

**Sexuality and Intellectualism  
In Classical Athens**

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## Classical Athenian Literature: An Illuminating Conversation With Socrates About Love

When examining the ideology that distinguishes classical Athenian sexuality in aristocratic intellectual circles, there are no better sources to give us a glimpse of this private world than elite literary sources of the time. Although there are various pieces of Athenian literature that are applicable in some regard to this study, the classical Athenian dialogues that I have elected to examine in order to ascertain as accurately as possible how sexuality was considered in an intellectual context are Plato's *Symposium*, Plato's *Phaedrus*, and Xenophon's *Symposium*. Out of these three dialogues, Plato's *Symposium* contains the most enlightening as well as exhaustive discussion of sexuality and intellectualism; because the speeches presented in the *Symposium* offer such a wealth of diverse commentary, the bulk of this chapter is dedicated to an examination of ideas generated in this text. The *Phaedrus* and Xenophon's *Symposium* primarily serve to either expand on ideas from Plato's *Symposium* or to offer a different take on them.

There are many themes woven throughout these texts that tie them to one another, most prominently the overarching theme of love. All agree upon a right and honorable way to conduct oneself in love as well as dishonorable and detrimental behavior performed by those in love. In *Law, Sexuality, and Society*, David Cohen claims "that honor and shame define the normative boundaries of homoeroticism (and sexuality in general)" and this is evident in the writings of Plato and Xenophon.<sup>1</sup> Socrates, a common thread that weaves the three dialogues together, is an outspoken advocate for a virtuous love based first and foremost on the mind, a love that forges an intellectual bond between two people. In this way, by speaking through the wise and venerable figure of Socrates,

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<sup>1</sup> David Cohen, *Law, Sexuality, and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 183.

Plato and Xenophon skillfully provide insight into the elite intellectual mindset surrounding proper sexual behaviors and what it meant to be in love in classical Athens.

### **Plato's *Symposium***

Plato was perhaps the most eminent literary voice of Classical Athens. As the famous philosopher Socrates left none of his own written works, Plato became the conduit for Socrates' ideas. Kenneth Dover regards Plato as a man with stronger homosexual tendencies than what most Athenian men were in possession of at that time, making his portrayal of Greek homosexuality slightly more embellished than other literary representations.<sup>2</sup> Socrates in particular is portrayed as an adherent to the pederastic tradition, but places a much higher value on "Eros for wisdom" than mere physical sexual desires.<sup>3</sup> Because Plato utilizes many different voices that all state different opinions, the beliefs expressed by these voices cannot be taken as absolute truth on the matters they discuss; thus, there is a difference between Plato's own views and the common Athenian attitude.<sup>4</sup> Dover describes Plato's literary works as growing "increasingly aware that reason and love are convergent upon a point at which they must in the end fuse together," and "in two works above all, *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, ...it is of particular importance that he regards philosophy... as a dialectical progress which may well begin in the response of an older male to the stimulus afforded by a younger male

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<sup>2</sup> K. J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* (New York: MJF Books, 1978), 12.

<sup>3</sup> Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, 154, 156-157, 159.

<sup>4</sup> In regards to the majority of people in classical Athens, Plato is something of an anomaly in that he was someone who had a substantial amount of money for the time, and because of this, was able to concentrate on his passionate interest in the finer intellectual pursuits; Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, 12-13.

who combines bodily beauty with ‘beauty of the soul.’”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, it is evident in his dialogues that Plato himself is a proponent of intellectual love between two males.

Plato’s *Symposium* is one of the most famous written works of classical Athens and is truly an exemplary representation of the role that sexuality played in intellectual Athenian life. Translator Christopher Gill describes Plato’s *Symposium* as having an “unusually intellectual character.”<sup>6</sup> The homoeroticism expressed by the speakers in the *Symposium* is not representative of Athenian culture as a whole, though it may very well be characteristic of Athens’ exclusive elite intellectual cliques. Gill goes on to explain that homoerotic relationships and their virtuous nature are strongly linked to “high-status activities such as athletics, warfare, politics, philosophy and rhetoric,” therefore exemplifying the “‘erotic-educational’ relationship.”<sup>7</sup>

While all the speeches contribute to the understanding of love in their own ways, there are several eulogies that stand out in regards to Greek Love being thought of as an intellectual union between males as well as a sexual one. The philosophical conversation begins when Eryximachus brings up Phaedrus’s fascination with the Love deity and proposes that the men at the *symposium* all individually eulogize Love, or *Eros* in the original Greek, signifying an ode to the desirous, lustful type of love.<sup>8</sup> This prompt then gives way for a variety of speeches with each man expressing his feelings on the nature of love. These speeches are delivered respectively by Pausanias, Aristophanes, Socrates, and Alcibiades.

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<sup>5</sup> Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, 12.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Gill, trans., *The Symposium* (London: Penguin Books, 1999), xiii.

<sup>7</sup> Gill, trans., *The Symposium*, xv.

<sup>8</sup> Plato, *The Symposium*, trans. Christopher Gill, 177b-d, 8-9.

## Pausanias: Common and Heavenly Love

A man named Pausanias, whose enduring homo-romantic relationship with fellow *symposiast* Agathon is of some significance as well as unusual in its longevity, delivers one such notable speech.<sup>9</sup> In his oration, Pausanias distinguishes between what he terms Common and Heavenly Love, as modeled after the two Aphrodites.<sup>10</sup> In Common Love, men's sexual appetites are bisexual in nature and do not move past the carnal desire for the physical body. In Heavenly Love, in which there is "only maleness," men "are attracted to boys only when they start to have developed intelligence" and in this way they are able "to lead a fully shared life."<sup>11</sup>

It is clear that Pausanias believes in a respectable type of love that only falls under the Heavenly category; to Pausanias, the character of love is only as virtuous or destructive as the behavior of those in love.<sup>12</sup> Thus, proper conduct is everything in a pederastic relationship, and the conduct is only proper and honorable if the *eromenos* is seeking to better himself as a person when he engages in sexual relations with his *erastes*.<sup>13</sup> In Pausanias's terms, "it's absolutely right to gratify a lover in the hope of gaining virtue."<sup>14</sup> Dover is of the opinion that Pausanias would allow any kind of favor from the *eromenos* if the *eromenos* will become better because of what he gains from the *erastes*.<sup>15</sup> This assessment of Dover's, however, may be overly simplistic; it is also the duty of the *erastes* and not just the *eromenos* to act honorably within their union and in

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<sup>9</sup> Gill, trans., *The Symposium*, xiv.

<sup>10</sup> Plato, *The Symposium*, 180e, 12.

<sup>11</sup> Plato, *The Symposium*, 181c-d, 13.

<sup>12</sup> Plato, *The Symposium*, 183d, 16.

<sup>13</sup> Plato, *The Symposium*, 184c, 16.

<sup>14</sup> Plato, *The Symposium*, 185b, 17.

<sup>15</sup> Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, 159.

order for the behavior to be deemed honorable, it must remain within set boundaries prescribed in the pederastic code.

### **Aristophanes: Two Halves of a Whole**

The most famous speech from Plato's *Symposium* is the one that Aristophanes presents to his fellow *symposiasts*. Aristophanes' speech is an etiological myth in which humans began their reign on Earth as three genders: male, female, and androgynous. These three genders essentially comprised two people in one forming "a rounded whole," with two males, two females, or a male and female.<sup>16</sup> When these people of three genders challenged the rule of the Olympian gods and attempted to overtake them, Zeus punished them by dividing them in two. When these fractured people began to die because they could do nothing if separated, Zeus decided to give them genitals as a way for them to connect and reproduce with their lost other half.<sup>17</sup>

Aristophanes explains the repercussions of this myth for his contemporary Athenians:

That's how, long ago, the innate desire of human beings for each other started. It draws the two halves of our original nature back together and tries to make one out of two and to heal the wound in human nature. Each of us is a matching half of a human being, ...making two out of one, and each of us is looking for his own matching half.<sup>18</sup>

In this way, those from the androgynous gender are attracted to those of the opposite sex, those from the female gender are attracted to other females, and those from the male

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<sup>16</sup> Plato, *The Symposium*, 189d-e, 22.

<sup>17</sup> Plato, *The Symposium*, 190b-d, 22, 191a-c, 24.

<sup>18</sup> Plato, *The Symposium*, 191d, 24.

gender are attracted to other males.<sup>19</sup> Those originating from the male gender are the most virtuous and therefore worthy to enter into the world of Athenian politics; once again, pederastic relationships are touted as the most honorable and intellectual of all sexual pairings.

In a particularly romantic sentiment, Aristophanes claims that if a man fuses once again with the other person who he has been so cruelly split from, he is overtaken by the emotional feelings instilled in him by this phenomenon of once again becoming a whole being. What these broken souls want more than anything is to live out the rest of their lives together because it is anguish for them to be parted. Aristophanes reasons that humans possess this yearning for one another because “this is our original natural state and we used to be whole creatures: ‘love’ is the name for the desire and pursuit of wholeness.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, Aristophanes’ explanation for the origins of human sexuality signifies a connection of the mind and soul between two people, not just a bodily connection. To Aristophanes, true love can be realized partially through physical means, but love is also somewhat of an intangible concept that humans are not fully capable of understanding. In other words, Aristophanes demonstrates the importance of love being simultaneously sexual and intellectual.

### **Socrates: Waxing Philosophical With Diotima**

The most peculiar speech in the *Symposium*, perhaps unsurprisingly, comes from Socrates. Socrates claims that his understanding of the nature of love came from a conversation he had had with a woman named Diotima.<sup>21</sup> According to Diotima, if an

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<sup>19</sup> Plato, *The Symposium*, 191d-e, 24-25.

<sup>20</sup> Plato, *The Symposium*, 192a-e, 25-26.

<sup>21</sup> Plato, *The Symposium*, 201d, 37.

*erastes* comes upon an *eromenos* whose quality of body and soul are superior to that of his current *eromenos*, then the *erastes* has a duty to himself to pursue a relationship with the superior *eromenos* because he is more apt to provide “metaphysical enlightenment” in the relationship.<sup>22</sup> Diotima judges that *eros* is essentially a desire to “achieve immortality.”<sup>23</sup> She believes that there are two types of men, those “who are pregnant in body” who become immortal through producing human offspring with women and those “who are pregnant in mind” who produce “Wisdom and other kinds of virtue” in order to become immortal.<sup>24</sup> When those men who give birth from their minds join together in a relationship, their connection to one another has a strength that is lacking in conventional male and female parents “because the children of their partnership are more beautiful and more immortal.”<sup>25</sup> Functioning in much the same way as the previous speeches from Pausanias and Aristophanes, Socrates also conveys the notion that love between males is far superior to the love between a man and a woman because of the homosexual relationship’s intellectual quality.

For a man to love in the right way, it is vital that he prize his lover’s mind above all else; if this is achieved, pederastic relationships will produce virtuous men. In this way, Diotima says that the *eromenos* “will be turned towards the great sea of beauty and gazing on it he’ll give birth, through a boundless love of knowledge, to many beautiful and magnificent discourses and ideas.”<sup>26</sup> As David Halperin contests, Diotima is a channel for expressing the nature of the male soul because she espouses the idea of a

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<sup>22</sup> Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, 161.

<sup>23</sup> Plato, *The Symposium*, 208b, 45.

<sup>24</sup> Plato, *The Symposium*, 208e-209a, 46.

<sup>25</sup> Plato, *The Symposium*, 209c, 47.

<sup>26</sup> Plato, *The Symposium*, 210b-d, 48.



virtuous pederastic relationship that is rationalized through intellectual means.<sup>27</sup> Just as the other *symposiasts* “project onto Eros the features of their own personalities,” Diotima offers her own “‘feminine’ perspective” through the utilization of pregnancy as a metaphor for the male condition.<sup>28</sup> Gilhuly claims that “the male appropriation of the maternal” is an idea that is woven throughout the Symposium.<sup>29</sup>

### **Alcibiades: A Wine-Soaked Ode to Socrates**

If the use of the corporeally absent Diotima in Socrates’ speech is the most irregular, then Alcibiades’ drunken ramblings are the most comical. Alcibiades, drunk, essentially delivers a eulogy to Socrates rather than love in general as he is supposed to. He describes how he is enchanted and even physically overcome by Socrates’ way with words.<sup>30</sup> Alcibiades explains that he had been under the impression that Socrates was sexually aroused by his handsome features, leading him to believe that he himself could become wise by sleeping with Socrates.<sup>31</sup> In a quote that shows how the wisdom of Socrates has had an effect on him that is very much like *eros*, Alcibiades exclaims “I’ve been bitten by something more painful still, and in the place where a bite is most painful – the heart or mind, or whatever you should call it. I’ve been struck and bitten by the words of philosophy...”<sup>32</sup> This statement from Alcibiades is indeed an unusual one. First of all, it describes an *eromenos* experiencing *eros*, an occurrence that is not in keeping with the elite pederastic code. Furthermore, Alcibiades equates the heart with

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<sup>27</sup> David M. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality* (London: Routledge, 1990), 113-114.

<sup>28</sup> Halperin, *One Hundred Years*, 117.

<sup>29</sup> Kate Gilhuly, *The Feminine Matrix of Sex and Gender in Classical Athens* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 68, 69.

<sup>30</sup> Plato, *The Symposium*, 215c-e, 54.

<sup>31</sup> Plato, *The Symposium*, 217a, 56.

<sup>32</sup> Plato, *The Symposium*, 218a, 57.

the mind and despairs over how he is under the spell of Socrates' alluring wisdom. In this way, Alcibiades' love for Socrates is what the *symposiasts* would deem an honorable love; his desire is not for Socrates' physical attributes, but for his unparalleled genius, therefore branding this love as one of intellect rather than of bodily lust.

### **Plato's *Phaedrus***

While the *Symposium* is possibly Plato's most notable as well as valuable dialogue in terms of what it teaches us about the intellectual side of sexuality, there is also much insight to be gained by reading the follow-up dialogue to the *Symposium*. Plato's *Phaedrus* takes place about a decade after the events of the *Symposium*, the very piece of literature in which Phaedrus's musings about love brought about the eulogies to the god Eros.<sup>33</sup> Socrates and Phaedrus meet one another whilst out walking around Athens and Phaedrus mentions that he had just spent time listening to a speech by the famous orator Lysias. Socrates then proceeds to express his fervent interest in hearing this speech recounted to him by Phaedrus, who is quite clearly taken with Lysias's words. Phaedrus says that in his speech, Lysias espoused the idea "that favours should be granted to a man who is not in love rather than to one who is."<sup>34</sup> When Socrates spots a copy of the speech hidden in Phaedrus's cloak, the two agree to stop and sit somewhere so as to read Lysias's speech.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> James Davidson, *The Greeks and Greek Love: A Bold New Exploration of the Ancient World* (New York: Random House, 2007), 247.

<sup>34</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. C. J. Rowe (Wiltshire, England: Aris & Phillips Ltd., 1986), 227a-c, 21.

<sup>35</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 228d-e, 23-25.

In his speech, Lysias states that men in love are afflicted with madness, and in this state, they should not rashly make momentous judgments that are better left to the lucid.<sup>36</sup> As James Davidson summarizes, men in love “are beggars” who will keep their beloveds to themselves and not allow them to learn from others, give bad advice, become easily upset, and will eventually end the relationship when it is no longer satisfying for them. Rather, it is better to be guided by someone not tainted by love’s madness because the bond of friendship and mutual respect is stronger and the advice bestowed upon one another sounder.<sup>37</sup>

Socrates begins to make his own speech on the topic in which he tells the story of a young man with many *erastai* seeking his favor. One of these *erastai* shrewdly pretended not to be enamored with the young man and was able to persuade him that the very same idea espoused by Lysias was true.<sup>38</sup> This *erastes* tells his *eromenos* how *eros* can lead one astray:

Now when judgment leads us by means of reason towards the best and is in control, its control over us has the name of restraint; when desire drags us irrationally towards pleasures and rules in us, its rule is called by the name of excess.<sup>39</sup>

The *erastes* goes on to tell the young man of the horrible things that can befall a couple if *eros* clouds the lover’s judgment.

[The lover] will be jealous, and by keeping him from many other forms of association, of a beneficial kind, which would most make a man of him, he will be a cause of great harm to him; and the greatest harm he will cause will be by

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<sup>36</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 231d, 29.

<sup>37</sup> Davidson, *The Greeks and Greek Love*, 250.

<sup>38</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 237b, 41.

<sup>39</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 237e-238a, 43.

keeping him from that association from which his wisdom would be most increased. This is that divine thing, philosophy...<sup>40</sup>

Socrates, in his second speech, begins to refute Lysias's argument that the lover's madness can only bring devastation to the beloved. Socrates claims that not all madness is destructive, however, as "divine" madness has provided some of "the greatest of goods."<sup>41</sup>

### **Xenophon's *Symposium***

While Plato's *Symposium* tends to overshadow his contemporary Xenophon's work of the same name, Xenophon still offers some useful insight on the nature of love in the Classical Athenian understanding of the word. Xenophon's *Symposium*, also referred to as Xenophon's *Banquet*, was not intended as a duplicate of Plato's, but rather was "written in response" to it.<sup>42</sup> Like Plato's *Symposium*, Xenophon's also includes an extensive discussion of pederasty as well as some choice words of wisdom from the ever-present Socrates.

As in Plato's, this work is comprised of speeches relating to love. Critobulus, one of the *symposiasts*, gives a speech on what he is most proud of: his good looks. He justifies the importance of his own beauty through how much the beauty of his significant other Cleinias means to him, because Critobulus "would rather gaze at Cleinias than at all the other beautiful objects in the world."<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, Critobulus claims that as such a staggeringly handsome man, he is quite beneficial to mankind:

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<sup>40</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 239a-b, 45.

<sup>41</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 244a, 57.

<sup>42</sup> Davidson, *The Greeks and Greek Love*, 405.

<sup>43</sup> Xenophon, *The Symposium*, trans. O. J. Todd (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923), 4.10-13, 571.

For since we handsome men exert a certain inspiration upon the amorous, we make them more generous in money matters, more strenuous and heroic amid dangers, yes, and more modest and self-controlled also.<sup>44</sup>

Thus, Critobulus claims that rather than being driven to the point of insanity by *eros*, desire for a beautiful boy can make a man most virtuous and can compel him to achieve extraordinary things in the name of love.

Another pederastic couple thrust into the limelight in this dialogue is Callias and Autolycus. Socrates remarks on Callias's love for Autolycus in reference to Pausanias's speech about Common and Heavenly Love in Plato's *Symposium*. He says that the love that possesses Callias comes from Heavenly Aphrodite because of "the noble nature" of Autolycus, and because the relationship is not kept hidden from Autolycus's father, demonstrating that the union is nothing to be ashamed of.<sup>45</sup> Drawing off the nature of this relationship, Socrates goes on to say "that spiritual love is far superior to carnal" and also how "the soul becomes more and more lovable the longer it progresses toward wisdom."<sup>46</sup> Socrates elaborates on his point by commenting on the mortality of the numerous female consorts that Zeus had taken and then comparing this to the immortality given to Ganymede because Zeus had great regard for "his spiritual character"; in this way Zeus found Ganymede "not *physically* but *mentally* attractive."<sup>47</sup> The figures that Xenophon represents in his dialogue quite clearly adhere to an ideology that values a sexual relationship with a strong intellectual component; intellectualism is what makes a union truly virtuous and worth-while to both parties.

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<sup>44</sup> Xenophon, *The Symposium*, 4.15, 573.

<sup>45</sup> Xenophon, *The Symposium*, 8.9-11, 617.

<sup>46</sup> Xenophon, *The Symposium*, 8.12-15, 617.

<sup>47</sup> Xenophon, *The Symposium*, 8.29-30, 625.

In this version, heterosexuality has a larger role to play than it does in Plato's. While female entertainers at the *symposium* are not present in the discussion of *eros* in Plato's *Symposium*, in Xenophon's *Symposium* they speak with the male guests.<sup>48</sup> While Diotima is not a corporeal presence at Plato's *Symposium*, she still retains more presence as a female figure than does the female entertainer in Xenophon's *Symposium*.<sup>49</sup> When a female dancer enters, however, Socrates makes an interesting statement about the intellectual character of women:

This girl's feat, gentlemen, is only one of many proofs that woman's nature is really not a whit inferior to man's, except in its lack of judgment and physical strength. So if any one of you has a wife, let him confidently set about teaching her whatever he would like to have her know.<sup>50</sup>

This is truly a curious statement to make in a patriarchal arena like the *symposium*, which is known for its homoerotic overtones, and no utterance quite like this can be found in Plato's works. In the context of the entire dialogue, it is reasonable to say that Socrates believes a marriage can be strengthened if the couple have more to do with one another intellectually than just sexually. While much is said in favor of pederasty, heterosexual love is lauded at the end of the dialogue. This is brought on by a dance performance starring "Dionysus" and "Ariadne," who act as passionate lovers. After this riveting performance, the *symposiasts* were inspired, and the men who were married instantly went home to be with their wives and those men who were not married decided that they soon must be so.<sup>51</sup> This sudden interest in female companionship appears to stem from

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<sup>48</sup> Gilhuly, *The Feminine Matrix*, 58.

<sup>49</sup> Gilhuly, *The Feminine Matrix*, 60.

<sup>50</sup> Xenophon, *The Symposium*, 2.9, 547.

<sup>51</sup> Xenophon, *The Symposium*, 9.2-7, 633-635.

Socrates' novel notion that men can in fact connect with their wives intellectually, thus making them more attractive as companions.

The classical Athenians portrayed in literature do not consider love a topic to be discussed lightly as it is best left for their greatest thinkers to decipher. Socrates in particular has illuminated the nature of love in various ways throughout each version of the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*. These musings on love range from the intensely romantic myth of the fractured people longing to once again become whole to the pessimistic tale of the lover who feigns disinterest for the sake of his beloved. Although each character in these three dialogues has his own unique way of understanding love and its proper code of conduct, they all prove that for love to be truly right and virtuous, love has to move past the physical body and enter into the depths of the mind and soul.

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