

The Symposium ('The Drinking Party')

APOLLODORUS: I believe I am quite well prepared to relate the events 172a
 you are asking me about, for just the other day I happened to be going
 into Athens from my home in Phalerum¹ when an acquaintance of mine
 caught sight of me from behind and called after me, jokily,²

'Phalerian! You there, Apollodorus! Wait for me, will you?'

So I stopped and waited.

'I have just been looking for you, Apollodorus. I wanted to get from
 you the story about that party of Agathon's with Socrates, Alcibiades 172b
 and the rest, the time when they were all together at dinner, and to hear
 what they said in their speeches on the subject of love. Someone else
 was telling me, who had heard about it from Phoenix, son of Philippus,
 and he said that you knew about it too. Actually he could not give any
 clear account of it, so you must tell me. You are in the best position to
 report the words of your friend.³ But tell me this first', he went on.
 'Were you at that party yourself or not?'

'It certainly looks as if your informant was rather confused', I replied, 172c
 'if you think the party you are asking about occurred recently enough
 for me to be there'.

'Yes, I did think so', he replied.

Certain words in the text carry footnotes giving their (transliterated) Greek originals, or related words, in italics. Explanations of these are to be found in the Glossary of Greek words. For all names see the Glossary of names.

¹ Phalerum was the old harbour of Athens, roughly two miles south-west of the city.

² The point of the joke is not obvious. ³ The friend is Socrates.

The Symposium ('The Drinking Party')

173a 'But how could you think so, Glaucon?' I said. 'Don't you know that it is now many years⁴ since Agathon lived in Athens, and it is not yet three years since I began to associate with Socrates and to make it my daily business to know everything he says and does? Before that I used to think I was achieving something when I was in fact running round in circles aimlessly, in the most miserable state, just like you now, and I thought philosophy⁵ was the last thing I should be doing'.

'Don't make fun of me', he said. 'Just tell me when that party took place'.

'When you and I were still boys', I replied, 'in the year when Agathon won the prize with his first tragedy⁶ and on the day after he and the members of the cast held the sacrificial feast to celebrate the victory'.

'Oh, then it really was a long time ago', he replied. 'But who told you about it? Was it Socrates himself?'

173b 'Certainly not', I said. 'It was actually the man who told Phoenix, someone called Aristodemus of Cydathenaeum, a small man, who never wore any shoes. He had been at the party, and I think there was no more devoted admirer⁷ of Socrates at that time. But of course I asked Socrates myself some questions afterwards about what I had heard from Aristodemus, and he confirmed what Aristodemus had said'.

'Then', said Glaucon, 'do tell me. The city road is in any case convenient for conversation between fellow-travellers'.

173c So it happened that as we went on our way we talked about the speeches, with the result that, as I said at the beginning, I am quite well prepared. If you really want me to recount them to all of you as well, then that is what I had better do. Anyway, whenever I talk myself on any philosophical subject or I listen to others talking, quite apart from thinking it is doing me good I enjoy it enormously. But when I listen to other kinds of discussion, especially from people like you, rich money-makers, I get

⁴ There is evidence to suggest that Agathon left Athens between 411 and 405 BC, and Socrates was put to death in 399 BC, so Plato is dating this purported encounter between Apollodorus and his friends to one of the last years of the fifth century BC.

⁵ 'To do philosophy' translates *philosophhein*.

⁶ Ancient authority gives the date as the early spring of 416 BC. Plato too would have been a boy at the time.

⁷ 'Admirer' is *erastēs*, the term for the (usually) older male partner in a homosexual relationship but it can also mean, as here, a devoted follower. Although the middle-aged Socrates followed the traditional Athenian pattern for homosexual love by at least professing to be in love with much younger men, it was widely observed that in reality it was the younger men who fell in love with him.

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-68298-5 - Plato: The Symposium
 Edited by M. C. Howatson and Frisbee C. C. Sheffield
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

The Symposium ('The Drinking Party')

bored on my own account and at the same time I feel sorry for you, my companions, because you think you are achieving something when you are achieving nothing. On the other hand you perhaps believe that I am the one who is unfortunate,⁸ and I suppose you are right. But in your case I don't merely suppose you are unfortunate, I *know* it. 173d

FRIEND: You are quite incorrigible, Apollodorus. You are always disparaging yourself and everyone else as well. I really do believe you think everyone except Socrates is miserable, starting with you. However you got that nickname, 'Softy',⁹ I cannot imagine. You are always like this when you speak, raging against yourself and everyone else except Socrates.

APOLLODORUS: Obviously then, my dear friend, if I think as I do about myself and all of you I am completely mad! 173e

FRIEND: It is not worth quarrelling about these things now, Apollodorus. Please do what we asked you and tell us what they said in their speeches.

APOLLODORUS: Well then, those speeches went something like this – no, I shall begin at the beginning and try to tell you the whole story as Aristodemus told me. 174a

Aristodemus said that he and Socrates chanced to meet when the latter was fresh from the baths and wearing his sandals, two rare events for him, so he asked him where he was going, having got himself up so beautifully.

'To Agathon's for dinner', Socrates replied. 'I avoided the celebrations yesterday, being afraid of the crush, but I agreed I would come today. So that is why I have beautified myself like this, a beautiful guest for a beautiful host. But you, now: how do you feel about possibly coming to dinner when you have not been invited?' 174b

Aristodemus said that he replied, 'I shall do whatever you say'.

'Well, come with me then', said Socrates, 'and we will spoil the old saying by altering the words. We will make it say that "to *good* men's feasts"¹⁰ good men go unbidden'. After all, Homer himself comes close not merely to spoiling it but to treating it with contempt. He represents Agamemnon as an exceptionally valiant warrior and Menelaus as "a

⁸ *kakodaimon*; see *eudaimonein*. ⁹ In Greek, *malakos*; some manuscripts read *manikos*, 'fanatic'.

¹⁰ Agathon's name suggests the meaning 'good men'; see *agathos*. Socrates appears to have in mind a proverb which says, 'To *inferior* men's feasts good men go unbidden'.

The Symposium ('The Drinking Party')

174c faint-hearted spearman",¹¹ and when Agamemnon after sacrificing is giving a banquet¹² he has Menelaus coming to the feast unbidden, and so the worse man going to the feast of a better'.

Aristodemus said that, after listening to this, he replied, 'I am rather afraid, Socrates, that in my case I shall come closer to Homer's version than to yours, being an inferior man going uninvited to the feast of a wise¹³ one. If you take me along you had better see what excuse you will give, because I shall not admit I came uninvited – I shall say I was invited by you'.

174d "As we two go further on the way",¹⁴ was the reply, 'we shall decide on our story. Come on, now'.

174e After a conversation like this Aristodemus said they walked on. As Socrates proceeded along the road he became absorbed in his own thoughts and started to fall behind; when Aristodemus waited Socrates told him to go on ahead. Arriving at Agathon's house Aristodemus found the door open and himself standing there, he said, in a ridiculous situation. One of the domestic servants immediately received him and led him to where all the other guests had taken their places, and he found them about to begin dinner. As soon as Agathon saw him he called out, 'Aristodemus, how lucky! You are just in time for dinner. If you have come for some other purpose, do postpone it. I was looking for you yesterday to invite you but I could not find you. But how is it you have not brought Socrates to join us?'

I turned round to look behind me, Aristodemus said, but I could not see Socrates anywhere. So I replied that I had been invited there to dinner by Socrates and that it was I in fact who had come with him.

'I am very glad you came', said Agathon, 'but where *is* the man?'

175a 'He was coming into the house behind me just now. I wonder myself where he might be'.

'Go and look for Socrates and bring him in', said Agathon to a servant. 'Now, Aristodemus, do take a place¹⁵ beside Eryximachus'.

¹¹ *Iliad* 17. 588. ¹² At *Iliad* 2. 408. ¹³ *sophos*.

¹⁴ An altered quotation from Homer, *Iliad* 10. 224.

¹⁵ At an Athenian dinner party and the subsequent drinking party (symposium), both of which were attended only by men, the guests reclined on couches, one, two or three to a couch, propping themselves on their left elbows and helping themselves to food and drink from small tables in front of the couches. The couches were arranged in a rough rectangle in the dining room. A servant would wash the guests' feet before they reclined. On the present occasion the

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-68298-5 - Plato: The Symposium
 Edited by M. C. Howatson and Frisbee C. C. Sheffield
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

The Symposium ('The Drinking Party')

Aristodemus said that one servant brought him water to wash with before he took his place, while another appeared and said, 'Socrates is here but has withdrawn into your neighbours' doorway and is just standing there, and though I have been calling him he will not come inside'.

'How odd', said Agathon. 'Call him again and keep on calling him'.

'No', said Aristodemus, 'let him alone. This is one of his habits. Sometimes he turns aside and stands still wherever he happens to be. He will come in very soon, I think. Don't disturb him, leave him alone'.

'Well, if you think so then that is what we had better do', replied Agathon. 'Now, you servants, lay your feast before the rest of us. At any rate you put on the table whatever you like when no one is supervising you – and supervising is something I have never yet done. So on this occasion treat these other guests, as well as me, as if you had invited us all to dinner yourselves. Look after us well and you will earn our thanks'. After this they started dinner, Aristodemus said, but still Socrates did not come. Agathon kept trying to have him summoned but Aristodemus would not allow it. After delaying for a little while in that habitual way of his, Socrates eventually arrived, but by then they were about halfway through dinner. Agathon, who happened to be alone on the bottom couch, called out, 'Socrates, come over here beside me so that I may enjoy the benefit of being in contact with that piece of wisdom which came into your mind in that doorway. Obviously you are now in possession of the answer you were looking for, otherwise you would not have stopped looking'.

Socrates sat down. 'It would be a happy state of affairs, Agathon, if wisdom were something that could flow between us through mere contact, from the one who is full to one who is empty, like water flowing along a strand of wool from a full cup to an empty one. If that is how it is with wisdom also, then I greatly value having the place next to you because I think that I shall get my fill from you of your abundant and beautiful wisdom. My own wisdom is certainly of an inferior sort, and, like a dream, of doubtful reality, whereas yours is already brilliant and full of promise – witness the fact that it was so conspicuous the day before yesterday and shone forth from you so splendidly, young as you are, in the presence of more than thirty thousand Greek spectators'.

bottom couch, probably furthest from the door, was occupied by the host Agathon (175c).
 Phaedrus occupied the first couch (177d).

The Symposium ('The Drinking Party')

'Socrates, you are being sarcastic',¹⁶ said Agathon. 'A little later on you and I will each plead our claim to wisdom, and Dionysus¹⁷ will be our judge. But now you must pay attention to your dinner before anything else'.

176a After this, said Aristodemus, Socrates arranged himself on the couch and ate his dinner along with all the rest, and when they had poured libations and sung in praise of the god and done all the customary things, they turned to the question of drinking. According to Aristodemus, Pausanias was the first to speak, roughly as follows.

'Well now, gentlemen', he said, 'how shall we make our drinking easy for ourselves? I must say to you that after yesterday's bout I am really in very poor shape and I could do with a breathing space. I imagine that is
 176b the case with most of you who were at yesterday's celebrations, so think about how we might make our drinking as easy as possible'.

'This is a very good idea of yours, Pausanias', Aristophanes replied, 'making it a first requirement to give ourselves some respite from drinking. I speak as one of those soaked in drink yesterday'.

Eryximachus, the son of Acumenus, had been listening. 'Very well said', he added. 'But there is still one of you I should like to hear from as to whether he feels strong enough to drink – Agathon?'

'No', said Agathon, 'I am certainly not up to it either'.

176c 'It would be a stroke of luck for us, I think', continued Eryximachus, 'that is, for Aristodemus, Phaedrus, and me, and for our other friends here, if you, the most stalwart drinkers, have now given up. We always did have weak heads. I am not counting Socrates; he is unaffected either way, so he will not mind whichever we do. So, since it seems to me that no one here present is keen on drinking much wine, perhaps I would not be too unpopular if I spoke the truth about the nature of drunk-
 176d enness. What has become very clear to me as a result of my profession as a doctor is that drunkenness is bad for people, and I would not care to drink a lot myself if I could avoid it, or recommend doing so to anyone else, especially if that person had a hangover from the previous day'.

According to Aristodemus, Phaedrus of Myrrhinous joined in. 'I for one always take your advice, especially in medical matters, and on this
 176e occasion the rest will do so too if they are sensible'. At this they all

¹⁶ *hubristes*; see *hubrizein* and footnote 206.

¹⁷ Dionysus is the patron-god of the theatre, where Agathon won his victory. He is also the god who introduced wine to humans, which Agathon expects they will soon be drinking at the symposium which will follow dinner. A 'contest in wisdom' could be considered to take place at 190c–201c.

The Symposium ('The Drinking Party')

agreed not to make heavy drinking the rule for the present party, but to drink only as much as they would enjoy.

'Well then', said Eryximachus, 'since it is settled that each of us should drink just so much as he wants, and there is no compulsion, I have another suggestion to make about the girl who plays the *aulos*¹⁸ who has just come in: let us tell her to go away and play to herself or, if she likes, to the women in their rooms, while for this evening we entertain each other with talk. And if you like I am ready with a proposal about the kind of talk we might have'.

They all welcomed his suggestion and asked him to explain further. 177a
 So he did. 'For what I am going to say, I will begin in the manner of Euripides' *Melanippe*:¹⁹ "not mine is the story". My suggestion comes from Phaedrus here. He is always complaining to me. "Isn't it shocking, Eryximachus", he says, "that while some other gods have had hymns and paeans composed for them by the poets, not a single one of all the many poets that have ever been has composed an encomium to the god Love, despite his great antiquity and importance! Just consider for a 177b
 moment those good²⁰ sophists²¹ such as the excellent Prodicus: they write prose eulogies of heroes²² like Heracles, which is perhaps not very surprising, but I once came across a book by a learned man in which salt was the subject of extraordinary praise because of its usefulness – and 177c
 you might find quite a few other things similarly eulogised. To think that people devote so much effort to subjects like that, but no one to this day has undertaken to celebrate Love in the way he deserves! So completely has this great god been neglected".

'It seems to me that Phaedrus has a point. I should therefore very much like²³ to gratify him in this matter and make a contribution, and I think also that this is a fitting occasion for those of us here present to pay honour to the god. If you too think as I do, we would have plenty to occupy us if we 177d
 passed the time in making speeches. My proposal is that each of us should make a speech in praise of Love,²⁴ the finest he can manage, going from left

¹⁸ A reeded pipe; normally a pair of *auloi* was played. Professional players and other entertainers were hired for parties.

¹⁹ The tragedy *Melanippe the Wise*, by Euripides, does not survive, but the line partly cited above ends: 'I heard it from my mother'.

²⁰ *chrestos*. ²¹ *sophistes*. ²² See Glossary of names under **Heroes**. ²³ *epithumein*.

²⁴ Eryximachus, following Phaedrus's lead, apparently intends the subject of the speeches to be Eros, the male god of Love (who was not as celebrated at this time nor as strongly characterised as Aphrodite, goddess of Love). However, in many of the speeches that follow, the subject

The Symposium ('The Drinking Party')

to right, and, since Phaedrus is occupying the first place on the left and is also the originator of the subject, he should begin'.

177e 'No one will vote against you, Eryximachus', said Socrates. 'I would hardly say no, since the only subject I can claim to know about is love,²⁵ and the same is true I rather think of Agathon and Pausanias,²⁶ and certainly true of Aristophanes, whose whole time is taken up with Dionysus and Aphrodite.²⁷ In fact it is true of everyone I see here. However, I should say that the arrangement is hardly fair on those of us who will be speaking last; but if those before us don't disappoint, and speak well, we shan't complain. Let Phaedrus go first and speak in praise of Love, and good luck to him'.

178a All the rest echoed his sentiments and repeated Socrates' instruction to begin. Now, Aristodemus did not entirely remember all that each speaker said, nor do I²⁸ remember everything that Aristodemus told me, but I will tell you what seemed to me particularly worth recording from the most memorable speeches.

178b Aristodemus told me, as I have said, that Phaedrus was the first to speak, and he began with the point that Love is a great god and particularly revered by men and gods by reason of his birth.²⁹ 'It is because he is the oldest of the gods that he is honoured', he said, 'and there is good evidence for this. Love has no parents, and none have ever been ascribed to him by anyone, prose-writer or poet. The poet Hesiod says³⁰ that first of all Chaos came into being,

"then there was
 broad-bosomed Earth, the eternally firm foundation of all things,
 and Love".

fluctuates between the god and the emotion of love, and in some places the word 'love' even seems to stand for the lover. This would have caused the Greeks fewer problems than it may cause readers of this translation, because the former did not distinguish in writing between upper- and lower-case letters. Most current texts and translations attempt to distinguish between Love and love, but the reader should be aware that in any translation the choice of upper- or lower-case initials is inevitably somewhat arbitrary.

²⁵ 'The subject of love' translates [*ta*] *erotica*; see glossary.

²⁶ Well known to be lovers; see 193b.

²⁷ In the view attributed here to Socrates, Aristophanes' comedies are all concerned with drink and sex, the respective provinces of those gods. Dionysus is also the patron-god of the theatre; see Glossary of names.

²⁸ Apollodorus, the narrator of the dialogue. ²⁹ *genesis*.

³⁰ *Theogony*, 116–17 and 120. It was the early Greek poets, especially Hesiod, who preserved the stories about the mythical past.

The Symposium ('The Drinking Party')

'Acusilaus too agrees with Hesiod and says that after Chaos there came into being these two, Earth and Love. And Parmenides also says of the origin³¹ of Love,

"First of all gods was fashioned Love".

'So it is widely agreed that Love is the oldest of the gods, and he is also the source of our greatest blessings.³² For I certainly cannot say what greater blessing there can be for any man to have right from youth than a virtuous³³ lover,³⁴ or what can be better for a lover than a beloved boy³⁵ who is himself virtuous. For those feelings which ought to be the lifelong guide of men whose aim is to live a good³⁶ life cannot be implanted either by advantageous connexions or public honours or wealth or anything else so well as they are by love. And what are those feelings? Shame³⁷ at dishonourable³⁸ and pride³⁹ in honourable behaviour. Without these feelings it is not possible either for a state or for an individual to do any noble or great work. Therefore I declare that if any man who is in love were to be revealed doing something dishonourable or submitting dishonourably to someone without defending himself, because of cowardice, he would not find it as painful to be seen by his father or his friends or anyone like that as he would to be seen by his beloved. Clearly the same is true in the case of the beloved, that he feels particularly ashamed if ever he is seen by his lovers to be involved in something dishonourable. If only some means might be found for a state or an army to consist of pairs of lovers, there would be no better people to run their country, for they would avoid any act that brought disgrace and would compete with each other in winning honour. Moreover they would be victorious over virtually every other army, even if they were only few in number, as long as they fought side by side. Certainly a man in love who deserted his post or threw away his arms would mind less being seen by the whole world than by his beloved; sooner than this he would choose to die a thousand deaths. And as for abandoning his beloved or failing to go to his aid in danger – no one is so cowardly that he cannot be inspired to courage⁴⁰ by Love himself, to be the equal of the man who is very courageous⁴¹ by nature. It is exactly as Homer describes a god

³¹ *genesis*. ³² *agathos*. ³³ *chrestos*. ³⁴ *erastes*.

³⁵ *eromenos*, one of two terms (the other is *paidika*) for the younger male in a pederastic relationship. See Introduction p.viii.

³⁶ *kalos*. ³⁷ *aischune*. ³⁸ *aischros*. ³⁹ *philotimia*. ⁴⁰ *arete*. ⁴¹ *aristos*; see *agathos*.

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-68298-5 - Plato: The Symposium
 Edited by M. C. Howatson and Frisbee C. C. Sheffield
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

The Symposium ('The Drinking Party')

'breathing might' into some of the heroes:⁴² in just the same way Love provides from his own being this inspiration for those in love.

- 179c 'There is another point. Only those in love⁴³ are prepared to die for one another, women as well as men. Every Greek will find sufficient evidence for this claim in the example of Alcestis, the daughter of Pelias. She was the only person willing to die for her husband even though he had a father and a mother still living. She so much surpassed them in devotion⁴⁴ because of her love⁴⁵ that she made them look like strangers to their own son, related to him only in name. When she had actually given up her life for him, so noble did it seem not only to men but also to the gods, that they sent back her soul⁴⁶ from the Underworld. Out of the many that have done great deeds, she is one of very few who have been granted this privilege; yet the gods sent back her soul because of their great admiration for what she did. So they too pay particular honour to the zeal and courage⁴⁷ that come from love. In the case of Orpheus, however, the son of Oeagrus, they sent him back from the Underworld without achieving his object: they showed him only a phantom of the wife he had come to recover, and did not give her back to him in the flesh, because they thought he lacked spirit; he was only a lyre-player and did not dare actually to die, as Alcestis did, for the sake of love. Instead he contrived to enter the Underworld while he was still alive. So, because of this they punished him, and brought about his death at the hands of women.
- 179e 'Achilles, the son of Thetis, however, they honoured and sent to the Isles of the Blest.⁴⁸ For when he found out from his mother that if he killed Hector he too would die, but if he did not kill him he would return home and live to old age, he nevertheless dared to make the choice of standing up for his lover Patroclus⁴⁹ and avenging him; thus
- 180a he also died, and died for his sake. (Aeschylus actually talks nonsense when he asserts that it was Achilles who was the lover of Patroclus: Achilles was not only more beautiful than Patroclus but also more

⁴² As Apollo into Aeneas at *Iliad* 20.110. ⁴³ 'those in love', in Greek *hoi erontes*; see *eran*.

⁴⁴ *philia*; see *philein*. ⁴⁵ *eros*. ⁴⁶ *psuche*. ⁴⁷ *arete*.

⁴⁸ In Greek myth, islands in the legendary far west of the Greek world where after death specially favoured mortals, notably some of the heroes, pass a blissful afterlife, rather than having a phantom existence in the Underworld like everyone else.

⁴⁹ Homer in the *Iliad* did not make Achilles and Patroclus lovers, but Aeschylus represents them as such in *Myrmidons*, a lost tragedy from which a few quotations survive.