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EXPLORING PLATO'S DIALOGUES

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The Title of the Symposium

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Socrates: "The gardens of letters he will, it seems, plant for amusement, and will write, when he writes, to treasure up reminders for himself, when he comes to the forgetfulness of old age, and for others who follow the same path, and he will be pleased when he sees them putting forth tender leaves. When others engage in other amusements, refreshing themselves with banquets and kindred entertainment, he will pass the time in such pleasures as I have suggested."

Phaedrus: "A noble pastime, Socrates, and a contrast to those base pleasures, the pastime of the man who can find amusement in discourse, telling stories about justice, and the other subjects of which you speak." (*Phaedrus* 276d)

Almost everyone who has been exposed to Plato's dialogues, whether novice or expert, is well aware that translators many times render *Symposium* as "drinking party" or "banquet." Such a bland description, however, hides the vast number of rituals and political overtones associated with this practice from Socrates's day. But if the word is not translated, the anglicized equivalent from the Greek *symposion* gives a misleading context.

Symposium: "a conference for discussion (or a collection of writings) on a particular topic." It is probably safe to say that Socrates never engaged in this type of activity -- at least not according to the formal connotation of the word.

Symposion: "a drinking party or banquet including the activities themselves and the guests participating." It is probably safe to say that Socrates engaged in several activities of this nature.

The Greek *symposion* has a long and noble history. There were rather elaborate rules for its execution, and many guidelines existed concerning the room in which the activity took place. A strict code concerning a man's appropriate dress remained unc hanged from Homer to Aristotle. The furniture was unique, the arrangement specific. There were various customs surrounding the consumption of food and/or wine. Entertainment of a certain character was also expected while the participants often gathered from specific stratums of Athenian society.

Behind all of this ritual and tradition was the Greek community. The Greek community, an underlying theme driving the discussion of the *Republic*, was focused, to be sure, on public (or civic) duty, but the notion of community also guided the activities of smaller, more exclusive groups. *Symposia* were often closely associated with such 'exclusive groups'.

By Plato's day, the *symposion* was an aristocratic male activity, but it was based on the archaic warrior feast. The warrior feast was already a central image of Homeric society when, from the eighth to seventh centuries, more complex rituals arose. The time of 'drinking together' separated off from the meal proper and became the focus of this metamorphosis. Women were excluded, and the activities emphasized the transmission of traditional Greek values. More importantly, however, by the time of Agathon's first victory at the Lenaea (the core setting of Plato's dialogue), the atmosphere could, and often did, provide the organization needed for political action. Specifically, the *symposion* provided the venue for *hetaireiai* ("comrads") to

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gather and converse.

The *hetaireiai* were associations of relatively young, upper-class men which combined social and political functions. In short, the clubs came to organize and further the ambitions of their leading members. Plato's relative Critias, for instance, was the member of such a club. These clubs, or associations, were sometimes called the "sworn groups." The term stemmed from the oaths of loyalty each member was required to take. The Mutilation of the Herms was said to be a vandalous act which served as an oath of loyalty for members of a specific *hetaireia*.

Despite its political overtones, the *symposion* was also an event of pleasure. Games were played, professional entertainment deployed, and, yes, drinking wine came to play a crucial role. A literal repertoire of drinking vessels were used, and they were elaborate with many different types of cups, jugs, wine coolers and mixing vessels. Water was added to the wine in a central crater to a strength determined by the *symposion*'s president, and it was then served by house slaves. Equality and order were strictly maintained: each crater measured a stage in the progress toward drunkenness. When the drinking ceased, a procession in the streets was designed to display the strength and unity of the group. Over time *symposia* became a focal point of many *hetaireiai*, and the observation seems, at least from hindsight, both natural and practically inevitable.

Nevertheless, Plato has Socrates attempt to describe on one occasion how a good *symposion* should be conducted *Protagoras* 347c-e): each person would make individual speeches in turn. And the *Timaeus* opens as a *symposion*. Critias, Timaeus, and Hermocrates are going to 'pay back' the hospitality of Socrates from another day, and Socratic talk here is referred to as a 'feast' (20c-d and 26e-27a). Indeed, Plato often describes Socratic conversations in terms of a word-feast (e.g., *Lysis* 211c-d; *Phaedrus* 227b; *Republic* 354a-b).

Moreover, it would appear that elements from real *symposia* penetrated into Plato's epistemological thought. When Socrates points to the differences between lovers of wisdom and lovers of opinion (*Republic* 479b-480a), Glaucon compares the halved and doubled appearences with the customary riddles and puzzles of drinking parties. In essence, then, we can conclude that the very nature of sympotic lifestyles seems to permeate throughout the Athenian *ethos*.

But Socrates outlines in a rather long speech (*Theaetetus* 176c-176a) the philosopher's true nature and contrasts that with the aims of the worldly man. He explains how the former lacks social success because he does not become involved in public matters, never becomes a member of a political group, and never attends any sort of gathering -- such as drinking and entertainment parties. When Socrates rejects Crito's offer of flight from prison, the Laws of Athens answer by comparing the imagined life of a refugee with that of a slave and a vile banqueter: escape from the polis would be the worst because it resembles a journey towards a sympotic life (*Crito* 53e). Moreover, many passages throughout the *Republic* allude to symposia or to the sympotic atmosphere (e.g., 329a, 389e, 395c-396b, 398e, 568e-569a, 573a). Plato himself even goes on to outline in the first two books of the *Laws* a kind of constitution for *symposia*.

The debate on *symposion* and drunkenness which is the opening of Plato's *Laws* arises because the Athenian Stranger postulates the banquets to be useful, but his two interlocutors reject them (636e ff.). The whole passage itself, along with the recurring references made by Socrates to aspects of the banquets throughout the corpus, suggests a much deeper interest in *symposia* than many readers of Plato would expect. As Plato refers to the *symposion*, he endeavours to pass judgement and/or come to terms with its cultural importance.

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After Socrates's execution Plato and other companions of Socrates (many of whom went on to be philosophers in their own right) took part in a *symposia* when they were guests of Dionysius in Syracuse (Diogenes Laertius 2.78). Moreover, Plutarch notes (*Moralia* 686a-d) that Plato later set up a sympotic lifestyle at the Academy: consequently, the importance of this Greek tradition to both Athens and Plato cannot be overstated.

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