

# Plato's Aesthetic Adventure: The *Symposium* in the Broad Light of Comedy

---

LANTZ FLEMING MILLER

**Abstract:** Two Socratic dialogues often considered “comic”—*Ion* and *Hippias Major*—have also been contested as to their Platonic authenticity. Plato's dialogues, while certainly engaging, can also seem grim in their philosophical intensity: At least one author has contended that the dialogue more firmly established as genuinely by Plato, *Symposium*; has some comic elements: This article goes a step further in suggesting that this dialogue does not merely have comic elements but is in fact a comedy. It draws on several texts in the literature on Greek comedy over the past century and suggests that; although the dialogue sets itself serious philosophical challenges, its structure; style; and method are deeply steeped in comedic modes from around Plato's day. This is not to presume whether Plato was deliberately writing a comedy. In general, writers are often strongly influenced by literary fashions of the day, so it would not be far stretching the matter to understand the work as comedic. Thereby, the article offers, via textual analysis, an argument for how the dialogue is a comedy along with counter-arguments against such a notion. In the end, indeed, acknowledging it is a comedy promises to open up new angles on interpreting that dialogue.

*Keywords:* Plato, *Symposium*, Platonic dialogue as comedy, comedic form, Plato's aesthetic leap

Plato has a deep-running relationship, often antagonistic, with poetry. The *Republic* famously proscribes all poetry but military odes and religious hymns from the *Republic*. In the *Ion*, Socrates discusses poetry with the poet Ion. The *Symposium* includes a speech by comic-poet Aristophanes. But the nature and character of the dialogues, as pieces of writing themselves, bear a relation to poetry. The *Ion* and *Hippias Major* are sometimes deemed “comic” for, if not exactly comic, then not always serious elements, as Leddy (2022) describes. Indeed, we may run up against a wall in a dialogue such as *Ion*, as Leddy contends, for beguiling us with its challenge to interpretation as a practice.

The *Symposium* has also fueled contentions of its “comic” or “semicomical” (Levin 2007) elements. One commentator has called it “not just a vivid conversation; [but] a full-blown drama: a comedy in three acts with an introduction, two interludes, and an epilog,” although the comment does not offer further justification. Reeve (2007) labels the *Symposium* first, like *Laws*, as tragic. But unlike *Laws*, *Symposium* is also comic “since it also contains an imitation of the second-best kind of symposium described in the *Protagoras*.” However, whether or not *Symposium* is a tragedy, I find that it is distinctly comic according to many standards by which a work is assessed as comic. Plato's *Symposium* is more than just funny and a pure joy and celebration of life. I argue that the work fits many major tropes of that literary mode. This understanding of *Symposium* can influence the way to approach Plato's philosophy in general.

First I look in more detail at the problem of genre for all of Plato's works. Readers then, as now, still face a problem of just which genre his dialogues fall into. This problem opens up to a general one in interpreting his oeuvre. I then turn to reader response as one way of gauging a genre. Response to the *Symposium*, I suggest, is response to a comedy. I support this contention with literary theory about genres, indicating the structure of *Symposium* is, literally, classically comic. With this understanding of the *Symposium* as a comedy, the article's final section asks and answers how this perspective may help in reading Plato's philosophy.

### 1. A Comic Problem: of Genre

In *Genres in Dialogue*, Nightingale (1995) proposes that Plato blended a spectrum of genres—speech, encomium, tragedy, lyric poetry, comedy—often in parody. This spectrum helped position his new genre of philosophy against earlier types of that genre and other genres of literature. However, her thesis does not answer exactly how the reader is to respond to the dialogues. Readers and audiences often know how to respond to a work by being able to place mentally certain forms, symbols, or stock characters into known categories, aiding in assessing what this new work is communicating. In this way, genres operate like an extension of language, with symbols and syntax that can be assembled in a new way for new expression and communication. So, when a reader encounters a Platonic dialogue, what kind of response is elicited? Perhaps we do not always root for Socrates. In the end, if Socrates triumphs, it is hard to conceive that readers turn and alter their life in accord with what Socrates said. In so many dialogues, such as *Euthyphro* or *Protagoras*, it is difficult to label the end as even a stalemate, but something more like the rhinoceros who has forgotten why it is charging.

As written philosophy was new in Plato's time, he had no long tradition against which to position his writings. Many of his dialogues position his particular kind of work against both poetry and competing philosophy, whether oral or written. Poetry having the longer tradition of the two, it is understandable he would sometimes challenge it as a rival (and for other, philosophic reasons). However, because philosophy *was* so ill-defined and he as a philosopher was one of the first to give it a rigorous definition, he had scant background against which to say exactly what kind *he* was doing. There was only the philosophy that came later, which necessarily was a retrospective interpretation of Plato, superimposing later philosophical perspectives upon him, eventually canonizing his works and construing them as systematic philosophy—a systematization that philosophy developed only later. In his writings themselves, however, there appears to be little self-consciousness about what *kind* of writings these are, primarily because they are the first of whatever kind they are. Many of them do not seem to be transcriptions of actual dialogues, as some amount of fictionalizing<sup>1</sup> distances them from, say, Thucydides-style history. They are seemingly not dramatic poetry, despite their multiple characters; besides, they are prose. They certainly are not speeches or letters, among the other major prose forms developing in his day. In fact, Socrates's diatribe against writing in *Phaedrus* makes it seem that even this written version of dialectic is but a shadow of the true, oral version. As Plato does not state just what he is trying to achieve in his dialogues and the reader can hardly dictate Plato's intentions, what does Plato finally achieve, in terms of a genre of literature, if it is *not* systematic philosophy of the sort developed later in history?

For help, the reader first should not let Plato's criticism of poetry nor the fact he writes in prose mean Plato would never employ any of poetry's techniques. In fact, in *Laws* (0952), Plato outlines a society where comic poetry would have a place [816C – 817E]. On the other hand, the fact he uses dialogue does not warrant imputations he was a “closet dramatist”—as if he were envious, wishing he could write hexameter and derived this mixed form in which his dogma is laboriously squeezed out through his mouthpiece Socrates. However, the fact of the dramatic presentation cannot help but elicit a certain response in the reader. That response can serve as a guide to the reader for how to interpret the work. Moreover, the fact Plato does reveal himself apparently vying with poetry for hearts and minds may help readers assess their responses in the context of Plato's work as a whole. He rarely appears in a dialogue—mentioned in *Apology*, and sick at home in *Phaedo*, so he cannot state his intentions. Such reader responses to this new genre, then, as one from within the universe of genres, can be key to assessing what Plato's is doing as a body of written work.

What *is* one such response? I have found that the response to *Symposium* is that accorded comedy. In fact, the world within *Symposium* is isomorphic with that within the broad genre of

comedy, as I detail later. Not only is the reader response like that to known comedies, but the form, characterizations, and tropes within the dialogue correspond to those within comedies, as described in literary criticism. These facts confirm that *Symposium* is itself a comedy and that Plato was inventing a new form of the genre—right around the time Old Comedy was itself evolving into Middle. His polemics and passages from *Symposium* and other dialogues allow the interpretation that he might be the creator of a new genre. And understanding this dialogue as a comedy could make a difference in interpreting his work in general.

## 2. Comic Response

From the start, *Symposium* is jaunty. The story travels; it is swift. At once, Glaucon calls out “playfully” to Apollodorus; He begs to hear a certain story of love.. Apollodorus, the narrator, was traveling when he heard the story. He was told of one, itself about travelers—to a feast.<sup>2</sup> Already, the reader smiles. The story line bounces along gleefully: Stories are embedded within stories embedded in stories. Apollodorus tells his Companion how he had encountered Glaucon who had heard the story of Agathon’s feast (years ago) but wanted to hear the correct version from Apollodorus. Apollodorus then tells his Companion how he told Glaucon the story that he, Apollodorus, had heard from Aristodemus, who had actually been at the feast.<sup>3</sup> The embedding fictionalizes and distances the story of the feast and thus makes its setting almost legendary and magical. It also establishes a merry confusion of personages and sparkling mood of delight.

Apollodorus’s embedded story (of the feast, as told to the Companion) itself begins with Aristodemus’s and Socrates’s meeting-up on the road to the feast. Socrates, jocular and sarcastic, quips how he is in his fine clothes because he is off to see a fine man [174A]. And the two sing merry bits of Homer about traveling to feasts, in a mood much like that of the travelers singing in the later comedy romance, *The Wizard of Oz*, off to see another fine man. No sooner do the two arrive at the feast, than a “comical thing happened” [174B]: Socrates disappears, only later to be found outside alone, staring into nothing like a stargazing scarecrow. What else would a philosopher be doing? It is as if he had just stepped off the stage from Aristophanes’s *Clouds*. (1952) If Plato makes us laugh at the man Aristophanes skewered to death, who gets the last laugh?

The entertaining pace continues. No sooner does Socrates emerge from his philosopher’s stupor than he has a repartee with Agathon, with a subtlety seen millennia later in Laclos’s *Les liaisons dangereuses* (1995) haughty wit in a comedy of aristocratic manners. “How I wish that wisdom could be infused by touch, out of the fuller into the emptier man” [175C], Socrates says to Agathon, with an outlandish image of wisdom poured like liquid from Agathon into a reclining Socrates.

Socrates’s praises border not only on sarcasm but on effusiveness—as manic as Groucho Marx upon being introduced to the University Chancellor in *Horsefeathers*. (date) Socrates is enthusiastic, he is happy, he is at the top of his form. He gets to be with the brightest stars, he has a chance to strut his stuff, and he gets to show up everyone and unmask them while he pretends he is nothing and while everybody knows it is a pretense and *knows* he is something. He could not have a better time—and it is all philosophy. The scene is hilarious, is all for the good, and anything but goody-goody.

As if the pace were not fast enough, love is so heavy in the air you can taste it. “Salt has been the theme of eloquent discourse” [177B]—so why, pleads Eryximachus, not make Love itself the subject of encomiums? Make love the object of everyone’s obsession, and it is hard to respond by sobbing.<sup>4</sup> From page 1, Glaucon has foreshadowed that this would be a love story, and he has set the tone. The idea alone of a bevy of carousers singing their praises to the greatest human foible does not evoke a solemn mood. Perhaps if the encomiasts had been placed in a temple, the brow might furrow and the head bow. But with Eryximachus saying that if even salt could merit high praise, then surely, Love deserves as much. Eros is set among funny company.

Love does take a drubbing of praise. From Agathon's fustian babble to Phaedrus's plebian worship to Eryximachus's quotidian dissection, Love is not so much praised as used to buff the speaker's pride and profundity. Eros, while allegedly upheld, seemingly becomes the poor misunderstood character, the Charlie Chaplin Tramp kicked about by the bigwigs of society and hoping to find someone who will understand. Between the antics of each speech runs the slapstick of Aristophanes's hiccupping or tickling his nose to sneeze, Socrates's damning Agathon's speech with syrupy praise, Alcibiades's storming in as soaked as an ocean and trying—unsuccessfully—to drink Socrates under the table, and some lovers' squabbles between Alcibiades and Socrates. Of the seven speakers whom Aristodemus remembers, the middle one (the peak of the seven speakers, with three speeches before and three after<sup>3</sup>) is Aristophanes. His madcap speech, with its roly-poly humans cleaved in half by Zeus and their scampering about fusing with whoever they can in a search for their other half, dominates at the pinnacle of absurdity over all the speeches. (It even ties in with Socrates's later characterization of love as desire for what one does not possess [200A].)

Socrates cleverly sidesteps the error of those encomiasts who bring more gloss to themselves and their speechifying than to the object of their speechification: He tells of what another personality, Diotima, taught *him* about love. She whips him as much as the speechifiers inadvertently whip Love. She chastises him for ignorance and slowness. In a further twist, Socrates, the shameless buffoon—the prototype Tramp “naively” exposing both himself and all the kicking around he has experienced—reveals himself subjected to the same sort of dialectical drubbing by *her* which *he* subjects others. In the biggest twist of them all, Socrates says, Love is not the most beautiful, wisest, youngest or oldest god as other speakers paint him, but an ugly, destitute bastard child of two reckless gods.

In a final flouting of *everyone's* speech, Alcibiades tops off the set with his inebriated bumbling. After crowning Socrates, he tries to make Socrates out to be *some* kind of superhero—if a somewhat off-kilter one, who on a military expedition stood absolutely still all morning trying to resolve a philosophical puzzle [220C]. But as Nightingale points out (1995: 127), Alcibiades does not quite *get* Socrates, cannot reach his arms around him, in more ways than one. He does not really get the fact that Socrates does not want a sex-for-philosophy exchange [218B – 219A]—and that this proclivity of Socrates's lies at the heart of his philosophical outlook: “I fancied that he was smitten, and that the words which I had uttered like arrows had wounded him...” [219A]. He also labels Socrates ‘despot’ and says “in conversation [he] is the conqueror of all mankind” [213D]. Yet, in the end, despite all Alcibiades's stabs at praise and fusillade, Socrates remains the Tramp, misunderstood in the street: “you might see him... in the streets of Athens, stalking like a pelican and rolling his eyes...” [221A]

As if there were not enough comic twists on the subject of love already, Alcibiades brings out another way that Love enters the dialogue: and that is Love flitting through the hearts at the feast itself. A whole subplot of love intrigue winds underneath this contest of encomium. No other than the roguish Alcibiades stands at the center of a love triangle including Agathon and Socrates. When Alcibiades enters [212D], he—as Socrates later reveals [222C]—understands that Socrates should still be his lover and he, Alcibiades, should be Agathon's. But at the end of his speech, Alcibiades shows that he understands that Socrates has been trying to seduce Agathon—and so he warns Agathon, “Be not deceived by” Socrates [222A] and the philosopher's wives. In this final bit of “Satyric drama” [222C], in a pitch of Aristophanic madhouse romp, there ensues a tug-of-war between former lover Socrates and former beloved Alcibiades for the couch of Agathon. When Alcibiades outright commands Agathon to lie with him, Socrates responds in one of the most humorous lines in the dialogue, like a mix-up scene from *A Night at the Opera*: (1931) “Certainly not... as you praised me, and I in turn ought to praise my neighbor on the right [Agathon], he will be out of order in praising me again when he ought to be praised by me...” [222E]. At once Agathon leaps up: “I will rise instantly, that I might be praised by Socrates.”

[223A] Giving the final twist to the farce, the defeated Alcibiades grumbles “The usual way, where Socrates is, no one else has a chance with the fair” [223A]. For all Socrates’s heady talk about love from the soul and beyond the flesh, it comes out that he is the top lecher of them all.

Plato lets Socrates drink anyone under the table without getting the least dizzy himself. Socrates does reach love beyond this world, but like Chaplin’s Tramp, in the end he also wins the earthly Beauty’s heart. And in this last twist of the “plot of this Satyric drama,” it becomes apparent that Socrates may have indeed dressed up in his finery and given his typically humble-sounding speech to woo that fine man Agathon. And Alcibiades gives his speech in hopes of retaining Socrates’s heart while, through showing Socrates is done with him, winning Agathon’s. Plato throws his own long-time hero into this same riot of the rabble with everyone, holding no punches even for the satyr who gets pummeled by everyone, including himself. However, who wins this comic contest? It is Socrates, beside whom Agathon, winner of the earlier tragic contest, lies.

The closing image: After the wild all-night revel that celebrates this “marriage,” Socrates is staying up until cock-crow, indefatigably discoursing, as the head of an isosceles triangle, with the tragic poet Agathon at one side and the comic poet Aristophanes on the other, about—what else? That the genius of tragedy on the one hand, and that of comedy, on the other, could be fused in one—not, perhaps, the one represented by the head of the triangle? The *philosopher*?

### 3. Comic Structure

If the dialogue, as a straight unamusing read, were not enough of a feast, the reader wanting to confirm such a response may turn to literary criticism. Can something so crusty as philosophy really be such a joyride?

With Plato’s evident interest in poetry and the dramatic nature of his works, an influence, either consciously or not, from the comic poets would not be surprising. His social class and wide-reaching interests would thrust him into the centers of Athenian culture, as indicated by his pervasive quoting from the poets, ancient and contemporary, and knowledge of all the arts high and low. He would understandably be moved or influenced by the prevailing cultural mood—zeitgeist—that guides writers and authors in a given period. Similarly, Hume exhibits much the same luxurious, flowing, and ornate prose style of Henry Fielding and Gibbon; Quine has the confident and breezy literary style of Bellow and Roth, while Searle and other contemporaries use the clipped and democratic “for-the-people” short sentences of much post-World War II American fiction.

Plato wrote *Symposium* sometime after 385 and he died around 346, so the work appeared as Old Comedy was giving way to Middle and before the advent of New. Given that Aristophanes is so central a character in *Symposium*, Plato would have plausibly incorporated elements of Aristophanic comedy into the dialogue. I will describe characteristics of Old Comedy seen in the *Symposium*.<sup>6</sup> Next I will point out another set of characteristics that it shares with later kinds of comedy. If this second set genuinely holds for this work, Plato may credibly be a forerunner of New Comedy. And we should not be surprised if such a sensitive bellwether of society and culture as Plato had been so prescient.

The origins of Aristophanic comedy in the Dionysian rites account for much of the highly sexual nature of the plots. (Dover 1972, Porter 2009) “Comedy” or *κομωδία* means “song of the *κομος*” which was one of the ritual procedures from the carousing Dionysian rites. Actors for the male parts in Old Comedy wore large phalluses, sexual innuendo was rife, food and drink often appeared, and choruses were often animals or other natural entities much like the costumed figures in the Dionysian carnival. The playful, Mardi Gras-like nature of the old rites carried over to the plays’ social satire and derision of political and military. As Stephen Dover (1972) writes:

[the] devaluation of gods, politicians, generals and intellectuals may be taken together with recourse to violence, uninhibited sexuality, frequent reference to excretion and unrestricted vulgarity of



language, as different forms of self-assertion of man against the unseen world, of the average man against superior authority, and of the individual against society. (41)

Ribaldry, fun, jest, sex and love, carousing, food and drink and party, the celebration of life and vitality and virility—the elements of Aristophanes, they also compose the atmosphere of *Symposium*.

A “symposium” is a drinking together (“sym,” together; “posis,” drinking), and the setting of Plato’s is certainly a large feast. And while the drinking was not “the order of the day” but was allowed at whatever level the individual desired, it still is the ongoing action in the plot. Witness the drinking contest. The food appears, and in time, the love and sex. But more particularly Aristophanic elements show up, such as satire. The drubbing of Alcibiades has its satirical edge: In a great satirical tradition, the [revered] politician is stripped down to the mere all-too-human level: that of a former lover and now a bumbling rival of crafty senior-citizen Socrates. His beating in the drinking contest has an element of comment on his political stature: He cannot uphold his proud veneer. The appearance of Aristophanes is a perfect parody of *Aristophanes’* own forced appearances of poets, particularly Euripides, in his plays. Is *Symposium’s* competition of love speeches not a parody of Aristophanes’ *Frogs’* own competition of poets? (The reader can easily imagine all the dramatis personae equipped with large leather phalluses during these speeches.) In *Symposium*, Aristophanes’ mad speech of the roly-poly lovers is, in one light, a satire of the satirist’s own form of satires. On the one hand, the speech is beautiful and philosophically loaded and will become, along with the allegory of the cave, one of Plato’s most famous images in the popular mind to this day. On the other hand, it is wickedly funny and a skewer into the gut of a man who helped bring down the reputation of Plato’s teacher and may have contributed to his eventual conviction.

Deeper than these atmospheric features, Aristophanic structures run through *Symposium’s* plot. The dialogue has the Aristophanic hero and a fantastic scheme. In Old Comedy, this hero would often be a rustic, or someone from the lower classes, earthy and plain, commonly a big drinker, that is, someone not normally admired. Importantly, he saves the day in the Aristophanic play. (In *Clouds*, Strepsiades seems to be this character.) While Socrates is not quite lower class or rustic, he is from the outside, perceived to be somewhat disreputable—and can he drink. And, importantly, he saves the day in the end, through his typically Socratic method of inquiry, acting as an interceder among all the speeches of love: His speech tops them all. Where the other speeches left something wanting, his satisfies the ongoing discontent. Socrates saves the day not just in the love-speech competition but in the real-love competition, for Agathon. He wins on all counts: He is crowned. The plot includes the fantastic Aristophanic scheme. In *Frogs* Aristophanes might have the poets in hell competing to return to Earth. *Symposium’s* fantastic scheme is appropriately enacted by Aristophanes himself, in his scheme to account for love through the split globular beings. Upon a stepping back, the whole scheme of explaining love through drunken competition of politicians, poets, and philosophers may be the most fantastic of all.

Other Old Comedy elements run through the dialogue, such as theme of journeys (as seen in *Frogs* and *Women of the Thesmophoriazusae*) and the ending in a marriage. There is also a conflict with an authority figure, which I cover in discussing the following riskier proposition: that Plato also wrote into *Symposium* elements that would flower in New Comedy. After all, Old Comedy had long ended with the Athenian defeat in the Peloponnesian War in 404 and the resulting disillusionment in the city. While there are few remnants of Middle Comedy, which would have been contemporaneous with *Symposium*, it would be reasonable to surmise it had fewer of the biting edges of the Old and more of the smoother surfaces of the New. It is also reasonable to suggest that Plato as well would have been susceptible to the same cultural tendencies that moved poets to redefine comedy. Next I inquire whether *Symposium* exhibits some of those elements that would eventually become particular to New Comedy and forms of comedy that persist to this day.

In *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye (1957) lays out his theory of literary mythos, with their four-seasons-based archetypes: the mythos of spring being comedy; that of summer, romance; autumn, tragedy; and winter, irony and satire. While Frye is not the final word in critical characterization of comedy, his system at least offers powerful tools to help assess why a reader may respond to *Symposium* as a comedy. Frye does not strictly delineate one mythos in general from another in terms of a list of traits. Rather, he provides examples from each mythos and how its set of distinctive traits start to emerge from a larger set, which no single work exhibits exhaustively. As his four archetypes overlap with their adjacent ones, comedy, like spring itself, has a wintry bite (of irony and satire); a comedy such as *Symposium* may have its share of parody and irony. It may also overlap with summer and romance, of which *Symposium* has plenty. In the mythos of comedy, several distinctively comic traits start to emerge which dovetail with features of *Symposium* and tell the reader, yes, there was a reason that the dialogue felt like a comedy.

Noting that comedy has been “remarkably tenacious” (163) of its structure and stock characters over the millennia, Frye first describes the usual plot handed down from Greek New Comedy, which has become the standard skeleton for much later comedy. A lover wants a beloved but is obstructed by some opposition (often parental), but by a twist in the end, the obstruction is overcome and the lovers unite. Of course, Plato wrote before the advent of New Comedy, but during the time of transition from Old to Middle. Nonetheless, presciently, *Symposium*'s plot follows the same stock plot that would eventually develop: Socrates wants Agathon but is obstructed by Alcibiades. Through the twist of Alcibiades's bacchanalian entry and self-destructive speech, Socrates comes out on top and wins Agathon.<sup>7</sup>

Frye also describes an undercurrent through this general comic plot structure: From the beginning, when the lovers are not yet united, until the obstruction is lifted and they finally become one, there is a movement from an old society to a new one. The old society is associated with the obstruction. There is in this in this undercurrent much of the element of the conflict with an authority figure seen in Old Comedy. In *Symposium*, I believe that the sharp edge of this element in Old Comedy has become more like the conflict with the obstruction to a love figure as imposed by the old society. Clearly, in *Symposium*, there is an old society, represented by the likes of Pausanias and Eryximachus and their old-time ideas of Love as two goddesses, and it must involve the two principles they represent.<sup>8</sup> Socrates is also clearly the upstart, the lover who itches to throw off this old order, though not for his own selfish ends (that is, to attain his beloved), but for the greater good of a new order.

However, Alcibiades's role as part of the old society is not as clear. He is the old beloved and forms an obstruction. As a political leader, he is part of the “society of the many” and in that way is the old establishment. In his speech, he also reveals he is baffled by Socrates, as his “old-order” thinking does not quite allow him to comprehend this being, Socrates. But his role qua obstruction does not depend upon his being part of that old order: His obstruction, then, primarily derives from the fact he is Socrates's old love interest *and* he wants Socrates's own new love interest. Nonetheless, he performs the crowning act that symbolizes the fact Socrates has triumphed as leader of the new society: He literally crowns Socrates—by taking the ribands from his own head and placing them on his ex-lover's. There could not be a clearer act of transference from old order to new.

Concomitant with the change of order is an unmasking of the old by the new.<sup>9</sup> Socrates undertakes such unmasking, on the one hand, by revealing the trivialities and pomposities of the company's encomiums of love, and on the other hand by revealing Alcibiades as having no other purpose in his speech than a love trick: “only an ingenious circumlocution, of which the point comes by the way at the end; you want to get up a quarrel between me and Agathon.” [222C] After the unmasking and change of order, in general, “[c]omedy usually moves toward a happy ending” (167)—as does *Symposium*. This change and happy ending often arrive in the form of a party, commonly a wedding. Although there had been feasting at Agathon's before the point

where Socrates and the speeches enter, it is almost prescient of Plato, anticipating the stock comic plot structure, to hold this feast in abeyance—suddenly no one wants to get drunk—until the very end when the lovers are united. In the very same sentence signifying Agathon’s rise to lie with Socrates, the “band of revelers entered” [223A] and “great confusion ensued,” and the banquet really cuts loose: “everyone was compelled to drink large quantities of wine” [223A]. Although Agathon and Socrates are hardly wedded, Plato symbolically fetes them as much as could happen in homoerotic Athens.

*Symposium* even exhibits some of the stock characters who creep up in comedy in general. Frye mentions the *miles gloriosus*, or military braggart; (163) the *alazons*, imposters; *eirons*, self-deprecators; *bomolochoi*, buffoons; and *agroikos*, the rustic or churl. (172) While the *eirou* deprecates himself, the *alazons* are the victims of his irony: a picture-perfect relationship of Socrates to the other encomiasts. Socrates, in the way he sets himself up to take drubbings, also often plays the role of *bomolochoi*. Alcibiades is both a *miles gloriosus* and, to some degree, the *agroikos*, at least in the way much humor bounces off of him. Aristophanes more obviously plays a *bomolochoi*.

Frye also describes several “phases of comedy” in the spectrum between irony and romance.<sup>10</sup> Nightingale 1995 has pointed out (110) the irony in *Symposium*, particularly in Socrates’s encomiums of the speeches themselves.<sup>11</sup> Toward the other end of the comic-phase spectrum, nearer to romance, Frye reveals another motif: In this phase, on the journey from the old to new society, there is often a side trip into a “green world,” the wilderness, such as that extensively seen in *A Midsummer’s Night Dream*. A female figure there is often involved in the transformative process of the green-world journey, which also has a dreamy quality. Socrates’s telling of his “journey” to Diotima and its dreamy instructions on the mysteries of love fulfill this motif.

For someone who did theorize extensively about the structures of comedy, even though he blatantly dabbled in myth, Plato exhibited impressive insight into the mythos of comedy, long before the concept of such mythos was conceived, just by the way he structured *Symposium*. While he did have plenty of comic models in Athens, it is hard to tell if he were consciously incorporating the Old (and probably Middle) Comedy elements into this dialogue. With his sensitivity to artistic forms and cultural facts, he just may have anticipated some elements of New Comedy in this his primary comedic work. He was too self-aware a writer simply to be maddened by a muse as the poets were and have no idea what he was doing. He wrote in prose, not verse; he could not be like the poets in *Ion*, idiosyncratic, insane (“inspired”), and ignorant. Instead, he would opt for breadth and depth of knowledge and conscious work. That would be the reasoned approach. And perhaps *Symposium* can stand as an example of how we may have acceptable “laughable” works in a well-ordered Republic, as the next section discusses.

#### 4. Comic Dialogue

So, the *Symposium* feels like comedy. It looks like comedy. But is it comedy? Much of what defines an artwork, say, is the cultural context in which the work arises. A bulldozer sitting in a vacant lot is just a bulldozer, but if a sculptor hoists it into a museum, it is suddenly a sculpture and is seen through a different perspective, such as that of social commentary. To a degree, a comedy is a comedy when the author says it is, and if the author is not a liar, it is then assessed as either a comedy, good or bad (as seen in Duchamp’s urinal). Plato is not known to have labeled any of his dialogues as comedies or tragedies. He did not necessarily even label them as “philosophy”: They simply present representation (or even μῦθος) of people *doing* philosophy, or dialectic. As I described, a challenge in interpreting Plato is partly due to there being little extant cultural context for his genre, comparable to the context available for a comedy audience, who can assure themselves, “This is a comedy; I know basically what sort of thing it is, so I can assess it.” (And there is scant extant tradition of written dialectic directly *after* Plato to aid this effort.) Thus, as I argued earlier, almost all the reader has to assess what kind of work the dialogue



is, *is* direct response. Similarly does a viewer, who has not been told what type of strange movie that is about to be shown, have to figure out what genre it is by what it feels and looks like.

However, as I have shown, both the response to *and* the structural appearance of *Symposium* is comedy. The immediate reaction to this assessment may be, *But the dialogue is prose—obviously never meant to be performed—not poetry. Within the conventions of his day, Plato could not possibly have intended “comedy.” Maybe it has comic elements, at most.* However, Plato allowed that comedy could be improved to turn it into something permissible in a just society [*Laws*, 816E<sup>12</sup>], if the proper regulations of laughable amusements are laid down. “For serious things cannot be understood without laughable things” [816D], in keeping with his usual theory of opposites (cf. *Phaedo*, 70E – 72A). A man “should learn them both, in order that he may not in ignorance do or say anything which is ridiculous” [*Laws*, 816D]. In this State in *Laws*, poetry is “of the best and noblest” in the same way the state itself is an “imitation of the best and noblest life” [817A]. As Nightingale interprets these passages, Plato is contrasting the supposedly serious creations of his contemporary poets “with the most beautiful and finest’ tragedy that he and his interlocutors are themselves producing in their construction of a good code of laws.” (88) In other words, a work like *Laws* is Plato’s version of serious drama.

In turn, at the end of *Symposium*, when Socrates is reported to be expounding how tragic and comic may arise from the same genius, Plato may have been hinting of no other genius than himself. If *Laws* is a tragic output, *Symposium* is certainly the comic. Even better examples of tragedies, at least in the Aristotelian sense that Frye describes, may be *Phaedo* or *Crito*: While comedy more often centers on the social group (*Symposium*), tragedy focuses on the plight on an individual (*Phaedo*). “The tragic hero is typically on top of the wheel of fortune, halfway between human society on the ground and the something greater in the sky,” Frye writes (2007)—and could not have more accurately encapsulated *Phaedo*. Socrates in *Phaedo* may even be said to have the hubris of the typical tragic hero which leads to his downfall, except his pride is humble as is his faith in the truth beyond himself. In a way, *Phaedo* is an *uber*-tragedy because the hero’s fall is not *for* himself and his stubborn pride but something outside him that only he will stubbornly represent. He does not evoke the same pity of the usual tragic hero in whom the audience senses their own pathetic selves and so “purged” by experiencing the other vicariously. *Phaedo* is indeed a purified tragedy of “the best and noblest.” *Symposium* is its purified comic counterpart, in which love at the joyous end is not merely the carnal conjoining of marriage but the joining of minds in dialectic, in the highest love, love of wisdom.

If *Symposium* is comedy of some kind, what is the resultant effect in terms of how Plato presents philosophy? First, it is significant that Plato wrote it and all the dialogues in prose. Nightingale observes the struggle of the emergence of prose forms as distinct from the poetic, in Plato’s day.<sup>13</sup> Prose forms, such as the encomium, letter, speech, and history, were taking shape in the hands of writers such as Herodotus, Xenophon, and Isocrates. Imagining oneself in 5<sup>th</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> century Athens, one might perceive poetry as generally “public” forms—continually recited or sung, if epic or lyric, or viewed, if tragic or comic—whereas, even though speeches may be read many times, at least the history or letter more often would be privately read (though aloud). The tenor of an overwhelmingly “public” genre, such as poetry, may seem tainted by long history of public approbation of its content, whereas prose included genres with new possibilities for more strictly private perusal and assessment. Prose may have an obvious appeal for someone seeking to convey completely new ideas that seek anything but public approbation. Prose was far from the madding crowds.

Furthermore, prose is not subject to the same artificial strictures of meter as poetry is. Prose can flow with the natural rhythms of the spoken voice, perfectly suited for a writer perhaps frustrated by the written word alone but needing to approximate as close as possible the rhythms of unfettered dialectic. Hence, the unselfconscious exchange in which words are the invisible medium to a greater world, not the ends in themselves.

Far from being a “closet dramatist” who just could not write hexameter, Plato chose the mode of prose, and within it constructed his own genre, which suited his philosophical program. That genre, in light of the fact that at least some of the works were tragedies or comedies and were in prose most likely for private perusal, may be considered “armchair dramas.” The reader in privacy gets all the benefits of comedy or drama without the harms of an author’s kowtowing to public tastes, without the falsehoods of dramatic and poetic *μιμήσις*, and with at least some of the benefits of vicariously experiencing dialectic. The written dialectic may be, compared with the real-life dialectic, only a shadow, just as this world is only a shadow of the realm of the forms. But perhaps, just as the senses’ perceiving the images of this world is a spur to philosophic contemplation of the forms, writing dialectic may spur the reader’s soul into the best way to engage in genuine dialectic. Considering the way *μιμήσις* so troubled Plato in the *Republic*, prose dialogues may be the least like *μιμήσις* of the written genres and the most like the thing itself.

As armchair dramas, then, the dialogues take on a different approach to philosophy than they would as merely stagy, sexy ways to present dialectical philosophy. Not merely cryptic manuals to a hidden, precise system of thought, they offer vicarious instruction on how to think for oneself. What Socrates so happens to think is subservient to the greater good of bringing the reader, as if on a phantasmagorical obstacle course, into the depths of a mind in operation, so the reader’s own mind is jump-started into operation. Analogously, what Hamlet or Puck so happens to think is subservient to the greater good of the audience traveling into these characters’ lives and emotions. This understanding of the dialogues does not deny that Plato, via Socrates or the Eleatic Stranger, was perhaps trying to work through very difficult issues over the course of years and made remarkable headway that others may pick up as they saw fit. However, it is often difficult to pinpoint exactly what Socrates believes about the ultimate reality or the gods. He seems to drift into a woozy dream-world where the impact of the parable is more at the intuitive than the intellectual level. This understanding about the dialogues does account for a recurrent whimsicality of Socrates.

This understanding may also account for certain philosophical inconsistencies among the dialogues as a whole. One such inconsistency arises in the way, in *Republic*, justice is understood by means of a society built upon its war-making capacity, whereas in *Phaedo*, “wars are occasioned by the love of money, and money has to be acquired for the sake and in the service of the body” [66A]. Yet, “if we would have pure knowledge of anything we must quit the body” [66E]: Justice and knowledge could hardly be derived from something (a war society) that is wholly in service of the body. However, through the understanding that each dialogue is an exploratory instruction in dialectic, there is no need to force consistency among the dialogues in order to reconstruct a system of the sort later seen in systematic philosophy (or perhaps in a single large work of Plato’s such as *Laws*). More important is the process, the practice, of philosophy, which only the individual can do through his or her own endeavor. Such an understanding of the dialogues, of course, would question much of later, Platonic and neoplatonic efforts to make his philosophy as a whole systematic, as such an effort would be fossilizing something that lives only as a breathing, speaking being. In fact, considering how Plato is repeatedly suspicious of *μιμήσις*, this view of the dialogues as living entities in their own right would at least help them transcend the problem of their being mere, dead products of *μιμήσις*, of living dialectic.

## 5. Concluding Thought

What about the works, such as *Statesmen* and *Laws*, which lose almost all their drama and characterization and so seem to be little more than Plato’s whipping out dry systematic philosophy in the image of dialogue because that is the genre Plato knows? Perhaps Plato did, finally, like many writers to follow him,<sup>14</sup> start to parody himself. Or even these works may still be understood less as dramatic armchair dramas where the “excitement” resides more in the labyrinthine explorations. Nonetheless the instructive value of exercising the philosophic muscle takes precedence

over the didactic goal of laying down an ironclad philosophical system. Even the Eleatic Stranger and Young Socrates in *Statesman* ask rhetorically, “is our inquiry... only intended to improve our knowledge of politics, or our power of reasoning generally? Clearly... the purpose is general” [285D]. These characters only affirm the understanding I posited for the other dialogues, considering them as armchair dramas.

Perhaps in later works Plato moved away from the armchair-dialogue approach altogether. It would require detailed examination of the dialogues through the perspective of this understanding to see if it sustains through all of them or see if he did become more systematic.<sup>15</sup> Either way, this perspective could make a difference in interpreting his philosophy in contrast to any approach that takes the body of work as singularly systematic.

The question remains, But why *comedy*? In Plato's day, comedy attracted a much wider audience than philosophy did—and it still does. Perhaps Plato did not hope to attract the general approval. But in Kaufman's account (1968), Plato and Nietzsche are among the best-selling philosophers these days, read widely among non-philosophers, and *Symposium* is one of Plato's most popular. If Plato did have good intimations about the mythos of comedy as it would soon develop in New Comedy, maybe, just maybe, he had a good sense of its wide appeal. Getting the word out would only be just, after the way his teacher was treated.

CUNY Graduate Center, USA

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Fictionalizing may be seen in *Symposium* in the anachronisms about the 385 BCE dispersal of the Acadians into villages [193A] or in the embedded-narrative techniques.
- <sup>2</sup> Including all this traveling is almost instinctive of Plato, in presaging travel as a trope for much later comic fiction, including Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, the Spanish picaresque novels, Fielding's *Tom Jones*, and Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. In these later works, the narrator or at least one major character is traveling. Traveling implies either a fluidity through *society* or a complete “outsider” relation to it. In general, the relation of being outside society and creating a new one is seen by at least one critic (such as Northrop Frye; see below) as an important part of the mythos of comedy.
- <sup>3</sup> There are at least six stories, then: (1) the first level, Apollodorus speaking with his companion; (2) the false version of Agathon's feast told to Glaucon but only hinted at; (3) the correct version Aristodemus told Glaucon; (4) the event itself; (5) the version Apollodorus told Glaucon; and (6) the version embedded in (1) of Apollodorus telling his Companion the “correct” version he learned from Aristodemus and told Glaucon. There is, in addition, Socrates's own embedded tale of Diotima and Alcibiades's tale of Socrates. Like *Don Quixote*, *Symposium* is made almost exclusively of intricate story-weaving.
- <sup>4</sup> Pace *Romeo and Juliet*. However, love tragedies and romances are hardly about love as obsession; they are about love as *possession*—in the sense of demonic possession.
- <sup>5</sup> The Pythagorean numerology can yield a heyday of analyses.
- <sup>6</sup> For descriptions of Old Comedy, I draw variously from: K. Dover, *Aristophanic Comedy*, 1972; K. Lever, *Art of Greek Comedy*, 1956; and G. Norwood, *Greek Comedy*, 1935.
- <sup>7</sup> One can only speculate whether Plato had been sensitive to the inchoate cultural zeitgeist when the very seeds of New Comedy were only being germinated in the sprouting Middle Comedy: It could make an intriguing speculative study of those developments.
- <sup>8</sup> Socrates's idea of love does involve the principles of bodily and spiritual love as well, so in a way he incorporates much of the earlier speeches' ideas, but he also supercedes them by sowing love as a single, ugly god and emphasizing a higher philosophical love as the true love.
- <sup>9</sup> Frye (1957) calls this general development in the comic plot the “comic discovery” *anagnorisis*, or *cognito*.” (163)
- <sup>10</sup> By “phases,” Frye does not mean all comedies somehow pass through each phase. Rather, he means something more like shades of the color spectrum, and certain works can exhibit one or more of these shades, or “phases,” and other works exhibit others.

- <sup>11</sup> A deeper irony arises from the fact that Socrates digs his most outlandish ironic praises into the speech of Agathon, his love.
- <sup>12</sup> Nightingale (1995, 88–89) describes in this dialogue his allowing poetry a limited role.
- <sup>13</sup> See especially the Introduction in Nightingale 1995.
- <sup>14</sup> Ernest Hemingway and William Wordsworth are two notorious examples.
- <sup>15</sup> A firmer chronology of his works would be helpful here. See Brandwood 1992.

### Works Cited

- Aristophanes. *The Clouds*. In: R. Hutchins; ed. *Great Books of the Western World, Vol. 5: Aeschylus; Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes*. Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 488–506. 1952.
- Aristophanes. *The Frogs*. In: R. Hutchins; ed. *Great Books of the Western World, Vol. 5: Aeschylus; Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes*. Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 564–582. 1952.
- Aristophanes. *Women of the Thesmophoriazusa*. In R. Hutchins; ed. *Great Books of the Western World, Vol. 5: Aeschylus; Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes*. Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 600–614. 1952.
- Brandwood, Leonard. “Stylometry and Chronology”. In Richard Krait, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press; 1992: 90–120.
- Dover, K. J. *Aristophanic Comedy*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Los Angeles Press; 1972: 41.
- Frye, N. *Anatomy of Criticism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; 1957.
- Kaufman, W. “Introduction.” *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*. New York: The Modern Library; 1968: ix–xiv.
- Laclos, P.C. de. *Dangerous Liaisons*. Douglas Parmée, tr. New York: Oxford University Press. 1995.
- Leddy, Thomas. “Milk and Honey: Plato’s Take on Inspiration in the *Ion*.” In the *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics* 45(2): 1–9. 2022.
- Levin, S. “Review of Richard Hunter. *Plato’s ‘Symposium’* New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.” In: *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 44(3): 467–468. 2006.
- Lever, K. *The Art of Greek Comedy*. London: Methuen. 1956
- McCleod, N., dir. *Horse Feathers*. Paramount Features. 1931.
- Norwood, G. *Greek Comedy*. London: Routledge; 2021.
- Nightingale, A.W. *Genres in Dialogue*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1995: 127.
- Plato. *Euthyphro*. In: John Burnet, Ed. *Plato’s Euthyphro, Apology of Socrates; and Crito*, 1–41. Oxford: Clarendon Press: 1–41.
- Plato. *Hippias Major*. In: P. Woodruff, tr: *Two Comic Dialogues: Ion and Hippias Major*. Indianapolis: Hackett; 41–82. 1983.
- Plato. *Ion*. In: P. Woodruff, tr: *Two Comic Dialogues: Ion and Hippias Major*. Indianapolis: Hackett; 19–40. 1983.
- Plato. *Laws*. In: R. Hutchins; Ed. *Great Books of the Western World 7: Plato*. B. Jowett, tr. Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 640–799. 1952.
- Plato. *Phaedo*. In: R. Hutchins; Ed. *Great Books of the Western World 7: Plato*. B. Jowett, tr. Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 220–251. 1952.
- Plato. *Phaedrus*. In: R. Hutchins; Ed. *Great Books of the Western World 7: Plato*. B. Jowett, tr. Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 115–141. 1952.
- Plato. *Protagoras*. In: R. Hutchins; Ed. *Great Books of the Western World 7: Plato*. B. Jowett, tr. Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 38–64. 1952.
- Plato. *Republic*. Benjamin Jowett; tr. New York: Simon and Schuster 2009.
- Plato. *Statesman*. In: R. Hutchins; Ed. *Great Books of the Western World 7: Plato*. B. Jowett, tr. Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 580–608. 1952.
- Plato. *Symposium*. In: R. Hutchins, Ed: *The Great Books of the Western World. 7: Plato*. B. Jowett, tr. Chicago, IL: Encyclopedia Britannica, 149–171 1952.
- Porter, John. “Aristophanes and the New Comedy.” 2009: <http://homepage.usask.ca/~jrp638/CourseNotes/Aristophanes.html>
- Reeve, C.D.C. “Plato on Friendship and Love.” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: 2007.
- Shakespeare, W. *A Midsummer’s Night Dream*. (*The Yale Shakespeare*). Ed. Brooke Tucker, Lawrence Mason. New Haven: The Yale University Press. 1947.
- Wood, S., dir. *A Night at the Opera*. Metro–Goldwyn–Mayer. 1935.