξηθεῖς)<sup>8</sup> him enough to catch sight of The Beautiful. The reader moves through a mirror of this process in the speeches presented at Agathon’s house. With each successive speaker and his encomium of *erōs*, the reader participates in a process of increasing refinement. The manner in which the symposiasts respond to the beauty they see in *erōs* and in the previous speakers’ speeches creates an sense of ascension up to Socrates’ account of his conversations with Diotima.

The final point of intersection between the *logoi* presented in the *Symposium* and Diotima’s ladder that I wish to identify is that both end with an epiphany which takes place in philosophical discourse. Diotima had previously explained that *erōs* is the love (*erōs*) for something beautiful, and that, since wisdom is about the most beautiful things, ὥστε ἀναγκαῖον ἔρωτα φιλόσοφον εἶναι, *erōs* must be a philosopher.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, it stands

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<sup>6</sup> *Symposium* 210c1-2; translation from Belfiore (1984) 145.

<sup>7</sup> *Symposium* 210d4-5.

<sup>8</sup> *Symposium* 210d6-7.

<sup>9</sup> *Symposium* 204b2-4.

to reason that the ultimate state to which *erōs* impels a lover is the pursuit of wisdom, philosophy. According to Diotima, this is what the lover experiences before he can see The Beautiful. Once freed from slavish devotion to one person or a single custom, the lover becomes inspired by the manifold beauty before him and produces beautiful speeches and *διανοήματα ἐν φιλοσοφίᾳ ἀφθόνῳ*, thoughts in limitless philosophy.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, those who read the *Symposium* must ascend through the speeches within the narrative and engage Socrates on philosophical terms as he expounds Diotima's revelation of *erōs*. The philosopher alone is erotic enough, so thoroughly directed by *erōs*, to receive the vision of The Beautiful, and the reader is required to hear it expressed by the philosopher Socrates.

### **Ascending Speeches**

Having thus outlined Diotima's ladder, I will now turn to the speeches given at Agathon's house and discuss how they create for the reader a sense of improvement, development, and ascent within the narrative. It is not my intention, as some have attempted, to align each of speeches given with a particular stage or rung of Diotima's ladder.<sup>11</sup> The focus of this analysis is to show how Plato engenders these feelings of ascension through the statements of his characters and that the content within each speech interacts with statements in the *logoi* of the other guests.

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<sup>10</sup> *Symposium* 210d5-6.

<sup>11</sup> Corrigan and Glazov-Corrigan (2004) 148-58. This is the most recent attempt to find a one-to-one correlation between the *logoi erōtikoí* given at the banquet and the rungs of Diotima's ladder. They developed a five-stage schema for the ascent of Diotima. Then they argue that these steps are each represented in the five speeches of Pheadrus, Pausanius, Eryximachus, Aristophanes, and Agathon. However, the relationships they try to establish between the speeches and rungs are based as much on difference or distinction as they are on direct similarities. On the whole, this approach over-simplifies the great complexity with which Plato has interwoven both of these structures in the *Symposium*, and at the same time puts forth elaborate and unclear systems of relationship.

Plato begins developing the notion of progress with the decision to create *logoi* in honor of *erōs*. Since the symposiasts all agree that they should not pass the evening in excessive drinking, Eryximachus suggests that they should each in turn make speeches in praise of *erōs*. However, Eryximachus is not the author of the idea to render encomia to *erōs*; Phaedrus had complained to him on several occasions that *erōs* is neglected in literature. Phaedrus recognizes that there is a lack of honor given to *erōs* although all manner of praise has been written for things as mundane as salt.<sup>12</sup> He feels that it is necessary to correct this oversight and desires that someone fill this void by praising such an old and great god.

The first step in this narrative progression begins with Phaedrus, the “father of the *logos*.” He expands upon the assertion that *erōs* is the oldest of all gods and, therefore, deserving of great honor. In order to prove his claim that *erōs* is the eldest, Phaedrus calls into evidence Hesiod and Homer, as well as the pre-Socratic philosopher Parmenides, and the fact that none of them provides a parentage for *erōs*. This is ironic because, according to Eryximachus, Phaedrus finds the writers of all genres, eras, and places negligent in their praise of this god. Diotima later refutes this claim of seniority with her own myth concerning the conception of *erōs* from the union of Poros and Penia. Phaedrus then turns to proclaiming that *erōs* is the best god for the benefit of mankind. He focuses on the relationship between a young man (*παιδικά*) and his older lover (*ἐραστής*) and how this type of pederastic union improves both the individual and the society when correctly administered. The elder lover seeks the affection and respect of his younger beloved and, in so doing, performs feats of virtue for his affections. This speech reflects Diotima’s

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<sup>12</sup> *Symposium* 177b4-6.

affirmation of the partnership required for the progress of lovers. It also centers on concepts expressed at the “lower” levels of Diotima’s ladder, namely, that an erotic person must learn to appreciate the beauty of bodies which results in an increase in virtue.

Narrative progression maintains its upward movement with Pausanias’ response to Phaedrus. Pausanias takes issue with the lack of refinement in the previously proposed mandate to praise *erōs*. Working within the traditions that *erōs* accompanies Aphrodite and that there are two Aphrodites, the heavenly and the vulgar, Pausanias concludes that there are two *erōtes*, a heavenly and a vulgar. Thus, he states, “So I will try to correct this, first to point out the *erōs* which one must praise, and then to make a praise worthy of the god.”<sup>13</sup> He notices the lack of specificity and the need to rectify the standards of praise, specifically, that one should attribute beautiful love only to the heavenly *erōs*. This concept is augmented when Pausanias explains that one can distinguish the heavenly, *ouranios*, from the vulgar, *pandēmos*, by the way in which *erōs* finds manifestation. But distinguishing between the two requires standards, customs, and laws by which both the lover and the beloved can know that they practice *erōs* nobly. Pausanias asserts that this is best exemplified in Athens’ laws governing the behavior of pederastic lovers. He praises how detailed and difficult to understand Athenian law is because:

Our law wants to put them to the test in a good and noble way, and wants to have them gratify some and shun others. On account of this it encourages them to pursue and the others to flee, setting up a contest and testing to which group the lover belongs and to which the one who is loved.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> *Symposium* 180d1-3; translation adapted from Strauss (2001) 63.

<sup>14</sup> *Symposium* 183e6-184a5; translation from Strauss (2001) 80.

Any lover or beloved pursuing erotic fulfillment must adhere to the strictures prescribed by law and custom in order to display the heavenly *erōs*. So, we see that Pausanias' speech thus reflects the ascent to The Beautiful in its theme of improvement and sense of progression. Key erotic issues such as loving the beauty in laws and the need to guide another nobly along his ascent find voice in this speech.

Arguably, Plato's most pronounced declaration of his program of narrative progression in the speeches comes in Eryximachus' opening statements. While it appears to Eryximachus that Pausanias started his speech well, he does not think that it was brought to an appropriate end (*telos*). Eryximachus decides, therefore, that he must provide an end for the *logos*.<sup>15</sup> In the opening sentence of Eryximachus' speech, Plato draws the connection between the speeches clearly. The guests at Agathon's banquet are correcting and improving the deficiencies within one another's speeches in order to make the "praise for *erōs* as beautiful as possible."<sup>16</sup> Plato uses this process within the narrative to instruct his reader that, like Diotima's ladder, there can not be an arrival to the perfect vision of the erotic without effort and development.

Some of the same topics that Diotima lists as necessary for a proper initiation into the erotic mysteries are introduced in Eryximachus' speech. Based upon the dual nature of *erōs* as described by Pausanias, Eryximachus explains that the two *erōtes* are oppositional forces at work in all things. He expands the influence of *erōs* from human affairs to the organization of the cosmos, the changing of seasons, the harmony of music, the practice of divination, and the study of medicine. According to Eryximachus, a person

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<sup>15</sup> *Symposium* 185e6-186a2.

<sup>16</sup> *Symposium* 177d2-3.

who would show reverence to *erōs* does so by understanding the balance that must be maintained between the heavenly and the vulgar. Also, the truly erotic man is able to remove the one and instill the other in order to preserve this harmony. Diotima addresses the concept of erotic dualism when she explains the daemonic nature of *erōs* to Socrates.<sup>17</sup> According to her, *erōs* is neither mortal nor immortal, god nor human, beautiful nor ugly, wise nor unwise. Diotima tells Socrates that because of its twofold nature, *erōs* is constantly perishing and then returning to life. We have noted that the lover must reach to the stage of Diotima's ladder in which he is turned to see the beauty in sciences. Eryximachus has relied upon his experiences as a physician to conclude that the twofold *erōs* is at work and striving for harmony in all things. Medicine and other branches of knowledge, such as meteorology and astronomy, serve as guides to Eryximachus in his pursuit of erotic understanding.

The transitional passage that leads to Aristophanes' speech is nearly as direct a statement of Plato's didactic agenda as the one leading to Eryximachus. Aristophanes' relates his response to his predecessors' speeches as one of contradistinction. Addressing Eryximachus, he says, "I intend to speak in a somewhat different way from how Pausanias and you spoke."<sup>18</sup> He honors this promise and employs his comic ability to contrive a new myth about the origin of men and the function of *erōs*. In this myth, Aristophanes manufactures a pseudo-history of mankind in which humans were once a physical duality, two people in one spherical form. Because of their hubris and attempted assault on Olympus, Zeus split the *hermaphrodite* humans in half. Although he maintains

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<sup>17</sup> *Symposium* 202d11-204b7.

<sup>18</sup> *Symposium* 189c2-3; translation from Strauss (2001) 122.

the notion of duality, Aristophanes has shifted Pausanias' and Eryximachus' dual *erōs* into a two-part human. Now having been separated from the other half, each person is driven by *erōs* to reconnect with his severed partner. Thus, according to Aristophanes, *erōs* is not some cosmic force of harmony, but a natural impulse in humans which drives them to find their match. Once again, Plato has anticipated Diotima's speech and placed signs for his reader to follow. As one continues through the speeches, Plato's characters interact in their *logoi* and the reader is made to grapple with the various theories about *erōs* while sensing the upward movement in the narrative.

As we approach the pinnacle of Plato's narrative climb to Socrates, Agathon presents an innovative oration about the attributes of *erōs* and its benefits to mankind. He indicts his guests for not having properly performed encomium, because they spoke only of the benefits which *erōs* provides without first describing the *laudandus*.<sup>19</sup> In order to begin his description, Agathon refutes Phaedrus' claim that *erōs* is the oldest of the gods, and argues the exact opposite, that he is the youngest. To establish his point Agathon cites two of the same literary sources, Hesiod and Parmenides, whom Phaedrus used as evidence to the contrary. This claim completes a "youthward" progression in the age of *erōs* as assigned by the other speakers.<sup>20</sup> In Agathon's estimation, *erōs* is the softest of all the gods, as he lives in the soft souls of men and avoids hard-heartedness. Agathon places not only all people under the power of *erōs*, but all of the Olympian gods also. The obvious dominant trait of the attributes which Agathon ascribes to *erōs* is that they apply to Agathon and *erōs* equally. Eryximachus centered his understanding of *erōs* around the

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<sup>19</sup> *Symposium* 194e4-195a5.

<sup>20</sup> Strauss (2001) 158.

medical arts, but Agathon goes further and turns *erōs* into a “poet so wise that he makes another poet.”<sup>21</sup> Agathon portrays *erōs* like himself, as a young, soft, delicate, poet who holds sway over both men and gods through his power to guide his audience to what is beautiful. Diotima will likewise portray *erōs* in her own image. As a prophetess, she once informed the Athenian people of the correct sacrifice to propitiate the gods and delay a plague for ten years.<sup>22</sup> Diotima ascribes this same function of mediation between gods in men to *erōs*. She states that *erōs*, since it is a *daemon* or a spiritual being, has the power of interpretation and governs the practice of fortune-telling, ritual sacrifice, and divination.

Having arrived at the end of Plato’s upward journey, the reader has been prepared to wrestle with and appreciate the erotic revelation of Diotima which Socrates discloses. With each *logos* given at the banquet, Plato anticipates another portion of the content of Diotima’s conversations with Socrates. He also provides examples of the alternative ways in which men of diverse vocations, such as a tragedian, a comedian, and a doctor, understand *erōs*. This arrangement of ascending speeches throws into stark relief the differences between the inconsistent and incomplete way most reason and how the great Socrates practices philosophy. The intricately designed and carefully implemented narrative ascent within the *logoi* of the symposiasts makes Plato and the *Symposium* instructors in *ta erōtika*, just like the guide who leads an uninitiated lover up the rungs of Diotima’s ladder.

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<sup>21</sup> *Symposium* 196d7-e2.

<sup>22</sup> *Symposium* 210d3-5.

## CHAPTER 5 THE EXAMPLE OF ALCIBIADES

Although Socrates' account of Diotima's prophetic revelation of the ascent to The Beautiful represents the dramatic climax of the *Symposium*, Plato has not completed his didactic progression. Even after negotiating the difficulties of the narrative frame, progressing through the series of improving speeches, and being taught the nature and function of *erōs* by Diotima, the reader still has more to learn about the practice of the erotic life. Before ending the *Symposium*, Plato provides both a positive and a negative example of proper submission to the power of *erōs*.<sup>1</sup> Alcibiades describes Socrates' adherence to love of only the highest beauty. At the same time, he illustrates that even Socrates' closest lovers misinterpret the erotic philosopher's actions because they fail to understand the works of *erōs*. Through Alcibiades' speech, the reader is moved from the theoretical heights of a vision of The Beautiful to a practical discussion of living in accordance with the erotic principles Socrates learned from Diotima.

In order to understand how both male characters function as exemplars of erotic understanding and misunderstanding, we must outline their relationship. As a young member of the Athenian elite, Alcibiades was well-known for his wealth, ambition, good looks, and vanity. Nearly twenty years before the dramatic date of the *Symposium*, he had been smitten by Socrates and his beautiful *logoi*. Bitten in his heart more severely than

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Dover (1980) 164. "Plato's chief purpose in this speech is to show us that Socrates put into practice the morality implicit in Diotima's theory."

any snake could bite,<sup>2</sup> Alcibiades was bewitched by the philosophical discourses he heard from Socrates and took him as his *erastēs*. Just as Agathon proposed upon Socrates' arrival to the banquet, Alcibiades thought that he would gain through physical contact some of the internal beauty and wisdom that Socrates possessed.<sup>3</sup> Consistent with Athenian customs regarding pederasty, Alcibiades expected that his older lover would wish to exchange sexual gratification for instruction in virtue.

Supposing him to be seriously attracted by my youthful beauty, I thought it was a gift from Hermes and marvelous good luck for me, that it was possible for me, by gratifying Socrates, to hear all that he knew. For I was extraordinarily proud of my beauty.<sup>4</sup>

However, Socrates never exercised the privilege of being physically gratified by him. Alcibiades, confused that Socrates does not pursue sexual fulfillment, felt the need to take on the role of the lover in pursuit of his beloved. He attempted to seduce Socrates on several occasions. Alcibiades arranged unsupervised visits, private exercise sessions consisting primarily of nude wrestling, and late-night dinners. All of these efforts resulted in the same unwavering asexual response from Socrates. Alcibiades felt scorned and mocked by Socrates. He was amazed at the endurance and resolve with which Socrates maintained his aloof and hubristic celibacy in the face of such advances.<sup>5</sup> Despite this, Alcibiades remained enthralled with Socrates and his philosophical speeches. He decided that he would continue a relationship with Socrates, although he was at a loss as to how he might win the philosopher's undivided attention. It is the aggressive nature of

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<sup>2</sup> *Symposium* 218a2-7.

<sup>3</sup> *Symposium* 175c7-d1; 219d1-3.

<sup>4</sup> *Symposium* 217a2-6; Translation from Rosen (1987) 301.

<sup>5</sup> *Symposium* 219d2-6.

Alcibiades' attempts that leads Socrates to ask Agathon for protection and mediation between the two men. No longer can Socrates show interest in another person in Alcibiades' presence without becoming the object of the young man's jealousy and forceful sexual advances.<sup>6</sup>

When we read about the affair between these two characters, it becomes clear that, despite his intimate and long-term relationship with Socrates, Alcibiades never fully comprehends Socratic *erōs*. He knows Socrates well, by his own claim, better than any other guest attending Agathon's banquet.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, he thinks of wisdom, virtue, and beauty as commodities for which he can trade. Alcibiades' suggestion to exchange sexual gratification for "all that Socrates knows" is a grotesque distortion of the process of erotic development as taught by Diotima and lived by Socrates.<sup>8</sup> All the familiarity with Socrates' behavior and dialogues has not brought Alcibiades to "upper" rungs of Diotima's ladder. As Belfiore explains, Alcibiades does not pass Moravcsik's so-called eighth stage:<sup>9</sup> he loves the beauty in *a* soul, as well as the beauty of customs and practices. However, he has not begun to love the beauty in *all* souls, as he is still entranced with Socrates. Because he does not ascend to the higher levels of erotic progress, Alcibiades does not understand that Socrates is behaving in an erotic way when he rebuffs all of the former's sexual favors.

In his speech, Alcibiades also presents an ominous explanation for Athenian outrage at Socrates. While marveling at Socrates' moderation and endurance, he relates to

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<sup>6</sup> *Symposium* 213c6-d6.

<sup>7</sup> *Symposium* 216c7-d1.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Hunter (2004) 100-1.

<sup>9</sup> Belfiore (1984) 146.

his fellow symposiasts a tale of Socrates on military campaign in Potidaea. During a harsh winter frost, the soldiers had all taken to moving as little as possible and, if any had to, they wrapped up their feet in several layers of hides. Socrates, however, walked about as usual; he wore his same cloak and remained shoeless. Despite the many other feats of amazing bravery and endurance which the men had seen Socrates perform, Alcibiades states that his comrades had viewed this with suspicion and anger (ὀπέβλεπον).<sup>10</sup> This is, in fact, the same way in which Alcibiades had interpreted Socrates' refusal of sex. Like the Athenian soldiers and, later, the city of Athens, Alcibiades loves Socrates for his beautiful speeches and bravery. However, he does not recognize that the same force of *erōs* drives Socrates to give birth to these beautiful speeches and to hold in contempt the love of only one body, soul, custom, or city. This *erōs* compels him to seek the visions of The Beautiful regardless of circumstance, which pursuit most people confuse with an atypical hubris. It is this misinterpretation of erotic pursuit for hubristic superiority and the resulting shame and anger in those who see Socrates that play key roles in Alcibiades' near prophetic statement, "Often would I sweetly behold him no longer among men."<sup>11</sup>

Alcibiades' ultimate failure to ascend properly to a vision of The Beautiful and become a fully erotic man is found in his readiness to leave philosophy in the hands of Socrates. As the younger lover in the relationship, Alcibiades is to be guided by Socrates, carefully following his instructions and example. However, he allows two emotions to interrupt his progress. First, vanity drove Alcibiades to prevent his growth in the correct order as taught by Diotima. As already mentioned, the young and blooming Alcibiades

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<sup>10</sup> *Symposium* 220b7-c1.

<sup>11</sup> *Symposium* 216c1. For an introductory discussion of the way in which Plato casts the shadow of Socrates' trial and execution over all of his works, see Clay (2000) 33-40.

was quite sure of his good looks. When Socrates did not take advantage of his right to gratification in his *paidika*, Alcibiades forestalled his continued proper relationship and inverted their roles in order to satisfy his vanity. Second, political ambition overthrew Socratic instruction. Alcibiades states that he cannot disagree with Socrates' reasoning and, he becomes enslaved to it whenever he hears a Socratic *logos*. Socrates forces Alcibiades to agree that he tends too much to the affairs of the Athenian people and not enough to his own excellence. Nevertheless, away from Socrates and his power to possess the mind, Alcibiades once again values the honor he gains from political recognition and behaves contrary to his agreements with Socrates.<sup>12</sup> Both of these disruptions in Alcibiades' erotic development result in a man unwilling to practice philosophy. With the first disruption, Alcibiades affirms that Socrates' soul is beautiful because it is pregnant with beautiful thoughts and speeches in "boundless philosophy." However, he sees Socrates and his internal beauty as objects he can possess. Turning his energies to winning Socrates, Alcibiades does not sense his own need to give birth to beautiful speeches, since he will gain such speeches by acquiring Socrates. With the second disruption, for as long as Alcibiades remains ensnared by public opinion and the desire for political power, he will never move past his current stage of erotic development. His love for this one *polis* and its *dēmos* constrains him from ever realizing that all beauties of body, soul, law, and custom are related. The *dēmos* could never understand that what makes Athens beautiful is the same beauty which makes Sparta beautiful, and this is precisely what Socrates needed Alcibiades to grasp. Therefore, Alcibiades is content to leave the pursuit of wisdom and the fully erotic life to Socrates.

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<sup>12</sup> *Symposium* 216b3-5.

By ending the *Symposium* with Alcibiades, Plato throws into stark contrast the differences between the lives of those who receive a vision of The Beautiful and those who remain immature in regards to *erōs*. The reader witnesses how Socrates, the successful initiate into the mysteries of *erōs*, interacts with and is perceived by the surrounding uninitiated. Plato warns that the truly erotic man must be trained rightly and must not succumb to distractions. He also demonstrates that, however unusual and seemingly contradictory Socrates' actions are, there was no dissimulation in his claim to know nothing other than *ta erōtika*. In fact, Plato has guided his reader through this explication of *erōs* so that the reader too may make the same claim.

## CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION

Considered by many Plato's most masterful work, the *Symposium* does not easily yield answers to the questions its complexity inspires. To unlock all of Plato's meaning from within this dialogue, were it possible, would require an analysis well beyond the scope of this paper. Therefore, I have narrowed my examination to the more literary and dramatic elements of the dialogue.

Chapters 3-5 attempted to demonstrate how one need not hunt for specific theories or doctrines in order to ascribe them to Plato as his own teaching. The claims of the dialogical method of Platonic interpretation that an entire dialogue speaks for Plato and no particular character can be assigned the title "Plato's mouthpiece" has gained further support. We have seen that the *Symposium* requires its reader to undergo Plato's didactic experience by completely and carefully reading and interacting with the entire text of the dialogue.

Each of the Platonic dialogues fulfills part of their author's philosophical and educational agenda. The *Symposium* stresses the need for people to transform the way they think through careful pursuit of the highest beauty. Learning to love only what is the most beautiful inevitably leads a person to perform the kind of philosophy which Plato lived out and wrote that Socrates practiced. Through his unparalleled union of literary and dramatic techniques into philosophical dialogue, Plato creates a world in which the reader participates with Socrates and his friends as Plato's archetypal philosopher guides others to understand philosophy as a work of *erōs*.

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