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THE PLATONIC ART OF COMEDY AND TRAGEDY

ANY PROPOSAL to speak of "the Platonic art" of tragedy and comedy will probably raise some eyebrows. Socrates' own argument in the *Ion* that poetry is the product of inspiration rather than of art or craft (*technē*) already suggests that the term "art" is entirely out of place. And those who do not share Socrates' doubts about the status of tragedy and comedy as arts might still object to use of the singular "art," on grounds that these are surely two distinct *technai*. Nonetheless an elusive passage near the end of the *Symposium* does point to the existence of a single art underlying both genres. At least, Socrates is able to force the tragedian Agathon and the comedian Aristophanes to admit — albeit after a long night of drink, by an argument they are "scarcely in any condition to follow" — that "the same man should know how to compose (*epistasthai poiein*) comedy and tragedy, and he who produced tragedy by art (*technē*) would also produce comedy" (223d).

Although Agathon and Aristophanes would have considered themselves genuine artists, they almost certainly would have viewed their respective arts as distinct and independent. We know of no playwright who competed in the festivals both as tragedian and as comedian. On the contrary, it was a commonplace, if an oversimplification, in fifth-century Athens that "the two genres were rigidly separate . . . tragedy was tragedy and comedy was comedy and never the twain should meet."[1] But if the two apparently separate genres in fact constitute a single art such that any of its masters would produce both comedy and tragedy, then neither Agathon nor Aristophanes would be a master of that dramatic art. Thus Socrates must "force" their assent.

But that surprising conclusion only heightens the doubt expressed at the outset. If there is a single dramatic art, what is one to make of Socrates' own argument in the *Ion* (and, in effect, the *Apology* and *Gorgias*) that good tragedy or comedy, along with any other good poetry, does not rest on *technē*, or on *epistēmē* (knowledge, genuine understanding), but is the product of inspiration, native instinct, or some mere knack?[2] And even assuming that comedy and tragedy do rest on art, what reason is there to suppose that they are the same art? Further,

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with an eye specifically to the *Symposium*, what might this art have to do with that dialogue's announced competition in wisdom (*sophia*) judged by Dionysus, god of drama and of wine, in which Socrates emerges the victor? And what, in turn, does that have to do with the dialogue's central occupation with love? All these questions point to a crucial preliminary issue, and to the larger theme advertised in the title of this paper: what, on Platonic grounds, would be involved in denying or affirming that anyone writes tragedy or comedy by *technē* or *epistēmē*? Discussion of this issue will bring out two distinct and textually attested Platonic conceptions of true drama, one from the *Laws*, another from the *Philebus*. Both will prove of interest in their own right and, I believe, contribute to our understanding of the *Symposium*.

I

In the afterglow of his victory at Epidaurus, the rhapsode Ion of Plato's *Ion* lays claim to knowledge of all the crafts of which Homer sang: as Homer is wise in all things, so also must be the master reciter and interpreter of Homer. But under questioning by Socrates he admits the absurdity of his claim to virtual omniscience, allowing, finally, that his success as a rhapsode is a matter of inspiration rather than knowledge. In Socrates' metaphor of the Muse as magnetic stone, even Homer himself is only the first in a series of suspended rings. By a power drawn from the stone, Homer attracts (inspires) Ion, who in turn inspires his audience. Through this account Socrates denies the poets (and rhapsodes) *technē* and *epistēmē*: they are not themselves masters of strategy, medicine, horsemanship, statecraft, or carpentry. However convincingly they may speak about these things, they do not *know* what they are talking about. In this they differ from every genuine Platonic *technitēs*, whether doctor, carpenter, or husbandman, who does have knowledge of some specific subject matter. Just as the sophist and rhetorician of the *Gorgias* lack *technē* in part because they lack knowledge of the things of which they speak (matters germane to legislation, or to the curative functions of a judicial system; see esp. 464b–465a, 500e–501c), so the poets lack *technē* because they have no genuine understanding of the things of which they sing or write. This basic epistemic condition for *technē* is either explicit or implicit in virtually all of Plato's works, so one may be sure that any *Platonic* art of comedy or tragedy must rest on knowledge of an appropriate field or subject matter.

At first glance Plato may seem to have softened his attack on the poets when in *Republic* X, at *Sophist* 266c, and *Laws* 667c-d he acknowledges an "art of imitation." But in fact this art of imitation, as explained in *Republic* X, still involves no knowledge of the true nature of the subjects imitated, but only — so far as one's apprehension of the subjects themselves is concerned — awareness of how they *appear*. The poet as such need not have knowledge (or even true opinion, *Rep.* 602a) of carpentry or generalship, so long as he can create a convincing phantasm in words of a carpenter or general. In this respect the poet is like the

painter who creates phantasms of "real things themselves" merely by looking at their appearances, and not through genuine knowledge of the kinds of actions or objects he paints (see *Republic* 598e–601a). This does allow the painter or poet some mastery of painterly or poetic technique (foreshortening, *skiagraphia;* handling of meter, etc.). But the present point concerns what the artist does or does not know about the true nature, rather than the appearance, of the subjects or actions he imitates. In this respect painter and poet are equally lacking in genuine knowledge. The essential epistemic condition for genuine *technē* insisted upon in the *Ion, Gorgias,* and elsewhere, and used in *Republic* X to put the *technē* of the imitative artist in its place, is simply not to be found among the poets.

II

Laws VII does, however, provide a version of true tragedy — tragedy based on knowledge of its subject matter and composed by art or craft in a sense denied to popular tragedy. At 816d–817a the Athenian distinguishes broadly between comedy and tragedy in terms of a familiar contrast between the *geloion* and the *spoudaion,* the low and laughable *vs.* the elevated, noble, and serious. He then contrasts the "so-called serious" compositions of the tragedians (*tōn de spoudaiōn, hōs phasi,* 817a2) with the only genuine tragedy:

> Esteemed visitors, we are ourselves makers of a tragedy, and of the finest and best we are able to produce. For our entire city has been constructed as a dramatization of the finest and best life; that is what we hold to be in truth the most genuine of tragedies. Thus you are poets and we also are poets of the same things, rival artists and competitors, and in the finest of all dramas, one that by nature can be produced only by a code of true law. (817b, trans. after Taylor)

The truest and best tragedy, if tragedy is the highest form of literary *mimēsis,* is the dramatization of the noblest and best sort of life. This is, to be sure, a far cry from the more familiar Aristotelian conception of tragedy involving strong arousal of the "tragic emotions" and centering on the tragic fate of a particular kind of central character. It is not that Plato precludes emotional response; audiences might still react with some measure of fear, pity, and so on, to the stories of good men in the perils of war (e.g., *Republic* 399a-c) or of Ancient Athens locked in mortal conflict with Atlantis. But this reaction will be such as to educate citizens to fear, pity, and rejoice in due measure, at things that really ought to be feared, pitied, etc. There will be none of the usual wanton indulgence of the passions, with its inevitable strengthening of the lowest part of the soul (*Republic* X, 602c–603b). (Plato does not concede, at *Laws* 790e–791a, a beneficial *katharsis* through arousal of emotion in the theater. He speaks there of a "Dionysiac treatment" for *madness.* It may be that Aristotle saw in such treatment a similar, more generally applicable benefit to be gained through stage tragedy. But Plato evidently did not.)

Nor is a "fall" part of the *Laws'* conception of tragedy. Socrates of the *Phaedo,* for example, is a Platonically tragic figure in the *Laws'* sense, but not because death is a misfortune for him. To view his death that way — as "tragic" in a more popular sense — is, as Socrates himself emphasizes, to ignore the whole course of the dialogue. For the philosopher, separation of the soul from the body is a welcome release from earthly impediments to true wisdom.

But in one important respect Plato's usage is entirely traditional. For he has isolated a very general aspect of tragedy about which all popular playwrights and their audiences would agree: tragedy is that branch of drama which is important, elevated, and serious; it is, if nothing else, *spoudaios,* because it treats important matters in an elevated manner. In general the term *spoudaios* takes its meaning from two contrasts — with *phaulos* (low, unworthy, inferior), and with *geloios* (low, laughable). On either count tragedy is agreed by all to be *spoudaios.* Thus Aristophanes has the Chorus complain in the *Clouds* that Socrates neglects "the high matters of tragic *technē,*" (1494–5) and Aristotle will classify tragedy as, among other things, an imitation of "serious (*spoudaios*) deeds" (*Poetics* 1449b10).

Plato is keenly aware of tragedy's exalted reputation and plays upon it ironically (*Phaedo* 115a, comparing himself to the "tragic man" answering the "call of fate") or even quite sarcastically (*Gorgias* 502b, on the "wondrous composition of tragedy" which he proceeds to expose as mere rhetoric dressed up for the theater). He takes special delight in spoofing tragic diction, so elevated as to be over the heads of the poor listener (see esp. *Republic* 413b, 545e; cf. *Sophist* 242c). But Socrates' cutting remarks of *Republic* X go considerably further. Against a background of the traditional division of poetry into the high and the low (*spoudaios* and *geloios,* 605c) he will conclude not that tragedy is *spoudaios,* but, with considerable effrontery, that tragedy "must not be regarded seriously (*ou spoudasteon*) . . . as if it grasped some truth and were some elevated matter (*hōs . . . spoudaia*), but we must be on guard against it . . ." (608a). And the unkindest cut of all: "Mimetic poetry is an inferior thing (*phaulē*) cohabiting with an inferior part of the soul (*phaulōi*) and producing inferior (*phaula*) offspring."

Returning to the *Laws,* the Athenian's concern with the common assessment of tragedy as *spoudaios* now stands out in sharp relief. He has just indicated what kind of dance performance *he* considers *spoudaios* (dignified imitation of motions of a comely body, imitation of the brave man in war and the temperate man in peace, 814d-e). He emphatically classifies popular comedy as *phaulos* and intimates that popular tragedy belongs there, too. It is then that he addresses the popular tragedians, the makers of "so-called noble" tragedy, denying their right to the term *spoudaios,* and laying claim to it on behalf of his own productions. He declares in effect that if tragedy is that sort of dramatic imitation which is noble, elevating, and serious, which grasps important truth — and, one must recall, which entitles its creator to the high title of "educator" normally bestowed upon the serious poets — then dramatization of a good, noble life is the true tragedy.

Thus the concept of tragedy as imitation of the highest and best sort of life,

which may naturally encompass the lives both of cities and of individuals, allows one to see the author of the *Republic* and *Laws* as a true tragedian, creating in words a just and good city. The unfinished *Critias* would have been Platonic tragedy on a grand scale, portraying the courage of ancient Athens in war and her ungrudging generosity, after her victory, in freeing all who had been enslaved by Atlantis (*Timaeus* 25b-c). Plato's dramatic imitation of the noblest and best sort of individual life issues principally in a series of portraits of Socrates: as philosophy itself is the highest form of *mousikē* (*Phaedo* 61a), so dramatization of the philosophical life, and in particular of the life of the most just and wisest man of his day (*Phaedo* 118a), is the highest form of drama.

On the other hand the Athenian Visitor of the *Laws* does not distinguish any true or philosophic comedy. He appears to speak only of popular comedy (816a–817a), deeming it unfit for participation or even viewing by a good man. Still one can forge a direct link between the truly tragic (in the sense just described) and the *apparently* laughable: to the many, the philosopher will inevitably appear ridiculous or laughable and definitely not worth taking seriously. The common perception of the philosopher and his peculiar views as *geloios* appears frequently in the dialogues (e.g., *Republic* 517a, e, *Symposium* 221e). Plato knew well that all who seriously pursue philosophy into adulthood will appear ridiculous to the ignorant multitude—for their lack of concern with worldly pleasures, their neglect of money and honor, and above all for their enfeebling lifelong pursuit of a "wisdom" that actually renders them useless to friends, family, and city (see especially *Gorgias* 485a–486c). One consequence of this popular view of the philosopher as *geloios* rather than *spoudaios* is a union of (true) tragedy and (popular) comedy in a single character. We shall return to this theme below.

As a complement to the *Laws'* conception of true tragedy one could easily imagine a notion of the truly comic as "that which is truly low, laughable, or not worth taking really seriously." As with the truly *spoudaios,* the philosopher's perception of who or what fits the definition will differ radically from that of most Athenians. If folly and wrong be the mark of the *geloios,* and beauty that of the *spoudaios* (*Republic* 452d), the philosopher will, in Plato's view, be the proper judge of both. But on either reading of the comic, it will be the philosopher alone who possesses the knowledge requisite for truly expert composition. He alone will know the nature of the truly tragic, i.e., the nature of the truly best life for city or individual. And he will, by virtue of exactly the same knowledge, be a master of comedy—either by creating truly tragic figures who are at the same time popularly comic, or by creating both truly tragic and truly comic figures. In the former case his philosophic drama will inevitably be highly ironic, revolving about a figure who appears to some comic because of the very characteristics that make him, for the *cognoscenti,* genuinely tragic. In the latter, he will create distinct tragic and comic figures, or perhaps figures both tragic and comic, but for different reasons. All this follows even though the view of drama in question

gives little specific content to the notion of the truly elevated and important, or the low and laughable.

III

The *Philebus* provides a second, more specific notion of the truly comic and tragic, starting from the Socratic and Delphic theme of self-ignorance. The topic arises within a discussion of mixed pleasures of the soul, which, as it happens, include one's response to comedy. The concept of self-ignorance then enters as part of the analysis of the proper subject matter of comedy, the laughable (*to geloion*). Socrates specifies further that a given character may be self-ignorant in one of three ways: about his "external goods," his bodily goods, or about the goods of his soul (48d-e). With regard to the third sort, it is an especially common failing to overestimate one's own wisdom or intelligence (*sophia,* 49a). The misfortune of self-ignorance is related explicitly to comedy, and implicitly to tragedy, as follows:

> All who foolishly hold this false opinion about themselves . . . must be divided into those who are influential and powerful and those who are the opposite. . . . Divide them in this way then, and all of them who are weak and unable to get even when ridiculed, you would be right to term ridiculous (*geloios*). But those who are powerful and able to fight back you would most rightly term fearsome and hateful. For the ignorance of the powerful is hateful and shameful—both it itself and its images are a danger to anyone near. But the ignorance of the weak has for us the rank and nature of the ridiculous. (49b-c)

This account of *to geloion* is apparently intended to apply in the first instance to popular stage comedy and to comedy in "real life" (50b). But here, as in the *Laws,* the philosopher will have a different view of what or who truly fits the given description, and hence of who is really comic.

Perhaps the purest illustration of a popular reaction of this sort occurs in Book II of the *Iliad,* 211ff.:

> Now the rest had sat down, and were orderly in their places, but one man, Thersites of the endless speech, still scolded . . . vain, and without decency, to quarrel with the princes. . . . This was the ugliest man who came beneath Ilion. . . . So he spoke, Thersites, abusing Agamemnon the shepherd of the people. But brilliant Odysseus swiftly came beside him scowling and laid a harsh word upon him: . . . You shall not lift up your mouth to argue with princes. . . . So he spoke and dashed the sceptre against his back and shoulders, and he doubled over, and a round tear dropped from him. . . . Sorry though the men were they laughed over him happily. (Lattimore trans.)

Some readers may not find the episode so vastly amusing as did the Achaeans, but Homer's audience would surely find Socrates' analysis of *to geloion* perfectly

applicable to Thersites. This unnaturally ugly and brazen "man of the people" does not know his own natural place – hence is self-ignorant – and is impotent to strike back when rebuked by Odysseus. (Plato, too, treats Thersites as *geloios,* at *Republic* 620c, though with no accompanying analysis. Near the end of the myth of Er, as various figures are seen choosing their next life, the soul of that "buffoon" (*gelatopoios*) is spied far off in the distance putting on the body of an ape.)

But other characters not popularly thought to be at all comic might well appear so to the philosopher. Ion of the *Ion,* whose false conceit of wisdom is exposed by Socratic cross-examination, does seem truly *geloios* despite his great popular success. Here the boaster (the *alazōn*) is confronted by an ironic Socrates (the *eirōn*) who claims no wisdom, speaks a humble language, and deftly worsts the hapless imposter. Euthyphro of the *Euthyphro,* like Thersites, appears comic all around. The assemblymen laugh at his predictions of the future as if he were mad (3c), while Socrates' own bemusement at Euthyphro's extravagant claims to knowledge of things divine shows through at 6c5–8:

> *Euthyphro:* If you wish, I could expound for you not only that, but many other things divine – things I'm sure you would be amazed to hear.
> *Socrates:* I wouldn't be surprised . . . .

Odysseus used a scepter to indicate Thersites' proper place. Socrates' method is gentler, but also involves the exposure of self-ignorance – here the false conceit of wisdom about matters of greatest importance.[3]

At the same time, Socrates himself will again appear popularly comic. It is not just that his ideas, his garb, and even his face will seem laughable, but also that he is unable to retaliate when laughed at or, as Callicles adds (*Gorgias* 485e–486b), when unjustly accused and hauled into court.

Tragedy is not explicitly linked in the *Philebus* to self-ignorance. But tragedy and certain commonly recognized "tragic emotions" are mentioned, and Socrates' remarks about the likenesses (*eikones,* 49c) of self-ignorance in the powerful indicate that he has in mind dramatic representations, as he explicitly had in mind dramatizations of the comic. If so, these must be representations from tragic drama. This is confirmed in Socrates' summarizing remark (50b) that the discussion applies not only to lamentations, tragedies (and comedies) "on the stage" (*en tois dramasin*), but also "in life." Most important, Socrates' treatment of self-ignorance suggests a natural application to tragedy: where self-ignorance resides in a person of power it is fearful and hateful, and may bring disaster to everyone near. In such situations one has the makings of a tragedy of self-ignorance.

The concept of tragic self-ignorance in the powerful will apply readily to a very broad range of actual Athenian tragedies, since every case of *hybris,* or in general of overstepping one's natural bounds, will be an open-and-shut case of

self-ignorance.[4] (The comic fable Plato puts into Aristophanes' mouth in the *Symposium* is in fact a mock-tragedy hinging on divine punishment of the reckless ambitions of mankind; see esp. 190b-c.) But again, the philosopher will naturally have ideas different from those of *hoi polloi* about the true goods of the soul, and hence about who is ignorant concerning such goods in his own case. This is not at all to deny the correctness or interest of the conception of tragedy under consideration. The point is rather that if tragedy is to be described in a particular way, then genuine tragedy is drama that really does fit the given description. While everyone will agree to this much, differences of opinion will arise when it comes to identifying or creating genuine tragedy, since the philosopher may see some characters as tragic who are not popularly so conceived, and vice-versa.

But from either a popular or a philosophic viewpoint the *Philebus* reveals an underlying and specific connection between the nature of the tragic and comic: both consist in one form or another of self-ignorance concerning one's own goods, particularly the goods of one's soul, where further aspects of a given character and situation determine that self-ignorance as comic or tragic. Like all generalizations about the nature of the comic or tragic, this one has its obvious limitations. But Plato's suggestion is especially valuable in isolating a conception thoroughly Greek, Delphic, and Socratic, which is in fact central to much that audiences, ourselves included, respond to as comic or tragic. Moreover, it indicates specifically why the philosopher alone will possess the requisite knowledge for a *technē* of tragedy and comedy. His dramatic art will be a single art resting ultimately on understanding of the true goods of the soul – along with true valuation of other goods, which in Plato's view depends on knowledge of the true good of the soul – and therefore on knowledge of who is and is not deceived about himself in this most important matter.

By contrast, the popular tragedians do not really know what the goods of the soul are, and therefore cannot knowingly portray their central characters as ignorant of those precise goods, or appraise accurately any other presumed goods incessantly aspired to, or "tragically" lost on the Athenian stage. As before with the *Laws,* it turns out that a description apparently well-fitted to much of the best popular tragedy does not in fact apply at all. It applies instead, so Plato tells us, to works that only a philosopher could knowingly compose: either the dramatization of the noblest and best of lives (the genuinely *spoudaios* sort of dramatic *mimēsis*) or the portrayal of characters ignorant of what is truly the highest good of their own souls.

I trust it will not seem confusing or contradictory to say that there are in Plato two non-equivalent conceptions of tragedy or comedy. It is simply that two common descriptions of tragedy, if interpreted Platonically, cease to apply to particular cases in the familiar ways. Still, if neither description truly applies to popular drama one may yet find that each, when correctly understood, points to a kind of drama that a philosopher-poet might in suitable circumstances find it

worthwhile to compose. This has already been illustrated by reference to the *Republic, Laws, Euthyphro,* and *Ion;* Plato's public will surely identify numerous other examples. (Indeed, any dialogue featuring Socrates as protagonist will qualify as *spoudaios* — hence "tragic" in the sense appropriated by Plato in the *Laws.*) But I believe the *Symposium* offers our best opportunity to view these general reflections in action.

IV

There exist a number of suggestions concerning Socrates' closing argument with the poets, some of which do recognize the centrality of *technē* and *epistēmē.* (Unfortunately, one could not tell from some translations of the dialogue that these fundamental Platonic concepts even appear in the text.) And some of these do appeal to general principles of Platonic epistemology (e.g., opposites are known by the same craft or "science" and comedy and tragedy are opposites;[5] or, any branch of knowledge requires mastery of its entire field of application, not just of one portion or another, and comedy and tragedy are only species of a generic poetic art involving knowledge of souls, knowledge of different kinds of *logoi,* and the effect of *logoi* on the soul).[6] These suggestions are in some important respects correct and consistent with what will be argued here. But none goes far enough to specify the nature of the underlying single craft of opposites — or the overarching generic craft — in question, or to demonstrate a connection between that craft and philosophic wisdom, or between the closing scene of the *Symposium* and the main theme of the dialogue, *erōs.*

Still other interpreters doubt that Socrates was really serious about a single art of tragedy and comedy. Perhaps the argument is only a "humorous final comment" on Socrates' "ardor for arguing the most paradoxical theses."[7] Or, since tragedy and comedy are inspired by different muses they are not, in fact, arts; all Socrates is saying is that "if they were arts, which they are not, then they would be the same one."[8] Both the *Laws* and *Philebus* offer promising explanations, however, which must be consulted before abandoning the cause.[9]

Let us return first to the *Laws'* combination, in the philosopher, of (true) tragedy and (popular) comedy. We may recall that the philosopher alone knows the nature of the noblest and best life, so that he alone can knowingly imitate it in *logos.* Since such a life will inevitably appear comic to the multitude, his tragic figure will just as inevitably be popularly comic. Thus he creates at once true tragedy and popular comedy, and is the only one capable of doing so by knowledge or *technē.*[10]

Possession of such knowledge might already be sufficient for making of oneself a "tragic figure": being tragic in the *Laws* sense is, perhaps, to be the right sort of *technitēs* or *epistēmōn.* (This makes best sense if the knowledge involved is taken broadly, as including education of the whole soul.) The *writing* of philosophic drama will presumably require more, including techniques of image making.

(Whether in Plato's view inspiration can combine with understanding is an interesting question, but one which need not be resolved for present purposes.)[11] Either way, drama based on *technē* or *epistēmē* must be composed from knowledge or genuine understanding of the tragic or comic as such, whatever else it may require.[12] On the *Laws'* view of tragedy, that subject matter — i.e., the noblest and best sort of life — will be the object of the philosopher's wisdom, not the poet's.

Thus only the philosopher meets the central requirement, and only the philosopher-poet meets all the requirements, for literary composition of true tragedy or comedy. This would not shed much light on the symposiasts other than Socrates, although it is not obvious that an interpretation of Socrates' closing argument has to accomplish that. A serious problem does arise, however, in accounting for the argument's requirement of symmetry between comedy and tragedy. The second clause of Socrates' conclusion was that "he who is by *technē* a maker of tragedy is also a maker of comedy" (223d5–6). This much in isolation is consistent with an asymmetrical reading: one makes true tragedy, and this turns out to be comic; there need be no true comedy as opposed to that which appears comic to *hoi polloi.*

But the first clause of the conclusion, that "the same man would know how to write both comedy and tragedy" indicates a symmetry between comedy and tragedy: both fall under the purview of *epistēmē,* and anyone who is able to compose one will also be able to compose the other. The natural and virtually universal reading of the Greek is that one and the same artist will be able to compose in both genres because comedy and tragedy involve, somehow, one and the same *technē* or *epistēmē.*[13]

If such symmetry does obtain, then Socrates' argument cannot rest on a combination of true tragedy and popular comedy (though Socrates does present such a combination), for there is no reason at all to think that skill in popular comedy (even popular comedy involving the figure of Socrates!) shows the kind of understanding requisite for knowledgeable creation of true tragedy. One might try to preserve symmetry by supplying a notion of the truly comic as that which is truly, rather than just apparently, low or laughable. But this expedient spoils the original point about Socrates' double role. He is no longer the tragi-comic figure, because he is *not* truly comic but only so in the eyes of the many.[14]

An approach by way of the *Philebus* seems more promising.[15] We may begin with the observation that within the drama of the *Symposium* Agathon is ostensibly the chief rival of Socrates for the crown of wisdom. Their rivalry is sounded immediately upon Socrates' arrival:

> Here you are, Socrates. Come and sit next to me; I want to share this great thought that's just struck you in the porch next door. . . . My dear Agathon, Socrates replied as he took his seat beside him, I only wish that wisdom (*sophia*) were the kind of thing one could share by sitting next to someone. . . . I'm sure you'd soon

> have me brimming over with the most exquisite kind of wisdom. My own *sophia* is a trifling thing (*phaulē tis*) at best. . . . Now, Socrates, said Agathon, I know you're mocking me. However I shall take up this question of wisdom with you later on, and let Dionysus judge between us. (175c-e, Joyce trans.)

In many other ways large and small the contest between Agathon and Socrates is billed as the main event of the evening (see esp. 175e, 177e, 193d-e, 198c, 213d-e). Agathon's brilliance had been demonstrated in his victory at the Great Dionysia, and in his glorious appearance before the Athenians (175e). On this evening his speech in the style of Gorgias is received enthusiastically by the other symposiasts and threatens to transfix Socrates, like a vision of some "Gorgon's head of Gorgias' eloquence" (198c).

But for Agathon, Socrates has prepared a bit of the usual question-and-answer "refutation." With startling rapidity Agathon is completely routed, admitting that love is not beautiful as he had said, but on the contrary, lacks the beauty it seeks. He also frankly confesses to Plato's key charge against the poets when he concedes that he had not known what he was talking about (201b11–12). Like the rhetorician he emulates, Agathon skillfully deploys the techniques of speech-making, at times with literal enthusiasm, but does not speak from knowledge of his subject. Equally revealing and even more ridiculous, Agathon cannot remember his own high-flown remarks of a moment before and must be reminded by Socrates (210a). (Compare Socrates' "forgetfulness" at *Phaedrus* 263d concerning his own "inspired" first speech; 235c-d, 237a, 238d.) Agathon's rhetorical brilliance masks a profound ignorance of matters central to the nature of love and of its proper objects, and Socrates exposes him with dispatch as one of the self-ignorant concerning the highest goods of his soul. As depicted in the *Symposium,* Agathon's *sophia* — his dazzling skill with words — is quite helpless in the face of Socratic cross-examination. In a word, on the *Philebus'* view of the comic it is not the philosopher but, appearances to the contrary, his rival for the title of wisdom who is *geloios.*[16]

I said that Agathon is "ostensibly" Socrates' chief rival, for the final round will include the comic poet as well. As has been often noted, Aristophanes' hiccups result, among other things, in his speaking immediately before Agathon. Thus the last three speakers on *erōs* constitute the final group of three who last out the night. Some will consider Aristophanes a more serious rival to Socrates than Agathon, though that is less important than the fact that both rivals are ignorant of the true nature of the love they praise. Accordingly, while Socrates does not have it out directly with any of the symposiasts besides Agathon, he does draw attention to Alcibiades' fundamental error: "There is a view that lovers are those who seek their own other half . . . but one does not love what belongs to oneself, except insofar as one speaks of good as one's own . . ." (205d10–e; cf. 211d).

The shortcomings of the earlier portraits of love are exposed by implication, through contrast with the higher mysteries revealed in Diotima's speech. From

that height all the earlier speakers must be regarded as ignorant of love and its highest objects, hence ignorant of the highest goods of their own souls. In suggesting that these apparently serious gentlemen are in fact comic in a peculiarly Platonic sense, I emphasize that this does not deny them intelligence, wit, or even a measure of profundity. All the symposiasts have "felt the sting of philosophy" (218a-b). Nor do I deny that in another work these same figures could be used quite differently, with an eye to the destructive forces they represent (e.g., sophistry; one thinks again of the *Protagoras'* explicit linking of Phaedrus, Pausanias, Eryximachus, and Agathon to sophists, and of the sometimes bitter reflections of the *Gorgias* on the effects of *sophistry*). Rather it is to affirm that they are self-ignorant in a critical way and that their ignorance is depicted in this specific work — perhaps most clearly in the case of Agathon — in a lighter spirit, as something like the *Philebus'* comedy of defenseless self-ignorance.[17]

On the complementary *Philebus* view of tragedy one character immediately stands out. Alcibiades is on the surface a comic figure, entering so drunkenly that he must be led to Agathon. He "is openly comic, clowning from the moment he comes in" — wrangling over Agathon with Socrates, exchanging mock courtesies with Eryximachus, forcing the company to drink out of the wine cooler . . . Socrates calls his speech a "drama of satyr and silene."[18]

But the dramatic date of the dialogue, established clearly in the opening as the day after Agathon's celebration of his first victory at the festival of Dionysus, points to a darker side of the situation. The symposium takes place in 416 B.C., only shortly before the sailing of Alcibiades with the Sicilian expedition. This apparently comic figure is the most brilliant and promising young Athenian of his day. But as Plato's audience knew, that brilliance and promise were soon to be turned in a devastating way against Athens and against Alcibiades himself. Alcibiades' own speech indicates that and how this is a matter of self-ignorance (though Alcibiades cannot fully and securely recognize it as such), and how, contrary to what many Athenian jurors may have opined in 399 B.C., it was despite Socrates rather than because of him that Alcibiades' story is a tragic one.[19] The source of the problem — in Plato's view, if not that of the general public — is that, as Alcibiades acknowledges, he gives himself over to the pursuit of *timē,* to glory in the eyes of the many, rather than to love of wisdom. As he himself puts it, as soon as he is out of Socrates' sight he is "overcome by the adulation and honor of the many" (216b4–5). Although he acknowledges that much in him needs care, he neglects himself and instead tends to the business of the Athenians (216a5–b).

Here Plato's Alcibiades contradicts Aristophanes' Euripides who, like most Athenians, regards Alcibiades as serving his own interests while neglecting the welfare of the city: "I hate the man [speaking of Alcibiades] who is by nature slow to help his city, but quick to bring great harm; ingenious for himself but useless to his city" (*Frogs,* 1427). But from the Platonic point of view, Alcibiades

had spent his life giving the city the sort of thing it wanted, while neglecting his own welfare, the true good of his soul. The result is that even though he recognizes the beauty of Socrates' wisdom and *sophrosynē* as opposed to his outwardly ludicrous appearance (215a-b), and recognizes also the beauty and sense of Socrates' words, despite their ridiculous appearance (221e-222a), Alcibiades cannot bring himself to reject the life of glory for the life of philosophy. He stops up his ears against Socrates' siren song for fear he may sit listening until he is an old man (216a). He has a choice, and chooses the life of power, politics, and honor.

Alcibiades' recognition that Socrates is not after all captivated by his physical charms, and that his and Socrates' roles are the reverse of what he had thought (he being in fact the lover, Socrates the beloved), the leaping of his heart and shedding of tears at hearing this Socratic Marsyas (216c-e) — all these are used by Plato to suggest a tragic Alcibiades. The effectiveness of these suggestions lies in Alcibiades' perception of the perilous state of his own soul, the emptiness of his seemingly full and enviable life — a state of soul that in Plato's view shows the most grievous sort of self-ignorance.[20] But these details deliberately reminiscent of popular tragedy, do not, I think, constitute the tragedy of Alcibiades — nor does his subsequent fall from power and eminence into disgrace, or his betrayal of the city, so crucial in Athens' loss of men and empire. These things do tend to strike us as "tragic," and perhaps for that reason one sometimes looks no further for the tragedy of Alcibiades. But these facts do not yet capture the distinctly Platonic view of the matter. For that one needs to appreciate, first, the exceptional potential of Alcibiades for a better life than that of politics and glory — better, at least, by the philosopher's lights. We are given to believe in the *Symposium* that Alcibiades was exceptional in his perception of the beauty of Socrates' soul and the good sense of Socrates' words. He was, by his own account, a "young and naturally gifted soul." One senses clearly in him a vigor and strength of soul far surpassing that of an Aristodemus or an Agathon. He seems in fact to have been, in the words of the *Republic* (419e, f, perhaps actually alluding to Alcibiades), one of those rarely endowed souls who with the right sort of education might achieve great things, but if corrupted — perhaps by the sophists, but above all by the many (492-3) — might commit the greatest wrongs. And so he was corrupted by the citizens whose values he put on and whose favor he had courted and won.

The Platonic tragedy stems from a combination of this extraordinary sort of power, found only in those few for whom the truest goods of the soul are in principle attainable, with its disastrous issue in an inferior sort of life and the great wrongs that came in its train. From this perspective Alcibiades, at the height of his prestige and success, and *before* the crimes of impiety and betrayal, was already the (true) tragic figure of the *Philebus*. The sorry events of 416 and after become a playing out to the bitter end of a tragic loss already implied in Alcibiades' failure to turn away from a life of *timē* in the estimation of the many

to life in the service of the true good of his soul. But then, only the Platonic philosopher could either love or pity Alcibiades for *these* reasons. And only under the spell of that "Socratic Marsyas" will Alcibiades fleetingly recognize, even at the crest of glory, his own true tragedy.

The final victory of the philosopher in the contest judged by Dionysus is now secure. For it is the philosopher alone who will know the true goods of the soul, and hence the philosopher alone who can know which characters are and which are not ignorant about their own highest good. Still, this reading of the dialogue may seem either problematic — because Socrates is famous for *denying* that he has such knowledge — or incomplete — because such knowledge has yet to be related to the dialogue's central concern with *erōs*.

Regarding the first issue, the *Symposium* is one of those dialogues, located chiefly in Plato's "middle period" but also including the *Philebus*, in which Socrates speaks as though he did possess important knowledge. In the *Symposium* Socrates says that the one thing he does claim to know something about is love (177d, 198d; he is also jocularly regarded by other members of the party as an expert on the subject in a more down-to-earth sense). Thus he in effect promises to divulge the *truth* about *erōs* when he says that he will give a proper encomium — one that, among other things, tells truths about its subject, rather than simply praising it in whatever exalted terms come to mind (198d; cf. 199b). He says the earlier speeches will be impressive to the ignorant, but not to "those who know" (*tois eidosin*, 199a1-2), and that Diotima was wise (*sophē*) in love and taught him about love (201d). Finally, at the end of his speech he appears to refer to himself as an initiate in the worship of love (212b). (All of this is consistent with Socrates' still desiring and pursuing future possession of goods flowing from his knowledge — i.e., for procreation of beauty through beauty, see esp. 206a-207a, 212a — or for continued possession of the good he has won.)[21]

Secondly, the knowledge of love claimed by Socrates in the *Symposium* is, on Platonic grounds, precisely the sort of knowledge spoken of in the *Philebus*. For knowledge of the nature of love and of its proper objects simply is knowledge of the highest good of the soul and of the best sort of life for man. Put another way, the best sort of life is a life spent in pursuit of the proper objects of love, as baser lives are those spent in pursuit of lesser objects.[22] Thus Plato frequently uses compounds with *philo-* to typify the major sorts of human life, most often contrasting the *philosophos* (the lover of wisdom) with the *philotimos* or *philonikos* (the lover of glory or honor, or of victory; for Alcibiades as *philonikos*, see also *Protagoras* 336e) and the *philochrēmatos* (the lover of wealth or material goods; see, e.g., *Phaedo* 82c, *Republic* 581c-d; cf. *Symposium* 205d). Again, only one who has knowledge of love and its proper objects will know the true goods of the soul. And only such a one can *knowledgeably* dramatize a life spent in ignorance of life's highest good. The philosopher alone will possess the genuine understanding requisite for that sort of drama, and his knowledge — which is at once self-knowledge of his own good as a human being and knowledge of love and its

highest objects — will underlie the composition of both comedy and tragedy of self-ignorance. Accordingly a Bacchic, truth-telling Alcibiades had crowned Socrates victor in *logos* over all mankind — not just for a single day, as with Agathon, but always (213e). So, too, after the testimony of Alcibiades, must Dionysus, now in the form of a large cooler of wine, finally acknowledge his superior in wisdom — a self-proclaimed priest of Apollo whom no amount of wine can conquer (176a-b, 214a, 220a) and whose sober self-knowledge brings mastery over Dionysus' own domain of comedy and tragedy.

V

Although it seems to me that the *Philebus'* drama of self-ignorance provides the most likely explanation of Socrates' closing argument against the poets, I believe the *Laws'* conception of tragedy is also essential to the construction of the *Symposium*.

The truly *spoudaios* imitation need not, and for Plato typically will not, involve the elevated diction or the solemnity of popular tragedy. It will nonetheless be important, above all for being properly paideutic. To elevate, to educate, to improve was after all a chief claim of tragedy and a primary basis of that "ancient quarrel" between philosophy and poetry. I would suggest that this, the proper function of all art that is truly *spoudaios*, cannot ever have been far from Plato's mind. It is reflected in the recommendations of the *Republic* admitting into the city only *mimēsis* of behavior that will set a true and good example, as well as in the *Laws'* "dance of peace and dance of war," two potent aids in the molding of proper character. It is reflected, too, in all the protreptic dialogues, all those in which dramatization of Socrates' philosophic life serve to fix a noble and ennobling pattern or example (*paradeigma*) in the souls of the audience, and to draw auditors or readers into the investigation of questions vital to the welfare of their own souls. It is not difficult, then, to see how these two notions of the tragic or comic combine in the *Symposium*. It is only the truly tragic figure in the sense of the *Laws* who could accurately perceive the self-ignorance of Phaedrus, Pausanias, Alcibiades, etc., and cast them in their proper comic and tragic roles, in the *Philebus'* sense of comedy and tragedy. To borrow a phrase from the *Philebus*, Socrates' wisdom enables him, without writing a word, to perceive and reveal "tragedy and comedy in real life." By the same token, Plato's dramatic depiction of that sort of action requires creation of characters tragic or comic in the sense of the *Philebus*, along with a central figure whose wisdom will immediately render him tragic in the sense of the *Laws*. As it happens, this pivotal figure of Plato's drama is, to the popular mind, a rather foolish fellow, whose ears one may box with impunity (*Gorgias* 486c), and whose "wisdom" is hardly to be taken seriously.

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1. Bernard Knox, "Euripidean Comedy," in *The Rarer Action: Essays in Honor of Francis Fergusson*, A. Cheuse and R. Kofler, eds. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1970). Socrates notes this fact at *Republic* 395a and adds that even comic and tragic actors seem naturally suited for only one genre or the other, despite the fact that the two are "close" to one another. (For a possible explanation of the closeness Socrates has in mind in this context, see *Rep.* 603c).

2. See esp. *Apology* 22a-c, *Gorgias* 502b-d with 464b-465a; cf. *Meno* 99c-d.

3. One must distinguish between finding a given person genuinely *geloios* and reacting to the unfortunate *geloios* as described in the *Philebus* — i.e., by taking pleasure in his misfortune unjustly and with ill will. A philosopher will lack *phthonos* (*Symposium* 210d6), said to be the basis of such a reaction (*Philebus* 50a), and will not commit injustice against either friend or enemy. This is still perfectly compatible with the philosopher's being amused or bemused by the pretensions to wisdom of various intellectual or moral lightweights. In particular, Socrates' exposure of a respondent's self-ignorance, whatever amusement it may occasion, is undertaken for the respondent's benefit, or at least not for the sake of unjust enjoyment of his misfortune. Some young followers of Socrates apparently fell short of that ideal.

4. For a helpful general discussion of this theme in ancient literature see Helen North, *Sophrosynē* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966).

5. James Adam, *Plato's Republic*, I (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1902), p. 148; cf. Helmet Kuhn, "The True Tragedy: On the Relationship Between Greek Tragedy and Plato," *HSCP* 52 (1941): 12. Space limitations prevent me from doing full justice to any of the interpretations to be mentioned here.

6. R. G. Bury, *The Symposium of Plato* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932), p. 171; cf. Paul Friedländer, *Plato II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), p. 133.

7. W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 380, n. 1.

8. Seth Schein, "Alcibiades and the Politics of Misguided Love in Plato's *Symposium*," *Theta-Pi* 3 (1974): 164. This reading will not explain *why*, if comedy and tragedy were arts, they would be the same art. Consequently it does not appear to explain or justify Socrates' specific conclusion, even if the premise about separate muses is granted.

9. Both the *Laws* and *Philebus* were apparently written considerably later than the *Symposium*. But in deciding whether and how the evidence of one dialogue may bear on the interpretation of another, one must consider individual suggestions on their own merits. Certainly there is much in both those "late" dialogues that one would hardly find tucked away even in the ample sleeve of the Socrates of the *Symposium*. But it seems to me that the *Laws'* treatment of tragedy only puts two and two together, the two's being already present in the *Republic* (see above) — a work close in time to the *Symposium*, and conceivably pre-dating it. The *Philebus'* contribution stems from one of Socrates' principal concerns from the *Apology* on. So I cannot see that either application to the *Symposium* is at all arbitrary. Here the proof of the pudding must be in the tasting.

10. For further development of this approach see Diskin Clay, "The Tragic and Comic Poet of the *Symposium*," *Arion* N.S. 2 (1975).

11. *Phaedrus* 245a is, I fear, no help; while it asserts that poetry produced by *technē* without inspiration cannot compete with works of inspiration, the *technē* in view in that context will be something like "poetic techniques," parallel to the rhetorical techniques familiar to both Phaedrus

and Socrates. And the great works of poetry alluded to there are not philosophic compositions, but the best Greek poetry as judged by more common standards.

12. Notice here a central parallel to the true *technē* of rhetoric, which must rest, among other things, upon knowledge of the subject about which one composes *logoi* (*Phaedrus* 262b).

13. Stanley Rosen's distinctive and highly involved reading in *Plato's Symposium* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), unfortunately depends upon the assumption of an asymmetry in the passage.

14. A different version of the *Laws* approach sees true comedy in the presentation of characters "worse than the average" (in Aristotle's phrase, *Poetics* 1449a32–33), these being, in Plato's dialogues, followers of the sophistic life (Helmut Kuhn, "The True Tragedy," p. 32). This makes sense in the cases of Phaedrus, Pausanias, Eryximachus, and Agathon (cf. *Protagoras* 315c-e). But it works less well for Aristophanes, and leaves one wondering about the role of Alcibiades.

15. I have not been able to find this connection developed anywhere. Diskin Clay mentions it, but apparently without noticing that it gives quite different results from the *Laws* passage. Nor do the older commentaries (e.g., Ficino, Hug, Stallbaum, Robin) mention a possible connection with the *Philebus*.

16. Bernard Knox has remarked to me that Agathon was probably a better choice for this role than some of his more heavyweight competitors (e.g., Sophocles). This I think is true, though Sophocles and even Homer will lack the Platonic *technē* for essentially the same reasons as Agathon. In fairness it should be said that there is considerable playfulness, including much sheer, unabashedly "sophistical" virtuosity, in Agathon's piece (e.g., the proof of love's temperance, 196c!). He himself says his *logos* partook both of play and seriousness (197e). Still, the telling fact that his portrait, like those of most or all of his predecessors, is a self-portrait (cf. Helen Bacon, "Socrates Crowned," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 35 [1959]: 429) indicates that these speeches do at least reflect the speakers' own choice of lives, which (as is argued below) in turn reflects their own conceptions of the highest objects of love.

17. I have not undertaken detailed treatment here of any of these speeches. There is no limit to the variety of specific figures fitting the general mold of the Platonically comic — or to the fine touches by which an instance of comic self-ignorance might be drawn. Moreover, it is obviously possible to see Plato's comic symposiasts as tinged with *Platonic* tragedy: the possibilities for truly Platonic tragic-comedy are also endless. In addition, there will be many ways in which tragic and comic elements — in some more vague and not uniquely Platonic sense of those words — may also combine in these characters. My aim is to describe certain distinctly Platonic conceptions and to show that they provide a plausible overview of the dialogue on which all the first five speakers are predominantly comic.

Helen Bacon perceives the comedy of complacent self-ignorance played out by the first five speakers. I agree also, below, that Alcibiades is a tragic figure (see esp. her pp. 425ff.) but will argue that self-ignorance is the common root of their comedy and his tragedy, and that this reading has substantial textual support (drawn from the *Philebus*), and that it yields a plausible explanation of Socrates' final argument with, and victory over, the tragic and comic poets. But there is much more to her excellent article; students of Plato's art are urged to consult it for themselves.

18. Helen Bacon, p. 429.

19. Here I differ with Michael Gagarin ("Socrates' *Hybris* and Alcibiades' Failure," *Phoenix* 31 [1977]: 22–37) who brings out well the neglected sub-theme of *hubris* in the *Symposium*, but, I believe, errs in seeing a certain *hubris* on Socrates' part as the cause of Alcibiades' failure. On his account Socrates, having been initiated into the higher mysteries of love, rejects Alcibiades' physical advances and causes him to turn away at the lowest rung of the ascent. But in fact it is

partly Socrates' very refusal to be seduced that leads Alcibiades to perceive the beauty of at least one soul. Unfortunately even Socrates cannot overcome Alcibiades love of *timē* and the pervasive cultural forces that have so powerfully nurtured it (cf. esp. *Rep.* 492–93).

20. Cf. Helen Bacon, p. 426. For a different approach which does not appear to capture the distinctly Platonic link between comedy and tragedy, but which offers some perceptive suggestions about what one could see as an additional source of our response to Alcibiades, see Martha Nussbaum, "The Speech of Alcibiades: A Reading of Plato's *Symposium*," PHILOSOPHY AND LITERATURE 3 (1979): 131–72.

21. *If* despite these indications one still doubts that Socrates is a full initiate, the fact remains that he will know that he is to some extent ignorant whereas the others, especially the first five speakers, will be oblivious to their own ignorance. Awareness of his own ignorance was, in the *Apology*, Socrates' claim to wisdom; the *Symposium* reminds us (204a) of the dangers of a self-satisfied ignorance of one's own ignorance. Moreover, Socrates will in any case have a much more accurate and full notion than any of the others about eros and its proper objects. He is neither complacently and comically self-ignorant, nor ultimately seduced by an inferior love.

22. Cf. Scheiu, p. 161: "In Plato's view immoral politics are the *result* of the pursuit of the wrong erotic objects, or of any given erotic object in the wrong way."