

Plato

The Symposium



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PLATO / THE SYMPOSIUM

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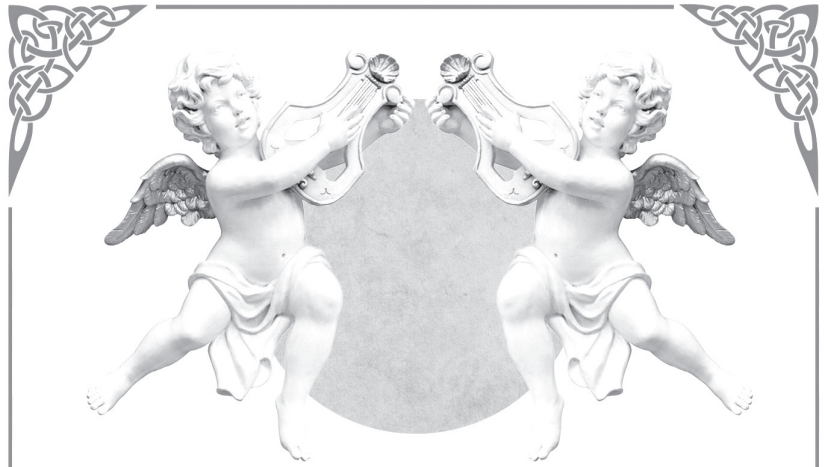


Translated and Edited by **Kerem Advan**

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SPEAKERS

Apollodrus: The dialogue's narrator, but not an attendant of the banquet. An avid follower of Socrates from Phalerum; he was only thirteen when the banquet took place.

Aristodemus: "A little man, who always walked around bare footed" is the man who tells the tale to Apollodorus and whom Apollodorus is quoting; he was present at the symposium but was not amongst the speakers (encomium).

Glaucon: Plato's older brother

Phaedrus: A noble Athenian

Pausanias: Agathon's lover and a lawyer

Eryximachus: A physician

Aristophanes: a comedy writer

Agathon: a tragedy writer play

Socrates: Athenian philosopher

Alcibiades: Athenian aristocrat and general

THE SYMPOSIUM

I believe I am quite well prepared to tell you the story you *172 a—174* ask me. Lately indeed, as I was going up from Phaleron, where I live, to the city, a man of my acquaintance who was coming behind me, saw me and calling me from afar: “Hey, the man from Phaleron, Apollodorus, he exclaimed in a bantering manner, wait for me!” I stopped and did as he told. “Apollodorus, he said to me, I was looking for you precisely to ask you on Agathon’s meeting with Socrates, Alcibiades and the other guests at the banquet he gave, and ask you on the origin of the speeches that were discussed on love. Someone already told me about it who heard it from Phoenix, son of Philip; he told me you knew them too, but he could not say anything precise. Tell me now, isn’t it only natural to let your friend know it too? But first tell me, he added, were you present at this meeting yourself?

- I can see it quite well, I replied, that your man hasn’t told you anything, if you think the meeting you speak of is recent enough for me to have attended. -Is it possible, Glaucon? Don’t you know Agathon hasn’t set his foot to Athens for several years? Besides, since I have been listening and following Socrates each day, for well over three years now, as I would wander aimlessly around the country and

thought myself so wise of a man, yet being the unhappiest soul in the world, not unlike yourself today, who deem every occupation there is above philosophy. "Spare me your sarcasm" he said and rather tell me when this meeting took place. - At a time when we were still mere infants, I answered, when Agathon won the prize with his first tragedy, the day after his grand triumph. "So, it goes back a long time" he said. Did Socrates tell you about tell you that story himself?

-No, by Zeus, said I, but the same person who told them to Phoenix, a certain Aristodemus of Cydathenaeum, a little fellow who always walks barefooted, he had for instance, attended the gathering, and, if I am not mistaken, he was amongst Socrates' most passionate disciples. However, I have since questioned Socrates himself on certain points that I heard from Aristodemus and Socrates acquiesced. - Well, he replied, tell me at once. The road that leads to the city is perfect for talking and listening while walking.

From then on, we spoke of these things all along the way; that's what makes me not ill prepared to the task. Therefore, if you would like me to tell you about it, I will comply. Besides, I find it useful to speak of myself or philosophy as a whole in particular and I find it extremely pleasurable. In the contrary, when I hear certain people speak, and especially wealthy people and businessmen, I pity them and their friends, to believe that you do wonders when you do so little. Perhaps you too, on your side, think me as unhappy, and I think you are right; but as in your case, I know it for sure. "You are always the same, Apollodorus" said his friend. You always speak ill of yourself and of others, and one would really believe, hearing you talking, that, everyone is miserable except Socrates, you especially.

On what occasion you were you given the attribute of being a furious man, I do not know; but what I do know is that your speeches never change and that you are always angry with yourself and with others, except for Socrates. “Yes, my friend” said Apollodorus. And it is quite clear, isn’t it, that it is the opinion I have of myself and of others that makes me mad and extravagant. “There’s no use arguing about that now, Apollodorus” said his friend. Do what you are asked, bring us back the speeches in question. “Well then, here they are approximately” said Apollodorus. But it is better to start from the very beginning, in the order in which Aristodemus told them to me.

“I met, Socrates” he said, coming out of the bath with sandals in his feet, which is hardly in his habit, and I asked him where he was going, dressed so sharply. He replied: I am going to dine with Agathon. I left the party he gave in honour of his success early yesterday evening, for I was irritated of the crowd; but I have planned to come the next day, that is why I have prepared thusly, I wanted to be presentable in order to come to see a man of importance. But you, he added, would you be willing to accompany me? “As you wish,” I replied. “Follow me then, he said, and let us say, modifying the proverb, that good people go to dine with good people without being asked. Homer not only changes it, but it seems that he does not care, when, shortly after stating that Agamemnon as a great warrior and Menelaus a weak soldier, Menelaus arrives uninvited, to Agamemnon’s feast, that is, an inferior man shows up at the door of a more eminent man.

174a-175e

Thereupon, Aristodemus had answered: “I am very much afraid of being, not the man you say, Socrates, but

indeed, to speak like Homer, the puny guest who presents himself at a wise man's feast uninvited. Would you have, if you take me still, an excuse? For my part, I will not admit that I came without an invitation, but I will say that it was you who begged me. – "Together" he replied, "we will search along the road for what to say; let's just go".

After having exchanged these words, off we went. Now, during our journey, Socrates, sinking into his thoughts, remained behind; as I expected, he told me to go ahead. Upon my arrival at Agathon's house, I found the door ajar. Immediately indeed, a slave came from inside to meet me and led me into the room where the company was already sitting at the table, about to begin the meal. As soon as Agathon saw me: "You come just in time," he said, "Aristodemus, to dine with us; if you come for something else, put it off until later; even yesterday I looked for you to invite you, without being able to find you anywhere; but how is it that you do not bring Socrates? I then turned around, to look, but no avail, Socrates was nowhere to be seen. "I really came with Socrates, I said, and it was he who invited me to dine with you. "That's very well done, but where is he?" "He was coming right behind me just now; but I wonder, too, where he can be. "My boy," said Agathon, "go quickly and see where Socrates is and bring him. As for you, Aristodemus, you can sit near Eryximachus."

– Then the child proceeded to wash my feet so that I could find my place at the table, and another slave came to announce that this Socrates whom he had orders to bring, was waiting, withdrawn in the vestibule of the neighbouring house, refusing to stir an inch, no matter how much he called her. "That is strange," said Agathon; call him at once

and don't let him go. 'No,' I said, 'leave him be; it's a habit of his. Sometimes he happens to stray anywhere and stay there for a while; he will come presently, I think; let's not disturb him and leave him alone. "Leave him be, if that's your opinion," said Agathon; as for the others, serve us. You are absolutely free to bring what you want, as you do when there is no one to order you. Imagine that I and the guests here are your own and take care of us, so that we will pay you compliments."

From then on, we sat down to dinner; but Socrates did not come; so Agathon wanted to send for him; but I opposed it. At last, Socrates arrived, without having lingered as long as usual, as it was about halfway through dinner. Then Agathon, who alone occupied the last seat, exclaimed: "Come and sit here, Socrates, near me, so that by being close to you, you may tell me the wise thoughts which came to you in the vestibule; because it is certain that you have found what you were looking for and that you have it, otherwise you would not have moved from your resting place."

Then Socrates sat down and said: "It would be desirable, Agathon, that wisdom was something that could flow from a man who is full of it into a man who is empty of it by the effect of mutual contact, as the water flows through a piece of wool from the full cup into the empty cup. If it be so with wisdom, I cannot prize too highly the favour of sitting by your side; for I flatter myself that your abundant, your excellent wisdom will pass from you into me and satiate me; for mine is mediocre and doubtful, and like a dream; but yours is brilliant and ready to flourish even more, having thrown so much light from your youth and having revealed itself the day before yesterday with so much brilliance

to more than thirty Greek spectators. “You are joking, Socrates,” said Agathon; but we will settle this question of wisdom a little later, you and I, taking Dionysus as judge; for now, think about having dinner first.”

(176a-178a) From then on, Socrates took his place on the table, and when he and the other guests had finished dinner, they made libations, they celebrated the gods, finally, after all the other usual ceremonies, they set to drink. Then Pausanias spoke in these terms: “Come on, friends, let us see how we can indulge in drinking overwhelming ourselves? As for me, I say that I am still tired from yesterday’s bout of drinking and that I need to breathe, as also, I think, most of you; because most of you were there alongside me. So, I advise us to drink moderately.” Aristophanes replied: “That is well said, Pausanias, we absolutely must give ourselves a break; because I, too, am one of those who drank heavily yesterday”.

(176a-176e) At these words, Eryximachus, son of Acumenus, said: “You speak truly; but I want to ask one of you again if he is ready to drink: is it Agathon. “Me neither,” answered Agathon, “I’m not well. “It is very fortunate,” said Eryximachus, “for me, for Aristodemus, Phaedrus and the other guests, that you, the great drinkers, have returned, because the rest of us have never known how to drink. I make an exception for Socrates, who is also able to drink and stay sober, so that whatever course we take, he will find his accommodate. Since none present today seem to be in the mood to indulge in wine, perhaps I will bore you less by telling you what I think of drunkenness. My experience as a doctor has shown me that drunkenness is a bad thing for a man, and I personally would not want to start drinking

again, nor advise it to others, especially if they are still weighed down by the previous night. “As for me,” said Phaedrus, “I always believe you, especially when you talk on medicine, but the others would be on your side today, if they are wise.”

Upon hearing these words, everyone agreed not to spend the present meeting getting drunk and to consume sparingly.

– Eryximachus went on: “Since it has been decided that everyone would drink at their own pace and without constraint, I propose to send away the flute player who has just entered for a walk; let her play for herself or, if she wants, for the women inside; in our case, let’s spend the time today in conversation; If you want, I’ll suggest a topic for you. They all replied that they would, and begged him to hear his proposition.

Eryximachus continued: “I will begin as in Euripides’ (177a-177e) Melanippe: what I am going to tell you is not mine, but rather an idea of Phaedrus, present with us here today. On numerous occasions, Phaedrus came to me, saying: “Isn’t it strange, Eryximachus, that many other gods have been celebrated by poets with hymns and poetry, and that when it comes to Eros, a god so mighty and so powerful, not one, among so many poets that we have mentioned, never composed any eulogy? If you were to cast your eyes on the skillful sophists, you would find countless eulogies for Heracles and others, such as the great Prodicus, and there is nothing but natural there. But I came across a sophist’s book where salt was magnificently praised for its usefulness, and praise of such frivolous objects is not uncommon. Isn’t it strange that so much effort is put into such trifles and that

no one among men has yet undertaken to celebrate Eros as it deserves? Yet, this is how we have neglected such a great divinity!”

It seems to me that Phaedrus is quite right. For my part, I wanted to pay my tributes to the god Eros and at the same time, it seems to me that it would be fitting on this occasion to ask everyone to say a few words in honour of the god. If you agree with me, this topic will provide us with enough to talk about. If you would agree, each of us, starting from left to right, could do his best to come up with a speech to eulogise Eros, starting with Phaedrus, since he is in the first place and is at the same time the one who came up with (178a-178e) the proposal. “You have all the votes, Eryximachus,” said Socrates; it is not I, in fact, who will say no, I who profess to know only love, nor Agathon, nor Pausanias, even less Aristophanes, who deals only with Dionysos and Aphrodite, nor any other of those I see here. And yet the game is not fair for us who are in last place; but if the former says all that needs to be said, we will consider ourselves satisfied. Let Phaedrus begin then, by the grace of God, and let him praise Eros.”

Everyone naturally agreed with Socrates and demanded that we do as he said. To repeat everything that everyone says, I could not; for neither Aristodemus remembered it exactly, nor I remember everything he said to me. I will therefore make sure to retell the words of the speakers who seem to me the worthiest of mentioning, I will repeat each of the speeches, and those only.

– If I recall it well from Aristodemus’ account, Phaedrus was the one who spoke first and began thusly: “Mighty Eros, a god worthy of the admiration of men and gods alike, for

many reasons, but above all for its origin. He has the honour of being among the most ancient gods, and the proof is that he has neither father nor mother and that neither prose writer nor poet attributes any to him; but Hesiod affirms that Chaos existed first, “then the wide-breasted earth, eternal and sure foundation of all things, and then Eros.”

According to, it was therefore after Chaos that these two beings were born: the Earth and Eros. On the other hand, Parmenides says of the Generation: “Eros came before all the gods. Acusilaus agrees with Hesiod.

It is often agreed from all sides that Eros is amongst the oldest gods. This ancient deity is also a great benefactor for humanity; for I know no greater good for a man, as soon as he enters adolescence, than a virtuous lover, and for a lover than a virtuous friend. For there is a sentiment which must govern all our existence, if we want to live honestly; now this sentiment, neither kinship, nor honour, nor wealth, nor anything can inspire it in us as well as love. And what do I mean by that? It is the shame of evil and the emulation of good; without this, neither state nor individual can achieve anything great or beautiful. Also, I affirm that a man who loves, suffers and feels a lot more shame if he is surprised to commit a shameful act or to cowardly bear an outrage, when seen by a father, a comrade or whoever by the one he loves; and likewise, we see that the beloved blushes ever so strongly to his lovers, when he is caught doing something shameful. If, then, there was a way to form a state or an army of lovers (179a-179e) and loved ones, we would have the ideal constitution, since it would have as its basis the abstinence from dishonour and the emulation of virtue, and if they fought together, such men, despite their small number, could almost conquer the

whole world. For what lover would not choose to be seen by all men than his beloved, either when abandoning his post unoccupied or throwing away his arms? He would rather die a thousand times than suffer such shame. As for abandoning his friend or not helping him in times of danger, there is no man so cowardly that Eros could not fill with courage to the point of making him a true hero, and truly, as Homer says, “that the gods breathe courage into certain heroes, as does Eros to those that experience Love.”

“Lovers only know how to die for each other, and I am not speaking only of men, but also of women. The daughter of Pelias, Alcestis, provides Greece with a convincing example: she alone consented to die for her husband, when he had his father and his mother alienated from herself, and her love so far exceeded their tenderness that she made them appear strangers to their son and that they seemed to be his parents only in name; and his conduct appeared so fine, not only to men, but also to the gods, that it won him a very rare favour. Among so many men, authors of so many fine deeds, one could easily count those whose soul the gods recalled from Hades: they nevertheless remembered that of Alcestis out of admiration for his heroism: so powerful the virtue that emanates from love!

On the contrary, they dismissed from Hades Orpheus, son of Œagros, without granting him anything, and they only showed him a ghost of the woman he had come to seek, instead of giving him the woman herself. Because, being only a player of the zither, he showed little courage and had not the heart to die for his love, like Alcestis, and sought the means of entering alive into Hades’ realm; so, the gods made him pay for his cowardice and had him put to death

by women. On the contrary, they honoured Achilles, son (180a-180b) of Thetis, and sent him to the Isles of the Blessed because, warned by his mother that he would die, if he killed Hector, and that he would see his country again, if he did not kill him, and would end his life there, burdened with years, he resolutely chose to rescue his lover, Patroclus, and not only die to avenge him, but also die on his body. Also, the charmed gods honoured him above all men, for having set such a high price on his lover. Aeschylus tells us stories when he affirms that it was Achilles who loved Patroclus, Achilles, who triumphed in beauty, not only over Patroclus, but also above all the heroes, who was still beardless and who, according to Homer, was by far the youngest. If really the gods highly praise the virtue inspired by love, they admire, they love, they give even more the devotion of the friend for the lover than that of the lover for his friend; the lover is indeed closer to the gods than the friend, since he is possessed by a god. This is why they praised Achilles more than Alcestis, by sending him to the Island of the Blessed.

I conclude that of all the gods, Eros is the most ancient, the most praise worthy, the most capable of giving virtue and happiness to men either during their life or after their death.”

“Phaedrus’ speech went more or less like this” said 180c-185c Artistodemos”. There were others parts he did not remember so well; he skipped them and it was then Pausanias’ turn to speak: “It seems, Phaedrus, that it is uncanny to make us thus simply praise Eros. If indeed there was only one Eros, it would be good; but Eros is not unique, and if it is not unique, it is right to say at first which one is to be praised. I will therefore try to rectify this point, to determine first and

foremost, which Eros should be praised, then to praise the god to his worth. We all know that Aphrodite is not without Eros; if there was only one Aphrodite, there would be only one Eros; but, since there are two Aphrodites, it is of all necessity that there are also two Eros. Can we in fact deny the existence of the two goddesses, one ancient and motherless, daughter of Ouranos, whom we call heavenly, Ourania, the other, younger daughter of Zeus and Mnemosyne, whom is also called Pandemos, it necessarily follows that the Eros who serves the one must be the one we refer to, he who serves the other, the one in the skies. Now, we must undoubtedly praise all the gods, but we must try to determine the attributions of each of the two Eros. Indeed, every action is neither beautiful nor bad in itself – for example, what we do now, drinking, singing, talking, none of this is beautiful in itself, but becomes such, according to the how one does it, beautiful, if one does it according to the rules of honesty and justice, bad, if one does it contrary to justice. It is the same with love and Eros: not all love is beautiful and laudable, but only that which leads to honest love.

– The Eros linked to Aphrodite is the one that we all know about and also the one that does not know of any rules. It is the vulgar kind of love. The love of these people is addressed first of all to women as well as to boys, to the body of those they love rather than to the soul, finally to the most stupid they can meet; for they only have enjoyment in the surface and are not concerned with honesty; also, it happens to them to do so without discernment, either good or evil; for such love comes from the goddess, who is by far the younger of the two and who is of female as well as male origin. The other, on the contrary, comes