

*Begetting Beautiful Ideas: a Sympathetic Reading of
Rhetoric in the Symposium*

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“A lover who goes about this matter correctly must begin in his youth to devote himself to beautiful bodies. First, if the leader [Love] leads aright, he should love one body and beget beautiful ideas [kaloi logoi] there; then he should realize that the beauty of any one body is brother to the beauty of any other and that if he is to pursue beauty of form he’d be very foolish not to think that the beauty of all bodies is one and the same” (Symposium 210a-b).

What if we read the Plato’s famous ‘ascent passage’ in the *Symposium* as proving the value of rhetoric by applying it in his explication of the Forms, represented through the metaphor of love? This letter hopes to provoke the reader to consider an interpretation of the passage as sympathetic to rhetoric, indeed, embracing rhetorical oratory as desirable. The ‘beautiful ideas’ Plato proposes in attaining wisdom of the Forms is *kaloi logoi*, not *alethe*; the choice introduces an ambiguity on this point, allowing a possible reading of the beautiful ideas as rhetorical oratory. On that reading, the coming to understanding about the Forms through this rhetorical style might resemble the trajectory of love closely enough that we can extend the love-Forms metaphor to love-Forms-rhetoric. If the love object represents the Form of beauty, then rhetoric’s beautiful oratory leads to the wisdom the speakers seek.

The stakes of claiming that the ascent passage may advocate for rhetorical practice extend beyond the scholar’s disciplinary loyalty (itself a significant source of pride for the field of philosophy), to potentially suggest that the disciplinary divisions are not as entrenched in Plato as formerly believed. Traditionally, Plato is portrayed as critical of rhetoric, a practice he placed in opposition to dialectic (philosophy’s practice and later nickname) in order

to establish philosophy's academic hegemony (Boyarin 37). Plato loses no opportunity to disparage rhetoric, whose skills he portrays as soul-impairing gifts, in the name of a very dangerous concept: Truth (absolute, capital 'T'). Nor was Plato fond of Sophists, intellectuals who practiced rhetoric in the service of recovering dignity for *doxa* and achieving a humane and human-centered world view in which access to knowledge was equally accessible to all through discussion among various voices about important questions to their broader cultures. Daniel Boyarin calls Gorgias (the era's preeminent Sophist and student of rhetoric's founder Empedocles) Plato's "bête noir" (Boyarin 36), whom Plato accuses of caring only for "power, pleasure, and pocketbook," without regard to Truth. Yet, the ascent passage expresses a degree of respect for rhetoric. This reading is a way of playing with the text, not an attempt to reveal Plato's authorial intent, so will you play along?

Superficially, this passage of the *Symposium* (set in 416 BCE) appears to address what we now call homosexual love, though the contemporary connotations of the term make it somewhat misleading (see Halperin). While heterosexual lovers become pregnant in body, giving birth to children (*Symposium* 209a3–4), homosexual lovers are pregnant in the soul, birthing wisdom and virtue. A man who is pregnant in the soul will overflow with accounts of virtue and the beautiful when he (the *erastes*) loves a beautiful boy (the *eromenos*).¹ The classic interpretation of the passage as a lesson on wisdom reads Plato as advising that undertaking the beautiful, virtuous study he promotes will rescue a lover from falling for imagined fantasies of love (*Symposium* 210c3), guiding him instead stepwise to the Form of the beautiful.

The latter (and ladder) interpretation gives the section the 'ascent passage' moniker describing how to ascend the hierarchy of wisdom to access the Forms. The ascent is metaphorically a ladder, with each progressive rung representing a form of beauty closer to the ideal Form, beauty itself. From attraction to an individual, one should realize that all beautiful bodies have something in common and recognize that all individuals share one beauty. At this stage, Diotima of Mantinea, addressing the gathered symposium guests, explains the ascent: from the second step, any passion for the beautiful body that first attracted the ascender's fascination will seem "petty" (*Symposium* 210b). She characterizes the rest of the ascent as stepping up to appreciation of beautiful practices, to "beautiful Forms of learning," to learning about "beauty itself," to the ultimate step of understanding what beauty is (*Symposium* 211c). This ascent progresses from appreciation of aesthetic to moral to abstract intellectual beauty (Morovcsik 289). The ultimate knowledge, seeing the Form of *Kalon*, allows one "to

¹ *Pace* Hyland, who reads Diotima's advice in this passage as ungendered rather than specifically referring to homosexual love (Hyland 14), however, as he himself acknowledges (Hyland 54), the offspring created through heterosexual love are not always beautiful, so homosexual love is the preferable, more secure path to the Form of the beautiful.

give birth...to true virtue'² (*Symposium* 212a). *Kalon*, the beautiful or admirable, motivates the lover up the ladder: it is that towards which all things strive, and the broader definition as beautiful *or* admirable allows a general application to more ladders, and a sense of ambiguity.

Neither the superficial reading of the passage as about homosexuality, nor the classic reading as describing the ascent to the Form of the beautiful is sufficient. Ambiguity and subtext appeal to a deeper reading. As with the *Phaedrus*, the *Symposium* is ostensibly a text about love or sex, yet the content suggests that love and sex serve (also) as metaphors, and implicates rhetoric. That the ascent passage is about beauty rather than eros in a dialogue purporting to be about eros (or love or sex) suggests broader concerns. Eros is an odd choice for a passage about Forms, since changeable imperfect love cannot attain the pure state of a Form; were the dialogue truly about eros, Plato should not address the Forms. Further, the format of the event and arguably dialogue are rhetorical (Boyarin 309). If the ascent is about intellect rather than sex, then the following passage (210c5-6) makes more sense: bodies are not actually the topic. It is not the beauty of boys' bodies upon which we should focus, but rather what those bodies represent. While traditional readings interpret the beautiful accounts of wisdom to be philosophy, *kaloi logoi* could well refer to the beautiful expressions of virtue we call 'rhetoric.'

Beyond viewing the ascent passage as concerning homosexuality, wisdom and the forms, or a weak acknowledgement of rhetorical speech, consider a bolder assertion: could we read this passage as not merely addressing, but actually advocating for rhetoric? Whereas Boyarin's interpretation of the passage places rhetoric in the "lesser" category of Pausanian love on the ladder originating in physical love, and philosophy on the Platonically preferable ladder of eros (Boyarin 289), I want to suggest that the preferable ladder leads to rhetoric. Plato describes the paths of philosophy and rhetoric through the metaphor of two ladders: philosophy's begins in chastity and leads to his sylvan academy, whereas rhetoric's begins in sex with many beautiful people and leads to being mayor of Athens. If the zenith of the ascent is beautiful ideas rather than Truth, then it is more likely that the lover becomes a rhetor rather than a philosopher.

Drew Hyland makes the case that it's not simply beauty, but "the existential experience of beauty" that leads to knowing the Form of the beautiful (Hyland 3). The existential experience could be the difference between a philosophical encounter with Truth, and a rhetorical experience of truth through discourse that questions traditional western philosophical binaries such as belief and knowledge or subject and object. Once the lover sees the Form of the beautiful in his love for the boy, he will have access to concepts that describe Forms, with rhetoric providing the practice that exposes interlocutors to wisdom. As Alcibiades opens his ears to "be entered, willy-nilly, by penetrating words" (Nussbaum 188), the student who engages in

²This creation is what wins won the love of the Gods, and if the Gods love you, the eromanos' love must pale in comparison; so perhaps Socrates will not mourn not consummating his love with Agathon.

rhetorical practice can be penetrated by wisdom.

If “[b]eauty can thus be the bridge by which all the manifestations of eros can be connected” (Hyland 42), then rhetoric is the work that constructs the bridge. As the bridge does not come into existence connecting examples of the Form without some work: one does not simply acquire knowledge without the oratory to communicate that knowledge. As James Wetzel remarks, “The Form of Beauty does not satisfy Eros; it perfects it.” Rhetoric constructs the beauty that completes the desire, whether for Eros or knowledge. Rather than viewing rhetoric and philosophy as antithetical, we might then read rhetoric as complementing, completing philosophy’s desire for Truth, through beauty.

Beauty, *kalon*, is the One, the object, and love propelling the ascent to the Form. Yet the passage is not simply about *kalon*, but *kalagathoi*. The beautiful good allows a slippage that *beautiful* discourses might approach *true* discourses. Plato’s *Gorgias* and *Protagoras* present the Sophists as speakers who produce beautiful rather than True speech, yet *kalagathoi* being the beautiful good allows a slippage that *beautiful* discourses might approach *true* discourses. This reading of *kaloï logoi* connects the *Symposium* to the discussion of ambiguity around beauty and language in the *Phaedrus*, concentrating on the juncture between what is beautiful and what is true, and considering the possibility that good, artful, beautiful oratory may produce ideas that even Plato could value. *Kalagathoi* can give birth to accounts of virtue that “make young men better” (*Symposium* 210c). To build a bridge of eros or *kalon* or other truths, the student or lover will need a work of beautiful good, a work of rhetoric. After all, the lover will require rhetoric’s persuasive powers to seduce the beautiful boy he loves, and survive the emperors.

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