

## FOREWORD

and accomplishment, even if he isn't all that beautiful. Recall also that a lover is encouraged in every possible way; this means that what he does is not considered shameful. On the contrary, conquest is deemed noble, and failure shameful. And as for *attempts* at conquest, our custom is to praise lovers for totally extraordinary acts—so extraordinary, in fact, that if they performed them for any other purpose whatever, they would reap the most profound contempt. Suppose, for example, that in order to secure money, or a public post, or any other practical benefit from another person, a man were willing to do what lovers do for the ones they love. Imagine that in pressing his suit he went to his knees in public view and begged in the most humiliating way, that he swore all sorts of vows, that he spent the night at the other man's doorstep, that he were anxious to provide services even a slave would have refused—well, you can be sure that everyone, his enemies no less than his friends, would stand in his way. His enemies would jeer at his fawning servility, while his friends, ashamed on his behalf, would try everything to bring him back to his senses. But let a lover act in any of these ways, and everyone will immediately say what a charming man he is! No blame attaches to his behavior: custom treats it as noble through and through. And what is even more remarkable is that, at least according to popular wisdom, the gods will forgive a lover even for breaking his vows—a lover's vow, our people say, is no vow at all.

The freedom given to the lover by both gods and men according to our custom is immense.

In view of all this, you might well conclude that in our city we consider the lover's desire and the willingness to satisfy it as the noblest things in the world. When, on the other hand, you recall that fathers hire attendants for their sons as soon as they're old enough to be attractive, and that an attendant's main task is to prevent any contact between his charge and his suitors; when you recall how mercilessly a boy's own friends tease him if they catch him at it, and how strongly

This dialogue, Plato's poetic and dramatic masterpiece, relates the events of a 'symposium' or formal drinking party held in honor of the tragedian Agathon's first victorious production. To gratify Phaedrus (the passionate admirer of speeches and rhetoric in the dialogue named after him), who indignantly regrets the neglect by Greek poets and writers of the god of Love, the company agree to give speeches in turn, while they all drink, in praise of Love. 'Love' (Greek *erōs*) covers sexual attraction and gratification between men and women and between men and teenage boys, but the focus here is also and especially on the adult male's role as ethical and intellectual educator of the adolescent that was traditional among the Athenians in the latter sort of relationship, whether accompanied by sex or not. There are six speeches—plus a seventh delivered by an uninvited and very drunk latecomer, the Athenian statesman and general Alcibiades. In his youth Alcibiades had been one of Socrates' admiring followers, and he now reports in gripping detail the fascinating reversal Socrates worked upon him in the erotic roles of the older and the younger man usual among the Greeks in a relationship of 'love': Socrates became the pursued, Alcibiades the pursuer. Appropriately enough, all the speakers, with the interesting exception of the comic poet Aristophanes, are mentioned in *Protagoras* as among those who flocked to Callias' house to attend the sophists gathered there (all experts on speaking): as he enters Callias' house, Socrates spots four of the *Symposium* speakers—Phaedrus and Eryximachus in a crowd round Hippias, and Agathon and Pausanias (his lover) hanging on the words of Prodicus; Alcibiades joins the company shortly afterwards.

Socrates' own speech is given over to reporting a discourse on love

## SYMPOSIUM

felt by the vulgar, who are attached to women no less than to boys, to the body more than to the soul, and to the least intelligent partners, since all they care about is completing the sexual act. Whether they do it honorably or not is of no concern. That is why they do whatever comes their way, sometimes good, sometimes bad, and which one it is is incidental to their purpose. For the Love who moves them belongs to a much younger goddess, who, through her parentage, partakes of the nature both of the female and the male.

Contrast this with the Love of Heavenly Aphrodite. This goddess, whose descent is purely male (hence this love is for boys), is considerably older and therefore free from the lewdness of youth. That's why those who are inspired by her Love are attracted to the male: they find pleasure in what is by nature stronger and more intelligent. But, even within the group that is attracted to handsome boys, some are not moved purely by this Heavenly Love; those who are do not fall in love with little boys; they prefer older ones whose cheeks are showing the first traces of a beard—a sign that they have begun to form minds of their own. I am convinced that a man who falls in love with a young man of this age is generally prepared to share everything with the one he loves—he is eager, in fact, to spend the rest of his own life with him. He certainly does not aim to deceive him—to take advantage of him while he is still young and inexperienced and then, after exposing him to ridicule, to move quickly on to someone else.

As a matter of fact, there should be a law forbidding affairs with young boys. If nothing else, all this time and effort would not be wasted on such an uncertain pursuit—and what is more uncertain than whether a particular boy will eventually make something of himself, physically or mentally? Good men, of course, are willing to make a law like this for themselves, but those other lovers, the vulgar ones, need external restraint. For just this reason we have placed every possible legal obstacle to their seducing our own wives and daughters. These

APOLLODOROS In fact, your question does not find me unprepared. Just the other day, as it happens, I was walking to the city from my home in Phaleron when a man I know, who was making his way behind me, saw me and called from a distance:

"The gentleman from Phaleron!" he yelled, trying to be funny. "Hey, Apollodorus, wait!"

So I stopped and waited.

"Apollodorus, I've been looking for you!" he said. "You know there once was a gathering at Agathon's when Socrates, Alcibiades, and their friends had dinner together; I wanted to ask you about the speeches they made on Love. What were they? I heard a version from a man who had it from Phoenix, Philip's son, but it was badly garbled, and he said you were the one to ask. So please, will you tell me all about it? After all, Socrates is your friend—who has a better right than you to report his conversation? But before you begin," he added, "tell me this: were you there yourself?"

"Your friend must have really garbled his story," I replied, "if you think this affair was so recent that I could have been there."

"I did think that," he said.

"Glauccon, how could you? You know very well Agathon hasn't lived in Athens for many years, while it's been less than three that I've been Socrates' companion and made it my job to know exactly what he says and does each day. Before that, I simply drifted aimlessly. Of course, I used to think that what I was doing was important, but in fact I was the most worthless man on earth—as bad as you are this very moment. I used to think philosophy was the last thing a man should do."

"Stop joking, Apollodorus," he replied. "Just tell me when the party took place."

they sent her soul back from the dead. As you can see, the eager courage of love wins highest honors from the gods.

Orpheus, however, they sent unsatisfied from Hades, after showing him only an image of the woman he came for. They did not give him the woman herself, because they thought he was soft (he was, after all, a cithara-player) and did not dare to die like Alcestis for Love's sake, but contrived to enter living into Hades. So they punished him for that, and made him die at the hands of women.<sup>61</sup>

The honor they gave to Achilles is another matter. They sent him to the Isles of the Blest because he dared to stand by his lover Patroclus and avenge him, even after he had learned from his mother that he would die if he killed Hector, but that if he chose otherwise he'd go home and end his life as an old man. Instead he chose to die for Patroclus, and more than that, he did it for a man whose life was already over. The gods were highly delighted at this, of course, and gave him special honor, because he made so much of his lover. Aeschylus talks nonsense when he claims Achilles was the lover;<sup>62</sup> he was more beautiful than Patroclus, more beautiful than all the heroes, and still beardless. Besides he was much younger, as Homer says.

In truth, the gods honor virtue most highly when it belongs to Love. They are more impressed and delighted, however, and are more generous with a loved one who cherishes his lover, than with a lover who cherishes the boy he loves. A lover is more godlike than his boy, you see, since he is inspired by a god. That's why they gave a higher honor to Achilles than to Alcestis, and sent him to the Isles of the Blest.

Therefore I say Love is the most ancient of the gods, the most honored, and the most powerful in helping men gain virtue and blessedness, whether they are alive or have passed away.

That was more or less what Phaedrus said according to Aristodemus. There followed several other speeches which he couldn't remember very well. So he skipped them and went directly to the speech of Pausanias.

FRIEND It's not worth arguing about this now, Apollodorus. Please do as I asked: tell me the speeches.

APOLLODOROS All right ... Well, the speeches went something like this—but I'd better tell you the whole story from the very beginning, as Aristodemus told it to me.

He said, then, that one day he ran into Socrates, who had just bathed and put on his fancy sandals—both very unusual events. So he asked him where he was going, and why he was looking so good.

Socrates replied, "I'm going to Agathon's for dinner. I managed to avoid yesterday's victory party—I really don't like crowds—but I promised to be there today. So, naturally, I took great pains with my appearance: I'm going to the house of a good-looking man; I had to look my best. But let me ask you this," he added, "I know you haven't been invited to the dinner; how would you like to come anyway?"

And Aristodemus answered, "I'll do whatever you say."

"Come with me, then," Socrates said, "and we shall prove the proverb wrong; the truth is, 'Good men go uninvited to Goodman's feast.'<sup>64</sup> Even Homer himself, when you think about it, did not much like this proverb; he not only disregarded it, he violated it. Agamemnon, of course, is one of his great warriors, while he describes Menelaus as a 'limp spearman.' And yet, when Agamemnon offers a sacrifice and gives a feast, Homer has the weak Menelaus arrive uninvited at his superior's table."<sup>65</sup>

Aristodemus replied to this, "Socrates, I am afraid Homer's description is bound to fit me better than yours. Mine is a case of an obvious inferior arriving uninvited at the table of a man of letters. I think you'd better figure out a good excuse for bringing me along, because, you know, I won't admit I've come without an invitation. I'll say I'm your guest."

"Let's go," he said. "We'll think about what to say 'as we proceed the two of us along the way.'<sup>66</sup>

With these words, they set out. But as they were walking, Socrates

“And though it’s not quite fair to those of us who have to speak last, if the first speeches turn out to be good enough and to exhaust our subject, I promise we won’t complain. So let Phaedrus begin, with the blessing of Fortune; let’s hear his praise of Love.”

178 They all agreed with Socrates, and pressed Phaedrus to start. Of course, Aristodemus couldn’t remember exactly what everyone said, and I myself don’t remember everything he told me. But I’ll tell you what he remembered best, and what I consider the most important points.

As I say, he said Phaedrus spoke first, beginning more or less like this:

Love is a great god, wonderful in many ways to gods and men, and most marvelous of all is the way he came into being. We honor him as one of the most ancient gods, and the proof of his great age is this: the parents of Love have no place in poetry or legend. According to Hesiod, the first to be born was Chaos,

...but then came  
Earth, broad-chested, a seat for all, forever safe,  
And Love.

And Acusilaus agrees with Hesiod: after Chaos came Earth and Love, these two.<sup>58</sup> And Parmenides tells of this beginning:

*The very first god [she] designed was Love.*

c All sides agree, then, that Love is one of the most ancient gods. As such, he gives to us the greatest goods. I cannot say what greater good there is for a young boy than a gentle lover, or for a lover than a boy to love. There is a certain guidance each person needs for his whole

to the slaves: “Go ahead and serve the rest of us. What you serve is completely up to you; pretend nobody’s supervising you—as if I ever did! Imagine that we are all your own guests, myself included. Give us good reason to praise your service.”

So they went ahead and started eating, but there was still no sign of Socrates. Agathon wanted to send for him many times, but Aristodemus wouldn’t let him. And, in fact, Socrates came in shortly afterward, as he always did—they were hardly halfway through their meal. Agathon, who, as it happened, was all alone on the farthest couch, immediately called: “Socrates, come lie down next to me. Who knows, if I touch you, I may catch a bit of the wisdom that came to you under my neighbor’s porch. It’s clear *you’ve* seen the light. If you hadn’t, you’d still be standing there.”

d Socrates sat down next to him and said, “How wonderful it would be, dear Agathon, if the foolish were filled with wisdom simply by touching the wise. If only wisdom were like water, which always flows from a full cup into an empty one when we connect them with a piece of yarn—well, then I would consider it the greatest prize to have the chance to lie down next to you. I would soon be overflowing with your wonderful wisdom. My own wisdom is of no account—a shadow in a dream—while yours is bright and radiant and has a splendid future. Why, young as you are, you’re so brilliant I could call more than thirty thousand Greeks as witnesses.”

“Now you’ve gone too far, Socrates,” Agathon replied. “Well, eat your dinner. Dionysus will soon enough be the judge of our claims to wisdom!”<sup>57</sup>

176 Socrates took his seat after that and had his meal, according to Aristodemus. When dinner was over, they poured a libation to the god, sang a hymn, and—in short—followed the whole ritual. Then they turned their attention to drinking. At that point Pausanias addressed the group:

“Well, gentlemen, how can we arrange to drink less tonight? To be