

SYMPOSIUM: FATE, DIVINITY, AND GENDERS IN LOVE

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Abstract: In *Symposium*, Aristophanes introduces a myth of trigender: male, female, and their union, asserting that beings were once split in half by Zeus. This separation compels individuals to spend their earthly lives in search of reunion, ultimately striving for the island of the blessed. This paper investigates the implications of Aristophanes' claims regarding the nature of love as both a fatalistic force and a divine mission. It explores whether Plato hints at a predetermined aspect of love or emphasizes its role as an aspirational journey of the soul. Additionally, the essay examines how the existence of separate genders influences the pursuit of love and the potential for reunion. What does it mean for individuals of a single gender in this framework? How does this framework shape our understanding of love's mission? By addressing these questions, the essay aims to elucidate the complexities of love in *Symposium*, highlighting the tension between Aristophanes' myth and the broader philosophical discourse initiated by prior speakers and echoed by Socrates. Ultimately, this paper will attempt to comment upon the existential and metaphysical dimensions of love as a quest for unity and fulfillment.

Keywords: Love; Gender; Mythology; Fatalism; Divine purpose; Soul

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Context of the *Symposium*

Aristophanes, in *Symposium*, makes an outstanding argument centered on the origin of love. As a poet, he crafts a fantastical narrative concerning Zeus's plan, which holds significant weight in the historical discourse on love [1].

According to Aristophanes, when humans are not yet descended to Earth, they existed as one gender, a union of male and female, or the "circleman", possessing complete strength and virtue. Upon becoming mortal, however, Zeus splits the union into two, like spitting the yolk from the egg white. He then instructed Apollo to twist their faces and rearrange their persons, creating wrinkles and tying a skin at the navel. Now, the two halves of the union, each obtaining half the strength and virtue, would go about looking for each other in the humanly world. To facilitate their union and fulfill their longing, Zeus invented the distinction of genders and sanctioned marriage. Souls that disobey this search for union, however, would be punished by being split into another half by Zeus [2].

1.2 Purpose and Research Questions

Upon understanding this context, three key points stand out. First, the fatality in how pairs of souls were united in the heaven. Second, the search of the partner as an obligation to obey Zeus. And finally, the fulfilment of the divine mission that gives the partner chances to reunite into their natural state of power and virtue.

Referring to the key ideas above, it is generally of interest to many scholars the implications of such a story, and how the story reflects the philosophical thinkings presented in the *Symposium*. This paper focuses on Aristophanes' contributions to the discussion by introducing the idea that love is a heavenly mission and delving into the implicit implications that Plato attempts to convey. This leads to the central question: How does Aristophanes' myth of trigender inform our understanding of love, gender, and divinity within the broader context of Plato's *Symposium*?

2 ARISTOPHANES' MYTH OF TRIGENDERS

2.1 Concept Overview

In Aristophanes' view, the genders where of two kinds, which does not align with the contemporary perceived meaning of "gender". Indeed, the concept of genders appears to be somewhat obscure and almost inconsequential in the discussion of Zeus's plan. Rather, the union was a single entity that embodies the complete strength and virtue of individual souls, and the genders of males and females serve as the qualities of the two halves, solely purposed to remain in union in the earthly world [3].

Therefore, when discussing Aristophanes' story, it becomes easier to understand the origins of gender as Zeus' mere invention of two distinct souls split from the same egg, resembling two pieces of a puzzle perfectly matched only to each other [4]. The fact that the two genders were a material needed for the halves to continuously search for and remain with the other highlights the stage set for such an idea that reunion was a heavenly mission imposed by Zeus.

2.2 Implications of Zeus' Fragmentation

Zeus's fragmentation holds significant implications. In curating this myth, Aristophanes concludes that love is of divine capacities and will be the ultimate mission for souls descended to Earth. Aristophanes states that his speech explains "the source of our desire to love each other," adding, "Love is born into every human being; it calls back the halves of our original nature together; it tries to make one out of two and heal the wound of human nature. Each of us, then, is a 'matching half' of a human whole...and each of us is always seeking the half that matches him" [1]. In such, Aristophanes makes a beauty of love that is intended to cure the wounds of a heart.

In comparison, there was also the ugly; Not only did early humans have both sets of sexual organs, Aristophanes reports, but they were outfitted with two faces, four hands, and four legs. These monstrosities were very fast – moving by way of cartwheels – and they were also quite powerful. So powerful, in fact, that the gods were nervous for their dominion. This rather arrogant and inelegant image was a first draw of Plato to satirize such a fantastical story, and to intentionally mock poets that creates disillusionment in truth.

Nevertheless, the divinity and beauty stand out. Aristophanes places demands and expectations on love heavily: "[When] a person meets the half that is his very own," he exclaims, "something wonderful happens: the two are struck from their senses by love, by a sense of belonging to one another, and by desire, and they don't want to be separated from one another, not even for a moment. These are people who finish out their lives together and still cannot say what it is they want from one another" [1]. Nowadays, these views are quoted by the romantic winged scholars in which to infer a divinity in love, and an idea of eternal love.

Though in anyways being beautiful portioned in the above, it is hard to infer how Zeus' fragmentation has been set forth by Aristophanes. Whether it is a pure imaginative story, for the sake that he himself is a poet that is fantastical, or an inference derived from judgement of love. Popular disputes remain. On the basis, Aristophanes presents his myth of the origin of love as a mere narrative rather than grounded arguments. He reasons Zeus' fragmentation by stating: "Zeus, in his fear of their power, decided to cut them in half... so that they might be made weaker"[1]. To Aristophanes, the union of genders in the power of love have been to conquer the gods, harming their authority, and was henceforth halved by Zeus. However, we find an oxymoron in Aristophanes' reasoning, though minor, when he claims punishments of Zeus to split those halves in half again if they did not find their divine couple, as if Zeus had brought on such a mission, forgetting about his own intention of splitting them apart in the first place. However, scholars today place negligence on such inconsistency and tend to place more focus on the divinity of love, favoring the romantic view.

In comparison, there are also pessimistic views. Some take the obscureness of trigender, suspecting either if one could have been single gendered from origin or if one shall not be found in their mortality. There have been two ways to reply. One of which is claiming how the existence of a single gender might reflect a tragic limitation imposed by Zeus, suggesting that some souls are destined to remain incomplete in their earthly existence. The second response aligns with Socratic thought, positing that love is inherently divine and that true fulfillment can only be achieved in the afterlife, once the soul reunites with its other half in the realm of the gods [5]. This perspective implies that while earthly love may be a pursuit fraught with challenges, it ultimately serves as a pathway toward a higher spiritual connection, reinforcing the idea that the goal of love transcends mortal experiences and resides in the divine. To this cause, the pessimistic are ultimately disseminated to the belief that love and the beauty of love shall be only achieved in the isle of the blessed, thus not any humanly deeds will ultimately achieve, with equality across all being.

In this way, the many different interpretations of the myth of Aristophanes constructs a mythical and unresolved discussion, rather complementing the fantastical existence of love, being the largest drawback of his speech, though upbringing some other expectations such as eternal marriages, mandated marriages, the abortion of divorcing laws, as well as other constraints on love and relationships that can be rather extreme to derive from the ugliness of the myth.

3 LOVE AS FATE

3.1 Fatalistic Interpretations

If the origin of love ought to be what Aristophanes proposes, then it must argue or constitute that love is fatal, undecided, and doomed from the beginning of birth. Instead, this idea soon becomes long-lasting and part of the integral view of how people today view love. But is it grounded?

To consider this, many concerns and reasonings can be raised. If people were to be assigned the unconditional quest of love, this means not that people are doomed to love since their origin, but rather their attraction, addiction, and desire for love is universally embedded in the soul, far from what romanticism has seen it today. Therefore, we must clarify that in reciprocal of what people rather assume, that true love will be constantly in search of one, to recognize that one shall be eternally and essentially inclined in the quest for true love.

Also, the procuration of how Aristophanes presents that only the two that formed a union would perfectly match each other shall also be reconsidered, as many people could deem their relationship a mismatch after some type of attachment, and that may prove Aristophanes' assumption of natural attraction false. But, in any case, the deeper view of love as fate, being one belief center to Aristophanes' myth shall be cited again in the case that fate has driven people to endure pain, mismatch, and challenge to test one's courage, referring to how speakers in prior have showcased the prerequisites of love, and to qualify one to surpass barriers and arrive at their ultimate mission.

3.2 Tensions with Free Will

The love as a fate implication in Aristophanes' myth once again claims some attention of those that attempt to justify some tension with free will. This essay rethinks two approaches in explanation.

The fundamental response links to the next key concept of Aristophanes' myth, love as a divine mission, that through the embedded instinct of search for love, there shall be no free from origin that appeals to the individual, for their quest for love has been obligated, trained, and towards their instinctive addiction to beauty. And thus, no question of free will emerges in the situation of pursuing the doomed and fatal love.

The second view will build on the first to extend a probable path of free will to be injected into this view. For, accumulatively discussed in the *Symposium*, individuals who bear true love will be granted into the isle of the blessed, will call to question the choice of whether individuals long for the isle of the blessed, in which most do, but there are exceptions. In this case, there may ultimately arise a tension in free will and the fatal love, where one may not be attentive to pursue being in the isle of the blessed, but still be obligated in search of such a love by the innate desires towards such beauty. The validation of this argument shall be considered together with the question of whether longingness for heaven is a shared instinct of humanity that inscribes no choice, or a diverged path that differs across souls which grants a possibility of free will to make such decisions.

4 LOVE AS A DIVINE MISSION

4.1 Defining the Mission of Love

Not only Aristophanes, but the *Symposium* itself also stresses the divinity of love. Phaedrus brings in the prior concept of courage and bravery, and the willingness to sacrifice for love as a quality of love, citing a myth of Alcestis and Orpheus. Then, the view of the earthly and the heavenly Aphrodites is apparent, representing desires and love of beauty respectively, and love as medicine to virtue [6]. Nevertheless, Aristophanes and Plato come in to round the discussion.

Indeed, Aristophanes presents that, from the side of origin, love has been doomed as a divine mission, and those that does not step on the journey of curing love shall be punished by Zeus. The divinity exists in two parts. First, the fatality of love, an almost fantastical view that supports the notion of searching for love in the desire to comeback to original form, and to acquire power and strength. Second, the idea that the couples of loves will eventually be brought to reunion by gravity and natural attraction, ultimately counting towards the doom of fate and the godliness of love as itself.

However, while Aristophanes plays on to invent his own myth, Plato comes in to piece the prior thinking together. Nonetheless, Plato fundamentally claims that everyone's perception and argument on love is merely based on their experiences and personal affections on love. Whilst he does help Aristophanes take the myth a step further, though taking Diotima as a reference. He claims that the search for love is a search for beauty, commonly up a ladder of love, ranging from a beautiful body to all beautiful bodies, beautiful souls, beauty of laws and institutions, beauty of knowledge, and finally the love of beauty itself [1]. On the one hand, his ladder helps consolidate the distinction of earthly and heavenly love, filling in the scales in between how people traverse through one type to another, to the sublime, summarizing the idea of excellence of love and the segregation to the two Aphrodites. On the other hand, Plato helps clarify the idea that love is divine, or more specifically, the love of beauty itself is divine. In this way, Plato makes it more probable that certain loves can only be achieved in heaven and are impossible to be achieved on an earthly basis, helping the pessimistic views around how some deter themselves undoomed of love by reminding the unachievable nature of the true love of beauty and accentuating the divinity of love.

4.2 The Pursuit of Reunion

Plato's ladder of love further insinuates ideas that seem somewhat controversial around Aristophanes' own account. Many may identify the pursuit of love as ambivalent and an oxymoron as it brings power and the isle of the blessed but also faces another split in the afterlife. However, the pursuit of beauty itself fuels the explanation of such motivation.

The pursuit of reunion, therefore, is not merely a quest for physical or emotional completeness but a spiritual ascent toward ultimate beauty and truth [7]. This aligns with Plato's broader philosophical project, which emphasizes the importance of transcending the material world to achieve a higher state of being. The reunion, in this context, symbolizes the soul's return to its original, undivided state, where it can fully realize its potential and participate in the divine.

The ladder of love also addresses a potential paradox within Aristophanes' myth: If the pursuit of love is divinely ordained, why does it often lead to pain and suffering? Plato suggests that these challenges are integral to the process of spiritual growth. By navigating the complexities of earthly love, individuals develop the virtues necessary to ascend the ladder and ultimately achieve true fulfillment. This perspective transforms the pursuit of reunion from a passive acceptance of fate to an active engagement with the divine, where free will and personal agency play a crucial role [8].

5 GENDER AND LOVE

In Aristophanes' view, gender serves as a decision of Zeus subordinate to the missionary of love and to the fulfillment of desires in holding two parts of a union together at their earthly deeds.

This perspective raises several critical questions about the nature of gender and its role in love. If gender is merely a tool for facilitating reunion, does it possess any intrinsic value or significance? Or is it simply a means to an end, a

temporary construct that will ultimately be transcended in the afterlife? These questions challenge traditional notions of gender identity and invite readers to reconsider the relationship between gender and love. Moreover, Aristophanes' myth raises concerns about individuals who do not fit neatly into traditional gender categories. What does it mean for those who identify as non-binary or transgender, or for those who do not experience romantic or sexual attraction? Are they excluded from the divine mission of love, or do they represent alternative pathways to spiritual fulfillment? These questions challenge the limitations of Aristophanes' binary framework and suggests a temporary need for a more inclusive understanding of love and gender, in which future philosophers dedicated in. Contemporary scholars have offered various interpretations of Aristophanes' myth considering these concerns. Some argue that the myth should be read as a metaphor for the inherent human desire for connection and wholeness, rather than a literal endorsement of traditional gender roles [4]. Others suggest that the myth can be reinterpreted to accommodate a more fluid and inclusive understanding of gender, where individuals are free to define their own identities and pursue love in ways that align with their authentic selves [9].

6 CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, Aristophanes' myth of trigender in Plato's *Symposium* presents a sophisticated and multi-interpreted view of love, gender, and divinity. While the myth offers a strong vision of love as a divine mission, it also raises critical questions about the nature of fate, free will, and gender identity. By examining these questions, this essay discovers the tension between Aristophanes' myth and the broader philosophical discourse initiated by Plato. Ultimately, this exploration has revealed that love, as depicted in *Symposium*, is not simply a matter of fate or divinity but an active and ongoing process of self-discovery and spiritual transcendence. The pursuit of reunion, whether it leads to earthly fulfillment or remains a longing for the afterlife, serves as a catalyst for individuals to strive for a higher personal discovery of beauty and truth.

Ultimately, further research could explore the reception and interpretation of Aristophanes' myth in later philosophical and literary traditions. Additionally, it would be valuable to examine the ways in which contemporary discussions of gender and sexuality can inform our understanding of love in *Symposium*. By continuing to engage with these questions, scholars gain new insights into the enduring power and complexity of love as a fundamental and universal aspect of the human condition.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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