

## Is Plato's *Symposium* a Feminist or a Sexist Work?

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### Abstract

This paper discusses two different types of evaluations of gender in Plato's *Symposium*, as exemplified by evaluations from Angela Hobbs and Andrea Cavarero. It will reconstruct Plato's concept of love and especially adjacent issues like immortality, homo- and heterosexuality, as far as is necessary to this goal. As we shall see, Hobbs will be far more gracious toward Plato than Cavarero, who sees in Plato a misogynist. In an attempt to explain this divergence, a fundamental distinction in feminist theory is introduced: that of *humanism* and *gynocentrism*. This paper shows that Hobbs and Cavarero are representatives of humanism and gynocentrism respectively. Next, Plato's gender references are shown to be unproblematic in the humanistic framework. Drawing from Angela Hobbs, this paper argues against all views that prematurely ascribe to Plato any sort of gender-essentialism. Following Cavarero, it will argue that, from a gynocentric perspective, Plato's gender-references are indeed problematic and must be criticized for imposing on the reader an interpretative logic of love and adjacent topics that is essentially patriarchal. In an attempt to explicate this patriarchal content, this paper argues against the position that Plato is a feminist. However, it will consider the possibility that these (gynocentrically speaking) problematic elements follow from axiomatic aspects deeply embedded in Plato's basic philosophy that might be purely metaphysical propositions. This possibility renders it more difficult for gynocentrists to condemn Plato personally because his thoughts, although gynocentrically problematic in consequence, might not have been intended to regard gender issues.

**Keywords:** Plato, Feminism, Love

### 1. Introduction

While in the last half a century there has been a number of publications on the topic of Plato's feminism, there still remains controversy around whether Plato should be deemed feminist or sexist. The *Symposium* presents a good opportunity to investigate Plato's feminism as Diotima and the symposiasts explicitly thematize the relations between the sexes. Before turning to the *Symposium*, however, it will be helpful to lay some theoretical groundwork with which the disagreement between the feminist interpreters of the *Symposium* can be explained.

### 2. Humanism and Gynocentrism

In her essay, *Humanism, Gynocentrism and Feminist Politics*, Iris Marion Young distinguishes between two types of feminist perspective. According to the first, the oppression of women consists in their confinement in traditional femininity. On this account, gender differences are originally accidental to humanity<sup>1</sup>—until patriarchal society imposes the essence of femininity on women. Patriarchy denies women the self-realization of their universal human potential that is equally shared by women and men. Let us consider the example of the humanistic evaluation of 'violence'. Humanism, as voiced by Beauvoir, affirms violence as the "authentic proof of each one's loyalty to himself,

to his passions, to his own will.” However, violence is a masculine privilege. While men are raised to be violent and assertive, women are raised and expected to be accommodating and considerate. Women may therefore experience “anger or revolt that does not get into the muscles [and] remains a figment of imagination. It is a profound frustration not to register one’s feelings upon the face of the earth.”<sup>2</sup> Femininity, as it is imposed by patriarchy, restrains women’s power to enforce their will and their originally gender-neutral potential. While thus consequently criticizing femininity and gender essentialism, this account remains uncritical of an allegedly gender neutral, ‘humanistic’ ideal life. It merely criticizes that its fulfillment in a patriarchal society is an exclusively male privilege, which it hopes to break by eliminating the gender categories.

The gynocentric analysis of women’s oppression and requirements of women’s liberation, on the other hand, produces results that are diametrically opposed: gynocentrism actually *upholds* gender differences. According to this perspective, patriarchy consists in the institutionalized depreciation and negligence of femininity and the over-appreciation and cultivation of masculinity. On our example, patriarchy’s appreciation and cultivation of essentially male ‘violence’—under the guise of ‘assertiveness’ or other positively connoted qualities—causes war<sup>3</sup> and other maladies. In response, gynocentrism demands appreciation and cultivation of ‘essentially feminine’ values such as compassion and collaboration. “Gynocentric feminism focuses its critique on the values expressed in the dominant social spheres themselves. The male-dominated activities with the greatest prestige in our society—politics, science, technology, warfare, business—threaten the survival of the planet and the human race.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, appreciating the feminine domain and exposing over-appreciation of masculinity is the gynocentric agenda.

### 3. Immortalizing Homo- and Heterosexuality

We can now turn to our evaluation of the *Symposium*. To do so, let us briefly bring to mind the functions of homo- and heterosexuality as presented in the *Symposium*. Diotima tells us that, as love “is the desire to have the good forever,”<sup>5</sup> love is a desire for immortality. Unfortunately for mortal lovers, in the profane domain, there is no such thing as genuine diachronic identity. Everything is in constant change. Therefore “every mortal thing is maintained in existence, not by being the same, as divine things are, but because everything that grows old and goes away leaves behind another new thing of the same type.”<sup>6</sup> Hence a mortal lover’s own persistence—a prerequisite of having the good *forever*—relies entirely on constant self-reproduction. Fortunately for mortals, we are told that all people share the capacity to be pregnant in body or mind<sup>7</sup>. At first glance, all people must therefore share the capacity to reproduce and thereby to achieve love’s desired permanence. However, this conclusion ignores the fact that, for Plato, human immortality is an *ordinal* quality, the degree of which depends on how it is achieved. Intellectual reproduction, for instance, generates “more beautiful and more immortal”<sup>8</sup> ‘children’ than biological reproduction. Plato gives us reasons to believe that the more successful (regarding the degree of produced immortality) types of reproductive processes—i.e. ‘pregnancies’—are more accessible to men. As we are told, it is “through loving boys in the correct way” that one “begins to catch sight of that beauty” and “come[s] close to reaching the goal”<sup>9</sup> that is the immortality of perfected virtuousness. Only men who are inferiorly ‘pregnant in body’ are attracted to women.<sup>10</sup> Contrarily, men ‘pregnant in mind’ engage in homosexual relationships. These are presented as intellectually and ethically fruitful, especially in the framework of *paidierastia*. Exemplifying the nature of this social convention, Alcibiades tells us:

I thought he was seriously interested in my looks and that this was a godsend and an amazing piece of good luck, because, if I gratified him, I’d be able to hear everything he knew. (*Symposium* 217a)

The characteristics of *paidierastia* are displayed here: male homosexual relationships consisted of a sexually dominant, older and socially superior partner like Socrates (the *erastes*) and a younger partner like Alcibiades (the *eromenos*). The *erastes* acted as a teacher, providing wisdom for the *eromenos*. This explains how homosexuality can be taken to result in ‘intellectual reproduction’.

Because female homosexuality is disregarded in the *Symposium* and in all of classical Athens<sup>11</sup> (notwithstanding 191e, where Aristophanes incidentally mentions the existence of female homosexuality), any female participation in a sexual relationship is equated with heterosexuality and therefore associated with merely biological reproduction and imperfect love.

As Aristophanes tells us, the “best [men] of their generation”<sup>12</sup> are the ones homosexually attracted to other men. They only engage in heterosexuality because they are forced to do so by convention,<sup>13</sup> and potentially because heterosexuality is necessary for the continuation of the human race.<sup>14</sup> Heterosexuality, and thus feminine participation in sexual activity, is here and elsewhere reduced to its instrumentality to the immortalization of the species. Although homosexuality (i.e. male homosexuality) is here presented as instrumental to e.g. relaxation and productivity, too, it

is presented also as especially desirable for its more inherent and more potent power to immortalize not the species but the individual by means of intellectual reproduction.

#### 4. Hobbs and the Humanist View

Are Aristophanes' reductions of heterosexuality and female participation in love to 'mere' instruments of biological reproduction exhaustive descriptions of feminine love in Plato? Can we really conclude that higher stages of love as conceptualized by Plato exclude female participation?

Any conclusion attributing to Plato such position must ascribe to him some sort of gender-essentialism that could explain women's incapacity to love the way men can. In her article *Female Imagery in Plato*, Angela Hobbs presents two reasons why ascribing this position to Plato is premature.

Most importantly, there are no significant disjunctive gender-essences for Plato.<sup>15</sup> As Hobbs points out, Plato's employment of canonically 'masculine' and 'feminine' qualities is ultimately gender neutral. In Plato's writings, notable instances of traditionally feminine images are midwifery and pregnancy. Midwifery was actually performed by both women *and* men, inviting Plato's "readers to rethink the association between midwifery and women."<sup>16</sup> In the case of pregnancy, Hobbs advances the idea that Diotima's notion of it comprehends "male arousal and ejaculation, which she [Diotima] views as a kind of male pregnancy and giving birth."<sup>17</sup> Both images are therefore not exclusively feminine. Another instance of men engaging in pregnancy is posed by Socrates' discussions with his oftentimes male interlocutors. His 'maieutic' method can be regarded as an instance of midwifery. Instead of 'inserting' his wisdom, he helps his (mentally) pregnant interlocutor give birth to insights. Thus, for Plato, these canonically feminine activities represent integral philosophical functions and can therefore not be regarded as exclusively feminine. In Hobbs' understanding, these cases of men performing female activities must be understood as part of Plato's argumentation against gender essentialism. (The salient objection that the notion of 'male pregnancy' is instead an instance of male appropriation will be considered below). Additionally to men engaging in traditionally female activities, in the *Republic*, Plato envisions that "many of the activities traditionally associated with males will be practiced just as much by guardian females."<sup>18</sup> By letting men perform traditionally female practices and vice versa, so the argument goes, Plato decidedly disproves gender essentialism.

Hobbs presents a second argument against attributing gender essentialism to Plato. She distinguishes pedagogical and genuinely philosophical elements of his writings. The passages in which Plato employs masculine imagery like war, hunting and athletics to visualize philosophical practice, according to Hobbs, must not be taken to affirm a specifically male 'talent' or natural disposition towards philosophy (and thereby towards love as "learning what beauty really is"<sup>19</sup>). Instead, considering that Plato's audience consisted of young men, these passages must be understood as pedagogical measures, helping his male disciples identify with the enterprise of philosophical practice. This interpretation is further supported by the fact that Plato did indeed face challenges declaring philosophic engagement as unmanly.<sup>20</sup>

We can now conclude with Hobbs that for Plato gender differences are ultimately inessential to philosophical praxis. Consequently, as love is also ultimately an intellectual endeavor—i.e. the "process of learning what beauty really is"<sup>21</sup>—gender differences are inessential to love, too. Love can be perfected independently of gender by both male and female lovers. Although lacking the complex argumentative foundation of Socrates' later speech, Phaedrus' account of Alcestis' self-sacrifice<sup>22</sup> exemplifies the fact that virtuousness at the end of love's perfection is accessible for women, too. The inessentiality of gender to love Hobbs finds in Plato is in strong accordance with the humanistic idea that gender differences are accidental to humanity and that women can be liberated by suspending the confining essence of femininity. Thus, on Hobbs' interpretation of Plato and according to the underlying humanistic understanding of feminism, Plato may be regarded as a feminist: As Hobbs writes, Plato is chiefly concerned not with 'appropriating the feminine' but with liberating men and women alike from inessential bodily and cultural constraints."<sup>23</sup>

#### 5. Cavarero and the Gynocentric View

As mentioned at the beginning, the gynocentric perspective radically diverges from the humanistic one. How can we understand the usage of gender specific imagery from a gynocentric perspective? And how must we evaluate gender in the *Symposium* from this perspective?

Let us consider two salient gender aspects of Plato's *Symposium*: first, the fact that "the works of Plato and Socrates seem marked by a *mimetic* desire for female experience,"<sup>24</sup> manifest in the strong presence of feminine imagery—i.e.

the pregnancy and Socrates' maieutic method—and second, the fact that the dramaturgical constellation of Socrates as Plato's mouthpiece is further complicated by the employment of Diotima—a woman—to present Plato's ideas. For Cavarero, these are theatrical devices.<sup>25</sup> What purpose might they serve? According to Cavarero, Plato strategically confuses female and male voices and strategically advances feminine imagery like 'pregnancy' in the *Symposium* in order to mask the fact that the ideas presented are a "philosophical discourse of a patriarchal order that excludes women". This method of disguise is referred to by Cavarero as the *mimesis*. It is important to notice that, for Cavarero, the patriarchal order cannot be located in the nature of gender differences such as the (supposedly) naturally different capacities of hetero- and homosexuality to produce immortality. The patriarchal order cannot be sought in nature. Instead, as we shall see, patriarchy on this account consists precisely in the *inversion* of the natural gender differences. "In Diotima's speech maternal power is annihilated by offering its language and vocabulary to the power that will triumph over it, and will build its foundations on annihilation itself."<sup>26</sup> For Cavarero, Plato employs feminine imagery as a disguise. But what is being disguised? Or, in other words: What exactly is the patriarchal order that the *Symposium* performatively produces? For Cavarero, there is a "natural imbalance of power between the two sexes."<sup>27</sup> Women, unlike men, have a natural power to reproduce. Unfortunately for men, as we are told by Diotima, "all human beings [...] when [they] reach a degree of adulthood [...] naturally desire to give birth."<sup>28</sup> The natural power imbalance between the sexes that consists in men's incapacity to satisfy this natural desire plausibly "brings about a scenario where envy becomes possible, and is actually activated."<sup>29</sup> We have now another way of understanding Plato's use of feminine imagery for men. Instead of refuting gender-essentialism by inverting it (as Hobbs has argued), it is an overt expression of male envy of the female ability to reproduce. The concept of 'male maternity'<sup>30</sup> is a concept that is introduced for and by men to distract from their incapacity to immortalize themselves through biological reproduction. Because there exists an envy towards female maternity, men conceptualize male reproductive ability through homosexual relationships in a way that depreciates female maternity on the ground that it is 'merely' bodily and only capable of immortalization to a lesser degree than male 'intellectual' maternity.

Diotima claims that "love's function is giving birth in beauty both in body and in mind."<sup>31</sup> Here we find the feminine image of pregnancy—an instance of *mimesis*—next to the distinction of body and mind—an instance of a discursive manifestation of the patriarchal order: as Cavarero shows, this seemingly harmless distinction implicitly contains the notion of "male maternity"<sup>32</sup> that expropriates women of the "female experience—of motherhood as power".<sup>33</sup> As a result of the successful institution of the fiction of male maternity, men are "eternalized in Western culture" despite their natural incapacity to immortalize themselves. This culture is "structured by logocentric power" that is essentially male and motivated by male envy of female power.<sup>34</sup>

Cavarero's perspective is radically gynocentric. First, she upholds and affirms gender-differences: Cavarero credits Aristophanes' mythological account of how humans as we know them came about for emphasizing thematically the fundamental existence of a human species with two sexes. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, as we have seen, she assumes a natural power imbalance between the sexes.

Secondly, her analysis and critique of patriarchy focuses on the values expressed in the dominant 'Western culture' of which she takes the *Symposium* to be an expression and constitutive document of. Lastly, by unmasking the *Symposium* as part of an essentially patriarchal discourse, her analysis implicitly calls for a dismissal of the values expressed in it.

For Cavarero, Plato's philosophy is ultimately informed by the gender essence of masculinity which "energizes the practices and contents of knowledge."<sup>35</sup> This claim is very difficult to prove or disprove conclusively. Cavarero holds that it is the "distinction between soul and body" that "will enable philosophy to be defined as a birth of the male soul and is linked to love between men."<sup>36</sup> The patriarchal element that we have identified is thus embedded in a fundamental dichotomy of Plato's philosophy. If we leave room for the possibility that this distinction is *not* energized by Plato's masculinity and rather poses a genuine philosophical insight, it becomes hard to call Plato a misogynist. On the other hand, neither can we disregard the possibility that the *Symposium* is indeed informed by and functions to stabilize the dominant masculinity, independently of authorial intent. Because of this uncertainty, we must remain critical and not fall for premature assertions that the *Symposium* is a feminist work.

## 6. Conclusion

As I have hope to have shown, there are different ways to evaluate the gender topic in the *Symposium*. I believe that both evaluations exemplarily discussed here are consistent accounts: there is consistency between the assumptions about the nature of feminism, patriarchy, women's oppression etc. that underlie the evaluations and the final judgements. On the side of gynocentric evaluation, perhaps one of the most central assumptions is the idea that Plato's and all other 'practices and contents of knowledge' in a patriarchal society are informed masculinely. On the

side of humanism, examples of these underlying assumptions are the *lack* of influence of gender-essences on these ‘practices and contents of knowledge’ and the denial of gender essentialism in Plato’s *Symposium* and other works. Thus, ultimately, the question is whether the practices and contents of knowledge are informed by the power relations between the sexes. Because there is a chance that they are, it seems careless to assert that Plato’s *Symposium* is a feminist work.

## 7. Endnotes

1. Iris Marion Young, “Humanism, Gynocentrism and Feminist Politics,” *Women’s Studies Int. Forum*, Vol. 8. No. 3, (1985): 174.
2. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, transl. H. M. Parshley (New York: Random House Vintage Books, 1974), 317.
3. As Cavarero remarks, it is no coincidence that “the earliest text in Western culture ... is an emblematic narration of war”. Andrea Cavarero, *In Spite Of Plato: A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy*, transl. Serena Anderlini D’Onofrio and Áine O’Healy (New York: Routledge, 1995), 105.
4. Iris Marion Young, “Humanism, Gynocentrism and Feminist Politics,” *Women’s Studies Int. Forum*, Vol. 8. No. 3, (1985): 176.
5. Plato, *The Symposium*, transl. Christopher Gill 207a, (London: Penguin Classics, 1999), 207a. Author’s italics.
6. *Ibid.*, 208a-b.
7. Cf. *Ibid.*, 206c.
8. *Ibid.*, 209c.
9. *Ibid.*, 211c.
10. *Ibid.*, Cf. 209a.
11. Cf. *Ibid.*, 191e n. 65
12. *Ibid.*, 192a.
13. Cf. *Ibid.*, 192b.
14. Cf. *Ibid.*, 191c.
15. The gender difference mentioned in the *Republic* 455d-e is no indication of an essentialist position. While Plato’s claim that “one sex shows greater mastery than the other in pretty much every area” is of course problematic, it does not imply that there are distinguishable gender-specific characteristics. As Plato also remarks, “no pursuit ... belongs to a woman because she is a woman, or to a man because he is a man”. In 469d, Plato speaks pejoratively of “small-minded and womanish” characteristics. This, too, seems to resonate with gender essentialism. Gregory Vlastos defends Plato, arguing that the “womanish” characteristics Plato disapproves of are only being exhibited by woman in actual, non-ideal Athenian society. He argues that Plato does not conceive of these characteristics as essentially feminine. Rather, this ‘false’ femininity is imposed on women by society. Under ideal conditions, i.e. in the Kallipolis, men and women would be indistinguishable. Cf. Gregory Vlastos, *Was Plato a Feminist? Feminist Interpretations of Plato*, ed. Nancy Tuana (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 16f.
16. Angela Hobbs, *Female Imagery in Plato: Plato's Symposium. Issues in Interpretation and Reception*, eds. James Leshner, Debra Nails, and Frisbee Sheffield, *Hellenic Studies Series 22* (Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2007), 261.
17. *Ibid.*, 263.
18. *Ibid.*, 265.
19. Plato, *The Symposium*, transl. Christopher Gill, (London: Penguin Classics, 1999), 211c.
20. Plato, *Gorgias*, transl. C. J. Emlyn-Jones and Walter Hamilton, (London: Penguin Classics, 2004), 485c.
21. Plato, *The Symposium*, transl. Christopher Gill, (London: Penguin Classics, 1999), 211c.
22. Plato, *The Symposium*, transl. Christopher Gill, (London: Penguin Classics, 1999), 179b.
23. Angela Hobbs, *Female Imagery in Plato: Plato's Symposium. Issues in Interpretation and Reception*, eds. James Leshner, Debra Nails, and Frisbee Sheffield, *Hellenic Studies Series 22* (Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2007), 271.
24. Andrea Cavarero, *In Spite Of Plato: A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy*, transl. Serena Anderlini D’Onofrio and Áine O’Healy (New York: Routledge, 1995), 92.
25. *Ibid.*, 93.

26. Ibid., 94.
27. Ibid., 105.
28. Plato, *The Symposium*, transl. Christopher Gill, (London: Penguin Classics, 1999), 206c. Author's italics.
29. Andrea Cavarero, *In Spite Of Plato: A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy*, transl. Serena Anderlini D'Onofrio and Áine O'Healy (New York: Routledge, 1995), 105.
30. Ibid., 101.
31. Plato, *The Symposium*, transl. Christopher Gill, (London: Penguin Classics, 1999), 206b.
32. Andrea Cavarero, *In Spite Of Plato: A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy*, transl. Serena Anderlini D'Onofrio and Áine O'Healy (New York: Routledge, 1995), 101.
33. Ibid., 101.
34. Ibid., 107.
35. Ibid., 107.
36. Ibid., 98.