Comedy and Tragedy and Philosophy in the SYMPOSIUM: An Ethical Vision

EDMUND L. ERDE
University of Texas Medical Branch

The ending of the *Symposium*[1] (223 c-d) is enigmatic. Why, in a dialogue presumably about love, is Socrates finally portrayed as trying to convince a tragedian and a comedian that the master or genius of their respective art should also *logically* be the master of the other? Neither the thesis nor how Socrates apparently convinces them seems linked to the detailed account of what preceded at the party and speech contest about love. The puzzle is enhanced by a fact recorded in the *Republic* (395a) that no one had yet been an author of both—indeed, no one had yet even mastered acting in both.

Little in the literature addresses the ending or uses its enigmatic character as a focus for reading the entire dialogue. I wish to do that here, and I take the maxim that Plato is an artist, a dramatic genius, as my license. A passage must fit thematically and dramatically when Plato is suggesting a philosophic insight (no matter how ironically).

The closing interaction is typically Greek, i.e., a contest is underway where it is Socrates versus Agathon and Aristophanes combined. These personifications offer the first clue as to what Socrates' thesis about comedy and tragedy means, for if the struggle is about drama and one side is represented by dramatists and the other side is represented by a philosopher, perhaps the struggle is about philosophy as well.

The friendly combat suggested at the close by such language as "Socrates was forcing them to admit" (223d) is a continuation of the aggressive flirtation between Socrates and Agathon present from the beginning. For example, their interaction begins when Socrates first enters Agathon's house, and Agathon invites him to sit where they can be adjacent so that thereby Agathon can share the insight that delayed Socrates' arrival. Socrates responds with the wish "that wisdom were the kind of thing one could share by sitting next to someone" (175d) so that it might flow like water and find its own level. Were it so, "I'm sure I'd congratulate myself on sitting next to you for you'd soon have me brimming over with the most exquisite kind of wisdom. My own understanding is a shadowy thing at best, as equivocal as a dream, but

yours, Agathon, glitters and dilates. . . ." (175d) Agathon recognizes Socrates' irony and declares war: "I shall take up this question of wisdom with you later on, and let Bacchus judge between us." (175e)

So, from the first, even before the decision to refrain from heavy drinking and the agreement to have a speech contest in praise of Love, the competition between Socrates and Agathon, between philosopher and tragedian, exists and concerns *wisdom*. Their aggressive erotic struggle pervades the dialogue. For later with just Agathon to speak and Socrates to follow, Eryximachus, who has been serving as moderator says, "Indeed, if I were not aware that Socrates and Agathon were both authorities on Love, I should be wondering what they could find to say after being treated to such a wealth and variety of eloquence. But knowing that they are, I've no doubt we'll find them equal to the occasion." (193e) This tension is immediately heightened by Socrates telling Eryximachus that were Eryximachus in Socrates' shoes, especially after Agathon's upcoming speech, he would be as nervous as Socrates is. After Agathon's speech, Socrates again addresses Eryximachus, "You laughed at my misgivings, but you see—they've just been justified by the event. . . ." (198a)

Thus, the ending which we are considering is a continuation of what permeates the earlier parts of the *Symposium*, at least at the dramatic level. This has been demonstrated as far as the strife between philosophy and tragedy. The strife between philosophy and comedy and their personifications is at a much lower level.

The first incident takes place after Socrates' contribution to the contest. Aristophanes, who is the only one not applauding, attempts to offer a rejoinder to Socrates who had drawn on a concept introduced earlier by Aristophanes. But before the rejoinder can be made, Alcibiades crashes the party and we never get to witness how the tensions between comedian (who wrote *The Clouds*) and philosopher (who is represented in *The Clouds*) will be exercised. Alcibiades, however, does say something about Socrates and comedy, i.e., "And what do you mean by sitting here, not by Aristophanes or one of these other humorists?" (213c) The world sees Socrates as a buffoon, a comic figure, so he belongs with Aristophanes, but the reader knows better, and so does Alcibiades: ". . . you've only got to open him up and you'll find him so full of temperance and sobriety that you'll hardly believe your eyes." (216d) Socrates is concerned with high purpose, cosmic order, the mystical, the divine. He is clearly in conflict with the comedians.

The ending of the *Symposium* should seem less enigmatic now. It is a continuation of action and interaction and other aspects of the design of this dialogue. For example, although comedian and tragedian are

separate contestants during the competition in praise of love, their offerings get juxtaposed because Aristophanes had to speak out of turn, having had an attack of hiccoughs. The final three participants in the competition are then the comedian, the tragedian, and the philosopher, respectively. This suggests an ascending order of importance because the philosopher comes last, and because there is much duelling between tragedian and philosopher (indicating a close rivalry), less duelling between comedian and philosopher (indicating more remote rivalry), and almost no duelling between the philosopher and the others who are not a serious threat. Phaedrus, the first speaker, is the man of myth; Pausanias, second speaker, is the man of convention; Eryximachus, third speaker, is a superficial physician; next are the three we have discussed. The order suggests a ladder where only the last three struggle for top step.

The dramatic consistency of the tension between the philosopher and the poet has now been brought out. But how does it come into the concepts involved in the *Symposium*? What is it about *love* and what is it about *drama* that makes sense of this?

In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates suggests a grid (made explicit by Sinaiko[2]) for understanding the soul. He depicts the loving soul's relation to the cosmos, its relation to other souls in society, and its relation to itself. This is a scale of participation with each level emphasizing a virtue; wisdom correlates with the cosmic, courage with the social, and temperance with the personal; justice is their harmony. In opposition to the virtues, we may specify vices. Ignorance is the opposite of wisdom, but as a *vice* it would best be called *intolerant pride* (*hybris*) or *false nobility*. Cowardice is the opposite of courage, and it is displayed as *exaggerated baseness*. Intemperance is a *blinding passionate concern with self*. The imbalance or disharmony resulting from these vices being present in a soul is then *injustice*.

This now displays the opposition between philosophy and drama. For the philosopher alone, the famous equation "knowledge is virtue" is significant. Philosophy, in being love of knowledge, belongs with the virtues. Drama is its opposite in that it teaches vices. It teaches vice because our susceptibility to drama arises from emotions which we must ordinarily suppress for the sake of controlled action. Dramatists find ways to imitate the conditions which cause these emotions to flow and, in so doing, appeal to our weaker elements, establish bad habits *and* teach pleasure when they should teach happiness or proper functioning.

These then are the charges against drama. Plato puts them briefly when, in the *Gorgias*, he describes rhetoric as a "knack of producing

gratification and pleasure" and marks rhetoric as a form of flattery. Later in the *Gorgias*, poetry is called a form of rhetoric. (502) In the *Protagoras* (316d), it is described as sophistry in disguise. The indictments are severe but no less so in the *Symposium*, for, when Socrates says that Agathon's wisdom glitters and dilates, he suggests that the eloquence proper to the tragedian misleads.

The flow of this discussion has thus far been channeled by the emotional aspect of drama. But undercurrents are present, too, e.g., in the theater the soul is a *spectator*. In philosophy, *in love*, the soul is a participant in making itself, in evolving into a more virtuous person. In drama the soul is passive and is subject to limitations provided it by ignorant gratifiers who aim at causing pleasure rather than happiness. Dramatists are concerned with their immediate present and their own suffering, even when they appeal to the cosmic order. In contrast, Socrates says, "For surely the whole of time from the boy to the old man would be small compared with all time. . . . Do you think that an immortal thing ought to be seriously concerned for such a little time and not rather for all time?" (*Republic* 608c-d) From *Prometheus Bound* to *Medea*, the tragedian is concerned with lot, injustice, anger, pride, noble suffering, injustice in the universe (cosmic level) or blind, stubborn obsessing (personal intemperance). He is concerned with the absence of love or the death of love, and focuses on the temporary existence and strife in a single locale. So drama actually bogs us down in Becoming and in feelings. Tragedy depends on our disappointment in not having ready access to an order such as the world of Forms, in our alienation or fall from high estates, while comedy mocks us for aspiring to such a world. We are, in drama, stuck in our own flux of emotions, and this is silly, because we are immortal and it is this immortality, thence virtue, and happiness which should concern us, not our own sufferings, vices, and emotional pleasure. We should be concerned with Love, not sex. Love is happiness is philosophy; sex is passion is pleasure is drama. Love is the initial topic of the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* and in each it is appropriately at odds with popular persuasion. This is why "there is from of old a quarrel between philosophy and poetry." (*Rep.* 607b)

I have established why dramatic poetry and philosophy belong on opposite sides of our schema, philosophy with the virtues, drama with the vices. But *where* do they go? Where does tragedy fit, where does comedy? And why is the master of one necessarily the master of the other?

In the *Laws*, the Athenian poses the question whether tragic poets

should be permitted to visit the polis to display their works, but he demurs, for he considers the polity a tragedy, "a dramatization of a noble and perfect life." (817a) He considers himself a poet. Tragedy is his way of teaching men how to live. In the tragedy he constructs, the actors are the citizens. This sets his work off from dramatic tragedies where the focus is on the individual's struggle. And, though tragedy pretends to teach noble living, it is usually destructive of polity and full of falsehoods; for it "dwells among men below, and is rough like the goat of tragedy, for tales and falsehoods have generally to do with the tragic or goatish life and tragedy is the place of them." (*Crat.* 408c)

Tragedy thus seems to operate at two of the soul's levels. Concerned with false nobility, it is the cosmic vice (*hybris*). Representing a stubborn egotism, demanding a petty justice for immediate suffering, it is the personal vice (intemperance).

Comedy is then the social vice, i.e., cowardice, for, if courage is a battlefield condition, buffoonery may be one ploy to get the coward off the hook. And courage as a social virtue is not so much battlefield behavior as political action or omission. The coward would never do what Socrates recounts of himself in the *Apology*: defying strong, dangerous men on behalf of justice and law and the integrity of the state. The coward *avoids* doing the right thing by feigning ignorance of it which licenses conforming with the crowd. That is a sort of buffoonery. Along with this, the coward may try to convince his audience of his own stupidity. He debases himself and represents mankind as base and free of higher demands. Comedy denies the cosmic order and suggests paying any price to get along.

Comedy is thus cruel jesting at the expense of humanity. The author harnesses the passion of disdain. Tragedy elicits pity and cosmic fear, which turn into despair and hatred at the personal level. These three, pity, disdain, and despair, are opposites of *agape*, *philia*, and *eros*, respectively; so love is the opposite of the *incensedness* which drama imitates. Incensedness is a mistake, but the man who does not err, the man who wants to know *all* including the opposites—virtues and vices, emotions, roles for humans and humanity, etc.—will then be a master of comedy and tragedy, and he will also be the master of philosophy. Thus, though he could then write both comedy and tragedy, he never would. The philosopher does not *write* drama simpliciter. He *does* philosophy. He eliminates imitation and tries to induce participation. He opposes incensedness and tries to induce love. He minimizes simple persuasion and maximizes recollection fostering happiness at the expense of pleasure. Thus, philosophy is the greatest of the arts (*Phaedo*

61a), "the noblest and best music." If all this is right, the enigmatic conclusion of the *Symposium* has been explained and the dialogue can be appreciated in a richer way than hitherto recognized.

These characterizations articulate with the comedian's and the tragedian's contribution to the *Symposium*. Plato's comedian represents mankind as totally isolated from knowledge of the divine. (189c) Our ancestors were grotesque and insolent creatures who, because of *hybris*, got halved by Zeus. They were thus *weakened*, and Zeus threatened to divide them again unless they behaved better. "So saying, he cut them all in half just as you or I might chop up sorb apples for pickling, or slice an egg with a hair." (190d) Rearranged and healed from then on, each half only sought its complement. Aristophanes enjoins his friends to be pious in order to avoid being split again.

His speech is supposed to be and is funny. But it does emphasize our social plight and its derivation from the ill will of Zeus. People are now like slices of egg or apple or flat fish. (191d) We mate like grasshoppers. (191c)

In this speech, our baseness is plain and plainly dependent on injustice. Being weakened by vivisection and separated from heaven, our plight in the social is severe alienation. Sex is as close to love as we may get: "If in all these clippings and claspings, a man should chance upon a woman, conception would take place . . . while if man should conjugate with man, he might at least obtain such satisfaction as would allow him to turn his attention and his energies to the everyday affairs of life." (191c)

These views of the Platonic Aristophanes instantiate Plato's fears about comedy exploiting the base, disdainful, alienated and pleasure oriented. Is Agathon then the incarnation of Plato's fears about tragedy?

Recall how Socrates asserted that Agathon's understanding glitters and dilates. The eloquence of his speech is blinding, but Agathon falls short since truth is not so important to him as victory. Flattery rather than praise is his technique. The superlatives seem unending. Love is the blessedest, loveliest, and best. (195a) Well, no doubt something is, but it is of this that Agathon confesses later, "I didn't know what I was talking about." (201c) The exaggeration grows out of control when he transfers his focus from Love's appearance to its virtue. Love never injures nor is injured, it has perfect righteousness and is entirely temperant, having "the power to control our pleasures and our lusts." (196c) Love is also the mightiest passion. This god's valor is supreme, and Agathon can do but scant justice to Love's genius. Is it irony that that is the best the tragedian can do? Rather, it is true! Through

ignorance and false nobility, Agathon gives an unjust (untrue) rendition of Love, claiming that it makes everyone a poet, whereas Socrates will claim that Love makes everyone a philosopher.

Much of the beauty and eloquence remaining in Agathon's description is appropriate to the Love Socrates will describe. The trouble is that Agathon's account cannot be reconciled with *life*. His picture is too beautiful. If sin is alienation from God, then we must all automatically be sinners, for the god Love is too distant. We can never have the benefits Agathon attributes to Love and, at the same time, be so remote, so insulated from Love. Love must be a mediator; it must be between the resplendancy of divine or cosmic completeness and the bankruptcy of hard life.

Agathon's vision is only the raw material of tragedy, for it fails to explain or even notice why things are sometimes bad for lovers. The man who is witness to Agathon's drama will mistake himself for God, and, acting accordingly, will eventually be so inflexible, so ungiving, so demanding, that he will be alienated from society and perhaps even destructive of it. Furthermore, if Love comes to him, it will only be temporary, for Agathon's Love attends only to the young and flees from the old and the ugly. This, again, resembles our description of tragedy as confined to the temporal order. Socrates' cross-examination of Agathon refines the poetic raw material bringing it toward fuller tragedy in forcing Agathon to *fear* that he did not know what he was talking about in his speech. (201c)

In this paper I have tried to explain the ending of the *Symposium* in light of the (1) action leading up to it, (2) the content of conceptions of comedy and tragedy as Plato seemed to have understood them, and (3) the instantiations of those conceptions in terms of how the comedian and tragedian conducted themselves. Correcting the errors in these genres by combining them and discovering their opposites and complements entails mastery of both and motive for flight from drama to philosophy.[3]

NOTES

1. All translations are from E. Hamilton and H. Cairns, *The Collected Dialogues of Plato* (Princeton, 1961).

2. H.L. Sinaiko, *Love, Knowledge and Discourse in Plato* (Chicago, 1965).

3. This is a portion of a chapter of a book on Plato and alienation literature.